

# **Discourse:**

Learning and Teaching in Philosophical  
and Religious Studies

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

(formally *The PRS-LTSN Journal*)

**Vol. 3, No. 2, Spring 2004**

**Editor:** David J Mossley  
PRS-LTSN  
School of Theology and  
Religious Studies  
University of Leeds  
Leeds LS2 9JT  
United Kingdom  
+44(0)113 343 1166  
david@prs-ltsn.ac.uk

**Assistant Editors:** Martyn Fletcher and Danielle Lamb, PRS-LTSN

Distributed freely to all individuals and PRS departments in UK Higher Education and to those registered in our subject areas.

---

**Editorial Board:**

Dr Gary Bunt  
Subject Co-ordinator  
PRS-LTSN  
University of Wales, Lampeter

Dr Graeme Gooday  
Associate Director PRS-LTSN  
University of Leeds

Dr Nik Jewell  
C&IT Manager PRS-LTSN  
University of Leeds

Mr George MacDonald Ross  
Director PRS-LTSN  
University of Leeds

Dr Hugh Pyper  
Associate Director PRS-LTSN  
University of Leeds

Dr Clare Saunders  
Subject Co-ordinator  
PRS-LTSN  
University of Leeds

Dr Simon Smith  
Centre Manager PRS-LTSN  
University of Leeds

Dr Pamela Sue Anderson  
Co-Chair Steering Group,  
Philosophy  
Regent's Park College, Oxford

Dr Helen Beebee  
BPA Representative  
University of Manchester

Dr Dominic Corrywright  
BASR Representative  
Oxford Brookes University

Prof David Evans  
BPA Representative  
The Queen's University of  
Belfast

Dr Mike Fraser  
HUMBUL Representative  
University of Oxford

Ms Julie Gallimore  
Employability Consultant  
Julie Gallimore Associates

Dr David Gosling  
Co-Director  
National Coordination Team

Prof Barry Gower  
BSPS Representative  
University of Durham

Dr Ron Geaves  
AUDTRS Representative  
University College Chester

Dr Mary Mills  
AUDTRS Representative  
Newman College of Higher  
Education, Birmingham

Prof Stephen Pattison  
Co-Chair Steering Group, TRS  
Cardiff University

Mr Chris Senior  
Brotherton Library  
University of Leeds

Register at:  
<http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/registration/index.html>

# Discourse

## Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies

(Formerly *The PRS-LTSN Journal*)

Volume 3, Number 2, Spring 2003-4

---

Welcome to the sixth issue of the journal for the Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network

---

## Contents

### *NEWS and INFORMATION*

The LTSN and the PRS-LTSN .....	6
Across the Network—The Higher Education Academy .....	8
Departmental Visits, Workshops and Contacts .....	11
Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL Phase Five) .....	12
Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning .....	13

### *ARTICLES and DISCUSSION*

George MacDonald Ross

<b>Plagiarism in Philosophy: Prevention Better than Cure .....</b>	<b>23</b>
--	-----------

Mike Fearn and Leslie J. Francis

<b>From A-level to Higher Education: Student Perceptions of Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religious Studies.....</b>	<b>58</b>
--	-----------

Olivera Petrovich

<b>Perceptions of Relevance and Conceptual Challenges of Studying Psychology among Theology Students .....</b>	<b>92</b>
--	-----------

Keith Crome and Mike Garfield

<b>Text-Based Teaching and Learning in Philosophy.....</b>	<b>114</b>
--	------------

Charlotte Sleigh

<b>Using Role Play as a Way in to the History of Science.....</b>	<b>131</b>
---	------------

Susan A.J. Stuart and Margaret Brown

<b>An Electronically Enhanced Philosophical Learning Environment: Who Wants to be Good at Logic?.....</b>	<b>142</b>
---	------------

Judith R. Webster

<b>The Finished Product: Four Skills to Help You Graduate Your PhD Student on Time .....</b>	<b>154</b>
--	------------

Gary R. Bunt

<b>Report: “Religious Studies—What’s the Point?” Conference .....</b>	<b>161</b>
---	------------

Notes for Authors .....	173
-------------------------	-----

About <i>Discourse</i> .....	176
------------------------------	-----

## Editorial: Change, Continuity and Opportunity

---

This is the sixth issue of the journal from the Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre. It is also the last from this subject centre as part of the LTSN. On 30<sup>th</sup> April the LTSN—along with the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE), the National Co-ordination Team (NCT) and the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme—will become part of the new Higher Education Academy. Within the Academy the role of the subject centres will continue unchanged for the foreseeable future and we shall continue to develop and respond to the discipline communities' needs in terms of learning and teaching support. And it is with pleasure that once again we can present new pedagogical development in *Discourse* as we shall continue to do. The first issue of volume four of *Discourse* will be published in the Autumn.

MacDonald Ross presents a comprehensive account of the nature, causes and possible solutions for plagiarism in philosophy, focusing on the development of students' grasp of philosophical literacy and their own writing style, surely a key skill for all undergraduates to acquire. He also provides an overview of currently available detection services. This report should stand as benchmark starting point for contemporary discussions of plagiarism.

Fearn and Francis, and Petrovich offer quantitative and qualitative studies of students' experiences in moving from A-levels to higher-education and the impact of studying psychology in theology and religious studies respectively. Not only are these exceptionally useful studies, but they demonstrate part of the diversity of approach open to lecturers and developers of educational research in the humanities.

Crome and Garfield, in an independent study, provide an excellent and full discussion of how texts should be used in philosophy teaching. They argue for a comprehensive appreciation

of the centrality of texts as *texts* in how students grow in their comprehension of philosophy as a means of reflecting on their world. As they state 'text-based teaching and learning has received scant attention as a form of pedagogical practice within philosophy provision'—their research and reflection on this issue is therefore of great importance in launching a dialogue and future developments to support diverse teaching strategies in this area.

Sleigh discusses the uses of role play in teaching the history of science based on her own experiences and research into different pedagogical techniques. It illustrates exciting possibilities for teaching in this area.

Stuart and Brown describe the use of an electronic voting system for logic teaching that allows student participation in large scale group teaching. Most interestingly they discovered the system reveals there is a gap between what lecturers and students regard as the most challenging aspects of logic learning and teaching. In enhancing the students' experience of education acquisition of this kind of knowledge is vital.

Webster provides a discussion of the kind of skills a good supervisor might pass on to their doctoral students. Her reflection on her experiences are insightful.

Finally, we have a report on a recent conference supported by the Subject Centre, 'Religious Studies – What's the Point?' We hope the presentation of abstracts and some of the discussion points will prompt further reflection.

**In the near future we shall be announcing funding opportunities from the Subject Centre, especially for more min-projects. Look out for details in the monthly e-bulletin and on the website.**

David J Mossley, Editor

## **News and Information**

## The LTSN and the PRS-LTSN

---

On 30th April 2004 the ILTHE and LTSN will become part of the new Higher Education Academy (see page 10). The central mission of the subject centres and networks will remain the same.

### LTSN

The Learning and Teaching Support 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.

#### Activities

The LTSN's core activities are:

- setting up, supporting and developing learning and teaching networks;
- promoting and sharing successful practice in learning, teaching and assessment through workshops, conferences, meetings and the interoperability of resources and databases of resources;
- facilitating the transfer of knowledge between users, experts, developers and innovators.

### The PRS-LTSN

The Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre 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. The name 'Philosophical and Religious Studies' is merely an abbreviation for these subject areas.

#### Activities

**The mission of the PRS-LTSN is to enhance teaching quality and improve the student learning experience for all in the context of a changing educational environment.**

More specifically, we aim:

- to be the accepted source of information and advice to PRS subject communities on subject-specific and relevant generic educational issues;
- to promote the discovery, development and brokerage of good and innovative practice in learning, teaching and assessment;
- to develop and maintain a national and international profile;
- to identify and disseminate current and future national policy objectives in learning and teaching and to assist departmental implementation where appropriate.

We provide the following services and resources:

- news and support advice on national developments and funding opportunities;
- individual consultations;
- departmental visits;
- grants and funding for learning and teaching mini-projects;
- a comprehensive website of electronic resources and reviews;
- *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious*;
- *Discourse Supplement* for heads of departments and policy makers;
- a monthly e-bulletin;
- regional and departmental workshops and conferences.

## Across the Network

---

### The Higher Education Academy<sup>1</sup>

On 30<sup>th</sup> April 2004 the ILTHE and the LTSN will transfer into the Higher Education Academy. The change will not result in any significant change for the subject networks we serve. However, the mission of the Academy mission will be wider than that of the LTSN has been.

#### **The Higher Education Academy will:**

- advise on policies and practices that impact on the student experience;
- support curriculum and pedagogic development;
- facilitate development and increase the professional standing of all staff in higher education.

### Funding

The Academy will receive funding from:

- the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) Northern Ireland;
- the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE);
- the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW);
- the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC).

### Structure

There are a number of organisations closely involved with the formation and delivery of the Higher Education Academy. The Academy has a very broad remit and will build on and deliver services currently provided by:

- the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE);
- the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN);
- the National Co-ordination Team (NCT);

---

<sup>1</sup> With thanks to the Higher Education Academy for the information below.



- the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS).

Some of the functions of the Higher Education Staff Development Agency (HESDA) will also come under the Academy.

### **Members (owners):**

The legal owners of the Academy will be Universities UK (UUK) and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP). This ensures that the Academy is a sector-owned body and independent of both Government and Funding Councils. As owners, UUK and SCOP have the power to modify the constitution and to remove directors (i.e. Board and Council members) but the management of the Academy will normally be undertaken by the Board.

### **The Board:**

The Board will be the Executive authority that manages the business of the Academy. Its members will be directors of the Academy and charity trustees. It will meet at least four times per year. The Board will comprise 14 members made up of:

- 4 appointees from UUK and SCOP, one of whom will be elected by the Board to serve as Chair;
- 2 appointed jointly by all the higher education funding bodies;
- 4 practitioner members of which 2 will be accredited practitioners (ILTHE members) and 2 appointed from the LTSN Subject Centres. One of these will be the elected Chair of Council;
- 2 chosen by the Board from outside the sector;
- up to 2 co-opted by the Board from related bodies (e.g. Leadership Foundation, QAA), one of whom shall normally be a student co-opted after consultation with the National Union of Students and National Postgraduate Committee.

At incorporation there will be an Interim Board who will discharge the functions of the Board until it is formally constituted.

### **The Council:**

The Council will perform the professional body role within the Academy, to provide a formal means for ensuring a strong practitioner voice. It will be based on the Academy's register of accredited

practitioners which will replace the ILTHE membership. All existing ILTHE members will be able automatically to join the register, as will all HE staff who subsequently meet accreditation criteria established by the Council.

The Council's advice to the Board will be regarded as definitive on matters of professional standards, accreditation and continuing professional development (CPD) arrangements and the development of individual practitioners, and will comprise:

- 16 elected registered practitioners (initially ILTHE members);
- 6 appointed from the LTSN Subject Centres;
- 2 appointed by UUK and SCOP jointly;
- 2 appointed from NUS;
- up to 4 co-opted from other staff groups and associations.

The Council will elect a Chair from the registered practitioners or LTSN Subject Centre representatives and the Chair of Council will be one of the Council members of the Board. The nature and reserved rights of the Council are significant as they provide a strong professional input into the business of the Academy. Practitioners will play a key role in most of the Academy's working groups and committees, alongside Board and Council members and others co-opted from the sector.

## Staff and location

There will be an open selection process for the senior posts of the Academy but the majority of staff within both the ILTHE and the LTSN will be transferred into the new corporate body under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) regulations (TUPE). The main administrative centre will remain in York.

More information can be accessed at [www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk) .

## **Departmental Visits, Workshops and Contacts**

---

### **Departmental Visits**

We have now visited most of the departments in our subject communities. We have contacted all the departments (either via your departmental PRS-LTSN representative or your Head of Department) and if we have not yet set up a face to face meeting then please do not hesitate to contact us at the address below to arrange one. The aim of the visits is to gather information about existing effective practice and to find out what the most pressing issues for your department and for individual lecturers and tutors are, so that we can better direct our resources and efforts to serve the PRS community in all learning, teaching and assessment matters.

We also offer a programme of follow-up visits and workshops. These are designed to help us better help you with issues raised in our first visits and to see how things have changed in your learning and teaching environment. We aim to provide workshops and support advice on any learning and teaching issue that has a subject-specific dimension. These workshops can be tailored to your departmental needs and time and can cover topics such as plagiarism, assessment and tutor training. Please contact us to discuss how we might help your with a workshop for your department, free of charge.

### **Contacts**

Our list of departmental contacts continues to grow, but there is still a small minority of departments that have not registered a representative. If you would like to be a representative for your department, please contact:

Martyn Fletcher  
PRS-LTSN  
School of Theology and Religious Studies  
University of Leeds  
Leeds  
LS2 9JT  
Tel: 0113 343 4184  
martyn@prs-ltsn.ac.uk

# **Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL Phase Five)**

---

## **FDTL5 Update: Stage 1 Outcomes**

PRS-LTSN is supporting all prospective applicants for FDTL5 project funding from the Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies subject communities.

24 Stage One applications were submitted to the HEFCE for projects relating to these subject areas. Of these, three applications were successful, and have been invited to submit a Stage Two application:

- Enhancing placement learning in religious communities and contexts (Bath Spa University College)
- Supporting critical engagement between personal beliefs and academic skills in religious studies and theology (University of Oxford)
- Extending effective work-based learning (Open University)

PRS-LTSN will continue to work closely with these projects, to develop plans and provide support throughout the bidding process.

The FDTL5 assessment panel has also provided very positive feedback regarding the strength and quality of all applications, including those which the HEFCE is unable to fund; and PRS-LTSN will continue to work with all applicants to develop and disseminate their project ideas.

Look out for future news of successful projects and dissemination activities. For more information see:

**<http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/fdtl/index.html> .**

## CETLs

(Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning)

---

### Invitation to Bid

In January 2004 HEFCE published the Invitation to Bid for Funds to establish Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). The full text of this document can be accessed from the HEFCE website: [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/hefce/2004/04\\_05/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/hefce/2004/04_05/).

The purpose of Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning will be:

- to reward excellent teaching practice; and
- to invest in that practice further in order to increase and deepen its impact across a wider teaching and learning community (HEFCE 2004/05 para. 2).

A total of £315 million is available to fund CETLs over the five-year period from 2004-5 to 2008-9; it is expected that this will be used to fund more than 70 CETLs.

For further details:

- consult the information provided below;
- See the 'Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning' section of the HEFCE website at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/tinits/cetl/>—including 'frequently asked questions';
- see the 'Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning' section of the Higher Education Academy website at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/cetls/>—including 'frequently asked questions'.

### What are CETLs?

Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning may be structured around a particular discipline or discipline cluster; and/or they may address learning and teaching issues in a thematic (cross-disciplinary) way. It is expected that CETLs 'are most likely to be led by academic staff who are themselves directly involved in teaching' (HEFCE 2004/05

para. 27), but may also involve a range of other staff—e.g. library, technical, educational development.

CETLs should be focused around an existing (group of) programme(s) or area(s) of study; which provide the basis for demonstrating existing excellence. It is open to applicants to provide a definition of ‘excellence’ in their chosen area(s)—which may include (but need not be exhausted by):

- a form of teaching;
- a way of conceptualising, organising or supporting student learning;
- a way of designing the curriculum or developing it to encompass new qualifications or issues;
- a way of designing student assessment to enhance and deepen learning;
- a way of involving students in active understanding and monitoring of learning effectiveness;
- a goal of higher education (HEFCE 2004/05 para. 29).

### Who can apply?

- HEFCE-funded higher education institutions;
- HEFCE-funded further education colleges with at least 500 full-time equivalent higher education students.

Bids can be submitted from individual institutions, or from a consortium of two or more institutions. There are restrictions on the number of bids which can be submitted by any one institution. For further details, consult the Invitation to Bid at

[http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2004/04\\_05/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2004/04_05/)  
(especially paras. 23-33 and 53-58).

### What funds are available?

Funds are available, for both capital and recurrent costs, at three funding levels:

- capital funding (for the first two years): up to £800,000 / £1,400,000 / £2,000,000;
- recurrent funding (per year for five years): £200,000 / £350,000 / £500,000.

It is expected that funds requested will be proportional to the number of students who will benefit from the work of the CETL—see the Invitation to Bid for details (especially paras. 34-39).

HEFCE will also provide funds to bidders who are successful at stage one of the bidding process, to support the development of stage two CETL proposals. Further details of this scheme will be published in April 2004.

## How to apply

There will be a two stage application process:

- **Stage One** will focus on the case for excellence and the rationale for the CETL's focus;
- **Stage Two** bids ... will be assessed ... on their business case for developing the area of excellence and increasing its impact on teaching and learning (HEFCE 2004/05 para. 5).

The criteria for assessment of applications will accordingly be different at each stage of the bidding process. Detailed guidance is provided in the HEFCE Invitation to Bid at [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2004/04\\_05/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2004/04_05/)

- **Defining excellence:** see especially Annex B;
- **Stage One:** see especially para. 65-66 and Annex A;
- **Stage Two:** see especially para. 67-70 and further guidance notes from HEFCE (forthcoming April 2004).

## Timetable for applications

- **23 April 2004:** Deadline for submission of stage one bids to HEFCE;
- **April 2004:** HEFCE publish further guidance re: applications for stage two;
- **End of June 2004:** Outcomes of stage one application process announced; successful bidders invited to prepare stage two submissions;
- **22 July 2004:** Seminar for stage two applicants, to support the development of stage two bids;
- **29 October 2004:** Deadline for submission of stage two bids;

- **January 2005:** Final decision on successful CETL proposals and announcement by HEFCE;
- **March 2005:** CETL contracts agreed and funding released.

## CETLs and the Higher Education Academy

CETLs will be required to work closely with the new Higher Education Academy—for example:

- liaising and collaborating re: dissemination strategy;
- establishing and making use of links between CETLs, the Higher Education Academy and its network of expertise, and academic communities;
- consulting the Higher Education Academy for advice and support re: good practices, evaluation strategy, and general operational and management issues.

The constituent partners of the Higher Education Academy—e.g. the LTSN (Subject Centres and Generic Centre) and ILTHE—will provide support and advice to bidders throughout the application process.

The Higher Education Academy, in collaboration with HEFCE, has held two support events for prospective bidders (London, 2nd and 4th March 2004). You can view or download the seminar presentations here:

- **[http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/cetls/cetls\(hefce\)\\_mar04.ppt](http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/cetls/cetls(hefce)_mar04.ppt)**  
(Carole Webb, HEFCE);
- **[http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/cetls/cetls\(hea\)\\_mar04.ppt](http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/cetls/cetls(hea)_mar04.ppt)**  
(Sally Brown, ILTHE); ‘The Role of the Higher Education Academy’ (Brenda Smith, LTSN Generic Centre); and ‘What can Subject Centres Do for You?’ (Mike Kelly, LTSN Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies).

Further details about the working relationship between CETLs and the Higher Education Academy, during both the bidding process and the lifetime of the CETLs, can be obtained:

- consult the HEFCE Invitation to Bid—especially paras. 46-49;



- see the Higher Education Academy’s dedicated CETL webpages—including detailed advice on the ‘terms of engagement’ re: support for CETLs from the Higher Education Academy;
- contact your subject centre at: **enquiries@prs-ltsn.ac.uk** .

## Further Information

Consult HEFCE’s webpages on frequently asked questions at **<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/tinits/cetl/>** and other information, about the CETL initiative. *Please note—these FAQs’ will be updated regularly.*

Additional information and guidance will be provided by the LTSN Subject Centres and the new Higher Education Academy—please consult the Higher Education Academy website for further details, including (regularly updated) FAQs and detailed guidance on the relationship between CETLs and the Higher Education Academy.

See also the information provided at the recent support seminars for prospective bidders (above).

For subject-specific advice on Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in areas relating to Philosophy (including History and Philosophy of Science), Theology and Religious Studies, please contact us: **enquiries@prs-ltsn.ac.uk** .

For general advice on the bidding process, please contact HEFCE: **cetl@hefce.ac.uk** .

## ETHICS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

### The ETHICS website

This online resource offers a range of materials designed to be of interest to teachers of applied and professional ethics, whatever their primary discipline.

The ETHICS website can be found at <http://www.prs-itsn.leeds.ac.uk/ethics/> and currently includes:

- A summary of the ETHICS Project
- A Case Study Resource Page.
- Downloadable documents on, assessment, consent, confidentiality and benchmark requirements for ethics.

If you have learning and teaching material that you would like to share with others, please let us know.

It is hoped that this material will form the nucleus of a much larger resource, attracting input not only from the subject communities directly involved with the ETHICS Project, but from all subject areas with a benchmarked requirement for ethics.

### Responding to needs

We would also like to encourage ethics teachers to provide us with information on what they would like to see on the website, so that it can continue to:

- Reflect current learning and teaching priorities.
- Operate as a broker for expertise and information in ethics teaching.
- Anticipate and respond quickly to changing needs and concerns.

### Approaches to Ethics in Higher Education:

#### Teaching Ethics across the Curriculum.

This guide, available in both printed and online formats from April 2004, draws on themes and concerns identified by the ETHICS Project.

The guide is available on request from the Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject, stocks permitting.

For further information please  
contact Dr David Mossley:

Philosophical and Religious Studies  
Subject Centre  
School of Theology and Religious  
Studies  
University of Leeds  
Leeds, LS2 9JT  
Phone: 0113 3431166  
Fax: 0113 3433654  
Email: [david@ps-itsn.ac.uk](mailto:david@ps-itsn.ac.uk)

<http://www.prs-itsn.leeds.ac.uk/ethics/>



# INSET TEACHERS' PHILOSOPHY CONFERENCES

## THEMES & LOCATIONS

June 21 • Theory of Knowledge • LONDON

June 22 • Ethics • LONDON

June 23 • Philosophy of Religion • MANCHESTER

June 24 • AQA AS Philosophy Texts • MANCHESTER

June 25 • Theory of Knowledge • MANCHESTER

June 28 • Philosophy of Religion • LONDON

June 29 • AQA A2 Philosophy Texts • LONDON

ALL 10.30AM-3.45PM • £150 (including lunch & refreshments)

Further details at [www.alevelphilosophy.co.uk](http://www.alevelphilosophy.co.uk)

## SPEAKERS

**Dr Julian Baggini** (*Philosophy: Key Themes* and *Philosophy: Key Texts*)

**Dr Michael Lacewing** (*Philosophy for AS and A2*, forthcoming, 2004)

**Dr Stephen Law** (*The Philosophy Files*, *The Philosophy Gym*, *Philosophy for AS and A2*)

**Dr Marianne Talbot** (*former member of A Level Philosophy syllabus approval panel*)

## ENQUIRIES & BOOKINGS

[enquiries@alevelphilosophy.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@alevelphilosophy.co.uk) • 07906 434206

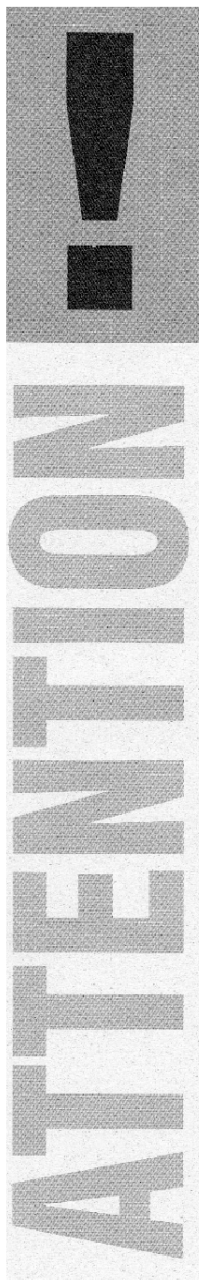
A Level Philosophy, 48 Templar Road, Oxford OX2 8LU

**Think**

**Philosophy Now**  
a magazine of ideas  
[www.philosophynow.org](http://www.philosophynow.org)  
**philosophers'**  
magazine

**ROUTLEDGE**

**Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group



# Islam in Higher Education Conference

1-2 SEPTEMBER 2004  
SELLY OAK COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

---

*Organised by*

- The Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) UK
- Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations (CSIC)
- Learning and Teaching Support Network – Philosophical and Religious Studies (PRS-LTSN)

---

THIS CONFERENCE SETS OUT TO BRING TOGETHER a diverse cross section of individuals and organisations concerned with the challenges facing Islam in higher education. It seeks to make a positive contribution to discourse and policies on Islam in higher education (HE) in the UK, through a critical analysis and dialogue on broad ranging issues including: the status of the study of Islam in higher education; access, employability, recruitment and participation; academic standard and pedagogy; the depiction of Islam and Muslims in higher education: comparative international approaches to Islam in higher education.

**Format:** Workshops, keynote speakers and papers.

**Participation:** Open to all those interested in discussing teaching and learning issues relating to the study of Islam, including academics, policy makers, Muslim community organisations, educationalists (in school, further education and higher education context), and postgraduate students.

---

*For information please contact:*

Islam in Higher Education, PRS-LTSN,  
School of Theology and Religious Studies  
University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK

Tel: 0113 343 4184 Fax: 0113 343 3654  
E-mail: [enquiries@prs-ltsn.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@prs-ltsn.ac.uk)  
Website: [www.islaminihighereducation.net](http://www.islaminihighereducation.net)

All the PRS-LTSN Subject Centre news on funding and events is available from our website:

**<http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/index.html>**

Also available are:

- our biennial new *Discourse Supplement* (for heads of departments and policy makers)
- our ***monthly e-bulletin newsletter***. To receive the e-bulletin you need to be registered with Subject Centre (visit the website).

The e-bulletin will keep you up-to-date with:

- Events
- Funding
- Conferences in learning and teaching
- National developments

NB: some institutions block mass emails. If you are registered but do not receive the e-bulletin, please contact Martyn ([martyn@prs-ltsn.ac.uk](mailto:martyn@prs-ltsn.ac.uk)) with an alternative email address.

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

Article

# Plagiarism in Philosophy: Prevention Better than Cure<sup>1</sup>

---

**George MacDonald Ross**

*School of Philosophy  
University of Leeds*

---

## 1. Introduction

‘Plagiarism more common than thought in student essays’ would make a good headline.<sup>2</sup> Recent research suggests that students admit to much more plagiarism and other forms of cheating than teachers generally suspect,<sup>3</sup> and it is widely believed that the problem is increasing as a result of the internet. The solution is to use a range of techniques to get the thought back into student essay writing, and to take more active steps to spot when this has not happened.

## 2. Definition of plagiarism

If action is to be taken against students who plagiarise, it is essential for there to be a robust definition of plagiarism, and for it to be thoroughly understood and owned by both staff and students. Each university has its own definition of plagiarism and its own procedures for dealing with

---

<sup>1</sup> Although I swear I thought up this subtitle myself, I have subsequently learned that it has become almost a cliché among writers on plagiarism.

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrased from the headline: ‘Sex more common than thought in US campuses.’ I have no record of the source.

<sup>3</sup> A UK study in 1995, before the internet explosion, found that over half a sample of students admitted to some form of cheating, and 54% to plagiarism; and that staff estimates were much lower: see Franklin-Stokes and Newstead 1995, pp.169-170. According to Carroll and Appleton 2001, a figure of 80% is to be found in Walker, J., ‘Student Plagiarism in Universities: What are we going to do about it?’, *Higher Education Research and Development* 17, 1998, pp.89-106. However, as Peter Levin has pointed out in a personal communication, these and other such surveys are often vitiated by students’ poor understanding of what plagiarism is. They may have admitted to plagiarism ‘on the basis of practices that many academics would in fact find acceptable.’ More recent studies have been careful to ask students questions about clearly defined acts of copying or paraphrasing.

it. Since these differ to a greater or lesser extent, any advice I give must be adapted to local circumstances.<sup>4</sup> However, the burden of my advice is to tackle plagiarism at source, so that only an irreducible minimum number of cases need to be sent through official channels.

Most definitions of plagiarism include the following elements:

- a deliberate intention to cheat;
- copying or paraphrasing a text without acknowledgment;
- adopting someone else's ideas without acknowledgment.<sup>5</sup>

Before going any further, I shall comment briefly on each of these.

### Deliberate intention

Although definitions usually include a reference to a deliberate intention to cheat, plagiarism is plagiarism whether deliberate or not, and accidental plagiarism can (in theory at least) attract the same penalty. I shall argue that deliberate and unintentional plagiarism should be kept as separate from each other as possible, since the latter is no more than poor academic practice, and it needs to be addressed in a non-punitive way.

### Copying or paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is sometimes regarded as less of a sin than straight copying, on the grounds that it requires independent intellectual effort to digest<sup>6</sup> a

---

<sup>4</sup> This is one reason why I don't offer my own definition of plagiarism. But more importantly, I want to sharpen the distinction between deliberate plagiarism as cheating, and unintentional plagiarism as poor academic practice, which is obscured by the use of a single term covering both. I have even advocated avoiding the term 'plagiarism' altogether. At one extreme, Peter Levin goes as far as to say that even good academic practice is plagiarism, since it essentially involves appropriating the ideas of others: 'Cheating has given plagiarism a bad name' (Levin 2003, p.2). A thoughtful and philosophical discussion of the differences between the concepts of plagiarism, cheating, and collusion is to be found in Johnston, W., 'The Concept of Plagiarism', <http://www.ilthe.ac.uk/1228.asp> (ILTHE members only) (accessed 15.12.03).

<sup>5</sup> However, it is quite common to treat unintentional plagiarism as on a par with deliberate cheating; some allow paraphrasing, provided it is radical enough; and some omit any reference to ideas. Many definitions also include what is known as 'autoplagerism', or reproducing work already submitted by the same student under a different head of assessment.

<sup>6</sup> The metaphor of digestion is an important one for explaining the difference between surface and deep reading; but it needs unpacking if students are to understand it. I tell



text, and to put it into your own words. Nevertheless, it still involves the unacknowledged use of someone else's work, and I think it is correct to treat it as hardly less objectionable than straight copying.

I therefore find it odd that students are sometimes positively encouraged to paraphrase. For example, Indiana University has a web page giving students advice on how not to plagiarise, and it provides examples of acceptable and unacceptable paraphrasing. One of the criteria it gives for unacceptable paraphrasing is that 'only a few words or phrases' have been changed.<sup>7</sup> However, paraphrasing without acknowledgement is still plagiarism, whether it is superficial or radical. Radical paraphrasing might be useful as an occasional exercise for testing comprehension, but it should not form the basis of essay writing, whether acknowledged or not. The ability to *summarise* what an author says in one's own words is a more useful skill; but most important of all, in the context of philosophy, is the ability to quote a passage verbatim, and to *analyse* how an interpretation can be derived from the actual wording. This way students will demonstrate that they are thinking for themselves.

### Adopting the ideas of others

It would obviously be absurd to expect students to give a source for *every* idea or fact they use in writing an essay. For example, if a student writes 'René Descartes (1596–1650) was a dualist,' no-one is going to accuse them of plagiarism, even though knowledge of Descartes' name, dates, and his dualism will hardly have been the fruits of the student's own independent thought. We all accept that there is 'common knowledge', which students can use without giving a reference. But it is impossible to say precisely what is or is not common knowledge, since this will depend on the topic of the essay, and the level of the student. For example, if the essay is *about* Descartes' dualism, it would be appropriate to discuss different interpretations, duly acknowledged; and a PhD thesis might take more common knowledge for granted than a first-year essay. Even experienced scholars will disagree where the line should be drawn, and it

---

them that it involves more than just translating someone else's words into your own words (paraphrasing), but extracting what is essential, incorporating it into your own being as a thinker, and rejecting the rest. This is why I believe that summarising is a higher-order intellectual activity than paraphrasing. However, Peter Levin might be right that paraphrasing is an important first step in developing the skill of deep reading (personal communication).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/plagiarism.html> (accessed 10.08.03).

would be unfair to take a penal approach to undergraduates who happen to overstep it.

More significantly, while we do expect philosophy undergraduates to think for themselves, we do not expect them to come up with ideas no-one has ever thought of before. Even at PhD level, most universities have abandoned or at least diluted the originality requirement, given the difficulty of finding something absolutely new to say.<sup>8</sup> The main difference between undergraduates and postgraduates is that we expect postgraduates to trawl the literature to find precedents for what they themselves may have thought of already. But time is too short for undergraduates to do this (and it is questionable how far it is a productive use of *anyone's* time). I don't think we would wish to penalise an undergraduate for failing to know that their ideas had already been published by others, unless the relevant texts were contained in the compulsory reading for the course. On the contrary, we would reward them for being able to come up with the same ideas as published academics, rather than unpublicably bad ideas. In short, what we are looking for is not *original*, but *independent* thinking—and this distinction needs to be made clear to students.<sup>9</sup>

By default, if students express ideas in their own words without an acknowledgment, they are claiming them as their own. However, it is hard to establish whether they have arrived at them through their own thinking, or have been inspired by extra-curricular reading. The ideal is that students should acknowledge all their sources of help, as junior members of an academic community in which this is standard practice. We should be pleased if some of them do more reading than is required, and use their brains to digest the material and make it their own. While falling short of complete independence of thought, breadth of reading

---

<sup>8</sup> For example, the University of Leeds *Regulations* state that "To qualify for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy the candidate must . . . present a thesis which shall be written in English on the subject of his/her advanced study and research, and satisfy the examiners that it contains evidence of originality and independent critical ability and matter suitable for publication, and that it is of a sufficient merit to qualify for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy." Leaving aside the tautologous nature of the last phrase, there is no further guidance as to what 'evidence of originality' means, and it is left to the examiners to specify what evidence there is in their report.

<sup>9</sup> I point out to my students that, if they were doing maths and were asked to prove Pythagoras's theorem, their proof wouldn't be original (because Pythagoras has already done it), but as long as they thought it out for themselves rather than copying it out of a book, their work would be independent. Obviously they need help; but the help given should be like the help Socrates gave to Meno (though perhaps less leading at HE level). cf. Levin 2003, p.4.

and the ability to digest the ideas of others are academic virtues to be encouraged. The advice I give my students is that if they merely quote and paraphrase, whether acknowledging the fact or not, they are failing to demonstrate any specifically philosophical ability. If they can digest the sophisticated philosophical ideas of others, and express them succinctly in their own words, they will get some credit for philosophical understanding. But what I am really looking for is the ability to *engage* with the ideas of others, which students can demonstrate by criticising them, setting one against another, confronting a commentator's interpretation with a primary text, and so on. If students are operating at this level, they cannot possibly conceal their sources.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that, when students have borrowed ideas and thoroughly digested them, it will be virtually impossible to establish that this is what they have done, rather than thinking up the ideas for themselves—and it is bad practice to make something illegal if it is unpoliceable. So to include the copying of ideas in a university definition of plagiarism merely complicates an issue which is difficult enough already. At Leeds, it is included in the definition<sup>10</sup>, and I asked the head of our Office of Academic Appeals and Regulation (who has had many years of experience in the role) whether there had ever been any plagiarism cases involving the copying of ideas. He said never. It always turned on copying from or paraphrasing texts. So why include this particular cog in the machine, if it never does any work? Indeed it can actually do harm to conscientious students, who will be worried about expressing their own ideas in case the same ideas could be

---

<sup>10</sup> The University of Leeds distinguishes between 'cheating in University Examinations' and 'plagiarism in University assessments and the presentation of fraudulent or fabricated coursework'. Its definition of the latter is: 'Plagiarism is defined as the copying of ideas, text, data or other work (or any combination thereof) without permission and/or due acknowledgment. Fraudulent or fabricated coursework is the production and submission of such work, particularly reports of laboratory or practical work, to satisfy the requirements of a University Assessment in whole or in part.' Among the oddities of this definition is the reference to 'without permission'. Do we ever expect students to obtain the permission of authors they quote from, and would they escape censure if they had obtained an author's permission to plagiarise? (Since I wrote the initial draft of the present document, 'with permission' has been dropped from the definition of plagiarism in the University *Regulations*. I have also been told that the Leeds regulations have been 'shamelessly plagiarised by several universities'—but in this case, as in many others, those who are professionally concerned with plagiarism take a remarkably relaxed view about the appropriation of their own ideas. They are more concerned that the situation should be improved than that their individual contribution should be publicly recognised.)

found in books they haven't read, thus leaving them open to a charge of unintentional plagiarism.

### 3. Crime<sup>11</sup> versus bad practice

If we eliminate the copying of ideas from the definition of plagiarism, we are left with a contrast between the deliberate intention to cheat, and copying or paraphrasing the words of others without acknowledgment. Everyone will agree that the deliberate intention to cheat is criminal, whereas failure to acknowledge sources is less obviously so. It may just be an instance of bad academic practice.

The trouble is that it is often difficult to discriminate between criminal intent, and mere bad practice on the part of students who are insufficiently initiated into academic culture. When confronted with accusations of plagiarism, students usually have plausible stories to tell:

- 'I did include the book in my bibliography';
- 'I wrote the essay from my notes, and I had forgotten to include the source';
- 'This is how I was taught to write essays at school';
- 'This is what I am expected to do in my other department'.

Most cases fall within a grey area, where what the student has actually done is captured by the definition of plagiarism, but it is difficult to prove deliberate intent to commit fraud.

It is the criminal aspect which makes plagiarism such a fraught issue for academics, for a number of reasons:

- In our role as policers of academic standards and integrity, we are embarrassed if external examiners catch us out as having failed to detect plagiarism (I myself remember being caught having awarded Professor Sir Peter Strawson a 2.2 mark for an essay on Kant, many years ago).
- Confronting the student is emotionally upsetting for both parties.

---

<sup>11</sup> Some may feel that 'crime' is too strong a word. I use it in order to maintain as sharp a distinction as possible between deliberate fraud and bad academic practice. I should also acknowledge my debt to the spin doctors of New Labour, since what I am recommending is that we should be 'tough on crime, and tough on the causes of crime.'

- It can take a lot of time to establish that plagiarism has taken place, and to go through official university procedures; and this time fulfils no useful educational purpose.<sup>12</sup>
- We are often unhappy with the final verdict—whether because we think the panel has been too severe, or because it dismisses a case on the grounds that the department was at fault (and universities may have a bias in favour of the student, in order to avoid expensive and embarrassing appeals).<sup>13</sup>
- An obsession with the avoidance of plagiarism poisons the overall relationship between teachers and students. The learning process becomes one of enforced compliance, rather than one of co-operation between teacher and student to maximise learning.

Institutions must have policies and procedures for dealing with fraud when it does occur; but it is clearly better to find ways of minimising the occurrence of plagiarism in the first place. The focus should be on:

- making the crime of cheating unthinkable;
- positively fostering good academic practice.

### What is the crime?

Unacknowledged copying is a crime in two respects:

1. First, it involves breaching the intellectual property rights of the author. Students are often unaware that copying is a form of theft, and that copyright legislation applies in all walks of life. The problem has been exacerbated by the internet, since students tend to assume

---

<sup>12</sup> Clare Saunders, in a personal communication, makes the valid point that being caught plagiarising can be a valuable learning experience—and I myself know of at least one student who was severely reprimanded for plagiarism in his first year, but went on to get a well-deserved first-class degree. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the time involved is disproportionate, and it is far better to prevent plagiarism from occurring in the first place.

<sup>13</sup> I am assured that, at Leeds at least, any bias in favour of the student is due solely to the judicial principle that 'a poorly supported and ill-financed individual is allowed more latitude than a well-financed and professionally supported organisation.' However, Carroll 2002, p.72, notes an increasing tendency for students to be represented by solicitors, whose 'adversarial and aggressive manner' is another source of stress for teachers who discover plagiarism.

that they can do what they like with material that is made available without charge.<sup>14</sup> It is important that they should be made aware of the legal implications of making illicit use of copyright material.

2. Second, and more importantly in the academic context, it involves gaining a qualification under false pretences. A degree is a passport to a high-status and well-paid career (outside academia, at least). If we certificate students as having knowledge and abilities which they have not in fact demonstrated, then this particular function of the university system loses its *raison d'être* and its credibility.<sup>15</sup>

Some of what I am going to say may be interpreted as too lenient on plagiarism. So let me make it absolutely clear that, when it can be shown beyond reasonable doubt that students have fraudulently passed off the work of others as their own, they should be severely punished. The punishment should not be merely a reduction in marks at the discretion

---

<sup>14</sup> There is a nice story of the American student who sent an email to his tutor, saying 'I've found what I need for the essay. To save the trouble of printing it out, can I just send you the URL?' At least that way he would have avoided breach of copyright. Nevertheless, we need to preserve a clear distinction between plagiarism and breach of copyright. Breach of copyright involves potential financial loss to the owner of the copyright, whereas plagiarism involves the owner's moral right to be acknowledged. Besides, no-one would be acquitted of a charge of plagiarism on the grounds that the source was out of copyright.

<sup>15</sup> I have confined myself to reasons why deliberate plagiarism is a *crime*. There are many more reasons why it is *immoral*, not least that it puts honest students at a relative disadvantage. Valerie Powell makes the interesting suggestion that students should choose the punishment: 'There is nothing like a bit of peer pressure and believe it or not the punishments decided by the students are usually more inventive and much harsher than any we could devise. They know exactly where to "kick where it hurts".' (<http://listserv.unb.ca/bin/wa?A2=ind0312&L=sthe-I&O=D&F=&S=&P=10536>, accessed 27.12.03). But much though I applaud the idea that students should be subject to peer pressure as members of a co-operative community of learners, I don't think we should abandon the ancient Athenian principle that actual retribution should be in the hands of some higher authority than the victims themselves. Again on the moral front, many US institutions attempt to discourage plagiarism through an 'honor code' which students sign up to. However I have seen no evidence that plagiarism is less prevalent in the US than elsewhere, and I am convinced that trying to introduce honour codes into the UK would go down like a lead balloon. For more on honour codes and plagiarism, see Larry Hinman's site on academic integrity: <http://ethics.acusd.edu/Resources/AcademicIntegrity/Index.html> (accessed 28.12.03) Also interesting is an article by Paul Robinson, called 'Code comfort', in *The Spectator* of 27 September 2003, though its focus is on honour codes in US military academies.

of the examiners, but it should involve a quasi-judicial process, in which the ultimate sanction is the failure to award a degree.

### Causes of the crime

Sometimes the reason for plagiarism lies with the students. There are many circumstances which can interfere with their work, and tempt them to resort to a quick fix as deadlines loom. For example:

- mental problems (depression, being in love, addiction to drink or drugs, etc.);
- adverse domestic circumstances (death, illness, or divorce among family or close friends);
- illness severe enough to affect their work, but not severe enough to warrant a year out;
- spending too much time in paid employment.<sup>16</sup>

Alternatively, there may be some students who register for a philosophy module without the necessary motivation. For example:

- it might be a compulsory component of an entirely different programme of study (e.g. medical ethics for trainee doctors), and students fail to see its relevance for their professional qualification;
- some students might take it as a soft elective option, without appreciating that the study of philosophy involves hard work;
- other students might have accepted a place on a joint-honours programme having been rejected for a single-honours programme with higher entry requirements (e.g. English or History), intending to transfer at the end of the first year.

Apriori, one might expect philosophy students (especially single-honours students) to be more committed to the subject for its own sake than students of other disciplines, for the following reasons:

---

<sup>16</sup> And, one might add, there is a small minority who want to get a degree with little or no work at all.

- a philosophy degree is not a specifically vocational qualification which students are desperate to obtain, even if it means taking short cuts;
- the large majority start philosophy for the first time at university, and are therefore not just unthinkingly continuing with a subject they happened to do well at in school;
- in some cases the decision to study philosophy is a positive one made against the advice of parents or careers advisers who mistakenly doubt the value of a philosophy degree.

If we lived in an ideal world in which all our students arrived with an enthusiastic commitment to learning philosophy for its own sake, then something would have gone seriously wrong if any of them resorted to cheating when assessed. Everyone understands that if you genuinely want to learn something—such as a foreign language, or playing a musical instrument—then cheating is entirely irrelevant to the purpose.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately we do not live in an ideal world, and a significant number of philosophy students arrive without a strong commitment to learning philosophy, at least as we teach it. It would be worthwhile conducting an empirical investigation into why such students opt for philosophy in the first place.

Given that students won't cheat if they want to learn, the key to preventing criminal behaviour is to foster a culture in which learning is valued for its own sake—in which those who arrive with enthusiasm don't lose it, and the others acquire it. This involves both eliminating structural factors for which we ourselves are responsible, and paying more attention to developing good practice.

## **Structural causes of the crime**

Common structural causes are the following:

### **1. Failure to make the rules clear**

It is difficult enough for us as teachers to articulate the distinction between cheating and mere bad academic practice, and it is hardly surprising if students fail to understand it, even if they are given a

---

<sup>17</sup> Hunt 2002 makes some incisive points about how university structures deflect students away from wanting to learn, and towards being motivated solely by grades counting towards their certification.



definition. As I shall explain below, it is much better to focus on educating students into good academic practice, since written work which conforms to good practice cannot be plagiarised. Of course, there needs to be a clear warning about all forms of cheating, and about the penalties and procedures applied within the institution. But our primary purpose is to produce good philosophers, and it is perverse to keep harping on about one particular form of bad practice at the expense of inculcating good practice. Cheating is something students *do*, but unintentional plagiarising is something they *fail* to do, namely acknowledge their sources. So it is odd to give advice on *avoiding* plagiarism, when we should be advising students on what to do *right*. You won't train anyone to be a good footballer by concentrating on how they should avoid being off-side; and the same goes for philosophy, or any other academic discipline.

Russ Hunt makes the interesting point that when we as academics cite the work of colleagues, our primary motive is not to avoid accusations of plagiarism, but to establish our *bona fides*, advertise allegiances, bring work to the reader's attention, exemplify contending positions, and so on. These are all positive motives, and it is wrong to give students the idea that the sole purpose of referencing is the negative one of defending oneself against charges of cheating. We should give them an apprenticeship in academic culture as it actually is.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. Over-assessment

It is a tautology that over-assessment is a bad thing. It is bad for teachers, since more time than necessary is spent accrediting student performance rather than improving it. It is bad for students, since it creates an atmosphere in which they devote all their energies to what is assessed, at the expense of exploring more deeply or more widely than is strictly required by the syllabus. In extreme cases, the sheer volume of assessment means that weaker students simply cannot fulfil assessment requirements without taking short cuts—in particular, by plagiarising.

In most universities, the problem has become acute because of a variety of factors (none of them necessarily bad developments in themselves):

- moving from assessment only in the final year to assessment at the end of each term or semester;

---

<sup>18</sup> Hunt 2002, Reason 4.

- increasing reliance on coursework, and forms of assessment other than unseen sat examinations;
- modularisation, which has tended to result in a greater number of units of assessment;
- semesterisation, with flexibility as to the amount of credits to be taken in each semester (in any given semester, students may be under- or over-loaded).

A more intangible factor is a growing perception that students have become more strategic in their approach to learning. Instead of following the whole syllabus, they work only on the minimum necessary to get them a good grade; and research has shown that students who take a strategic approach perform significantly better in their assessment.<sup>19</sup> Given that students are accredited as having covered the whole of the syllabus, there is a natural tendency on the part of teachers to ensure that everything is assessed. Without very careful planning, this will bring about an increase in the total burden of assessment. Still worse, if students are assessed on everything, this will be at the expense of deep learning, unless they have the rare good fortune to be taught by someone who has pared the syllabus down to an amount compatible with deep learning.

There is no simple answer to the question of how much students should be assessed. It is generally agreed that there is too much summative assessment (giving grades to students without feed-back to improve future performance), and too little formative assessment (giving feed-back, whether or not with a grade which counts towards the degree classification). In some universities, philosophy departments have very little discretion over the quantity and form of summative assessment; in others, they have almost complete freedom. I would recommend keeping purely summative assessment to the absolute minimum necessary for ensuring the reliability of the degree class awarded to students,<sup>20</sup> and focussing on methods of assessment which help the

---

<sup>19</sup> Gibbs, G. and Simpson, C., 'How assessment influences student learning—a literature review', Draft, September 2002, at [http://www.ncteam.ac.uk/projects/fdtl/fdtl4/assessment/literature\\_review.doc](http://www.ncteam.ac.uk/projects/fdtl/fdtl4/assessment/literature_review.doc), pp.1-2 (accessed 11.08.03). A final version is now in press as 'Does your assessment support your students' learning?', *Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*.

<sup>20</sup> It would be an interesting exercise to take a large cohort of students, and see whether omitting alternate marks made any difference to their overall degree classifications.

students to improve, whether or not the assessment counts towards the degree classification. Students need regular formative feedback on their written work throughout their programme if they are to master the subtle and complicated conventions of academic writing. Only then can we be certain that plagiarism, if it still occurs, is deliberate rather than the outcome of ignorance.

### **3. Bunching of assignments**

Even more important than the total quantity of assessment is the question of how it is timed. It is not uncommon for students to be taking up to six modules simultaneously, and to find that the deadlines for the submission of coursework are around the same time. It is easy for us to say that the students know the timetable well in advance, and that it is up to them to manage their time so as to work evenly on all their assignments up to the deadline. However, this is not how *we* work—if we have six things to do by a deadline, we will probably tackle them one-by-one (and probably also miss some deadlines with impunity). But these options are not open to students, however well they manage their time, since assignments presuppose the learning that will have taken place up until shortly before the assignment is due.

There are two serious problems here:

- If coursework has both a formative and a summative function, it needs to be submitted late enough to reflect what students have already learned, but early enough for feedback to be returned well before the terminal assessment. Particularly in the case of one-semester modules, this seems to imply a deadline around the middle of the semester for every module.
- In a modular system which gives students a wide range of choice, there is no way of ensuring that coursework deadlines are evenly distributed for every student.

These are not problems for departments which operate a tutorial system, in which students submit one or more formative essays each week, across the range of courses they are taking. Since such essays are only formative, they avoid the difficulty that some students might be assessed on work submitted at the very beginning of a course, and others at a much later stage. On the other hand, the tutorial system has the disadvantage that students are assessed by a single terminal examination, and that tutors are unlikely to be experts in all the courses taken by their students.

In a modular system, one can at least mitigate the problem by setting a number of short assignments at different dates, and ensuring that the submission dates are not the same for every module. It might be objected that students will be assessed on work done very early in the module; but this problem can also be overcome by making only the best of the assignments count towards the module mark. Unless a student has done spectacularly well on the first assignment, they have a motivation to improve.

#### **4. Setting of impossible tasks**

In philosophy, we expect students to *think for themselves* about the texts they read. But sometimes they cannot understand the texts, and don't know how to set about making sense of them. And even if they do understand them, they don't know what sort of criticisms to make, given that they are mere undergraduates dealing with famous living academics, or geniuses of the past. It is hardly surprising if students faced with an incomprehensible text and a looming deadline take the short cut of reproducing the thoughts of others (whether acknowledged or not).

It is important to remember how new an experience it is for many fresh undergraduates to be assessed on their own thinking, rather than on their ability to recall what they have been told by their teacher, or what they have read in textbooks. Although academics in all disciplines stress the importance of independent thought, the reality falls short of the rhetoric, and students can often get by without it. What makes philosophy different is the centrality of autonomous thinking and argumentation, and the low premium placed on the ability to remember facts.

Later, I shall give some advice about how to ensure that students can fulfil the tasks we set them. For the present, it is enough to say that failure to prepare them adequately for what we expect of them can leave them with the feeling that there is little alternative but to cheat.

#### **5. Allowing an antagonistic culture to develop**

As I have already said, most philosophy students don't come to university primarily for the paper qualification, but because they want to become philosophers (not necessarily in the sense of *professional* philosophers). They can lose this initial motivation if the structures we impose on them turn their experience into a game in which they are rewarded for obeying the letter of the rule, and severely punished for going against it. In most universities, there are managerial pressures to be

ever more explicit about criteria for success and failure; and I personally have no objection to the idea that we should be more explicit about our assessment criteria. However, an obsession with plagiarism is likely to be counter-productive, since students will perceive us as policing their work rather than facilitating it. It is difficult enough for us to maintain a co-operative relationship with our students when we are assessors as well as teachers; but if we are also perceived as trying to catch them out, the relationship is liable to collapse. The last thing we want is a culture in which staff and students vie with each other to devise ever more sophisticated means of detecting plagiarism and avoiding detection. In such a culture, only the stupidest will get caught, and the cleverer criminals will get off scot-free—and these are the very students whose cleverness we should be encouraging in a positive direction.

The existence of university-wide disciplinary procedures does at least mean that we are not both judge and prosecutor. Nevertheless, it is still up to the individual teacher to detect plagiarism and produce the evidence—the policing role will always be there, if only in the background. At my own institution, there is a commendable rule that teachers are not allowed to confront students with accusations of plagiarism. If there is evidence of plagiarism, it must be handed over to an impartial departmental committee, which will decide whether or not the student has a case to answer. All the same, it is still possible to have a dialogue with the student before that stage is reached. For example, you can ask them tactful questions about how they wrote the essay and what sources they used, provided the dreaded p-word is never mentioned, and it is clear that you are exploring rather than confirming a case.

My advice is that, while there must be a document which makes clear the penalties for cheating, much more stress should be laid on positive encouragement to adopt good practice.

## **6. Making cheating too easy**

I know it is rather like saying that it is your fault for being burgled if you leave your property in full view, and your doors and windows unlocked. Nevertheless, there will be much less stealing of other people's words if it is made more difficult. I shall deal with this in the next section.

## **Making cheating less easy**

The general principle is to set assessment tasks which cannot be carried out satisfactorily simply by copying or paraphrasing any previously available material. Whether or not a student can be proved to have done

so, they will fail anyway, because they have not satisfied the assessment criteria. Here are some tips for making cheating less easy:<sup>21</sup>

### **1. Set tasks which focus on process as well as on product**

If you merely ask students to produce an essay, then there is no obvious means of telling *how* it was produced—it isn't like watching an art student in a studio, or a science student conducting an experiment. There are a number of ways round this:

- tell them to submit an essay plan and proposed literature search before embarking on the essay itself (but you may find this too time consuming, especially if you comment on them);
- tell them to submit a first draft (again, time consuming—but students will produce better work if they have the advantage of your comments at an early stage);
- tell them to submit a log of how they wrote the essay, and attach it to the essay itself;
- formulate the question so as to force them to reveal their working (e.g. 'How far can an analysis of Kant's wording in the Refutation of Idealism be used to establish whether he was arguing to the existence of objects within the world of experience, or to the existence of things in themselves?').

### **2. Ask very specific questions, to which there are no published answers**

The more general and open-ended the question, the more likely there is to be a relevant answer to it in the published literature. For example, to ask a question like 'Is scepticism self-defeating?' is positively inviting students to go to the nearest dictionary of philosophy or textbook on epistemology. A question like 'How far does Sextus Empiricus's formulation of scepticism succeed in circumventing the charge that scepticism is self-defeating?' would be much more difficult to find an answer to. Indeed, the effort required to find a ready-made answer would almost constitute a respectable piece of philosophical research.

### **3. Relate questions to recent events, or the students' own experience**

Most philosophical publications are relatively context-free. If you tie a

---

<sup>21</sup> All these tips are relevant to assessed coursework and exams; but only some of them apply to dissertations and theses, which are necessarily more open-ended.

question down to a specific context, students will not be able to use them (or at least not as they stand). A question like ‘What are the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism?’ can easily be answered from available sources. But this will not be the case if you ask ‘What are the strengths and weaknesses of a utilitarian approach to a moral dilemma you have come across in the news during the past month?’ or ‘. . . to a moral dilemma you yourself have faced as a student?’

#### **4. Force students to be analytical and critical**

One thing plagiarists are good at is finding sources to copy from. You can capitalise on this virtue by telling them to identify, say, three sources which provide an answer to a particular question, and then to compare them, and explain which they consider to be the best answer, and why. This is particularly appropriate for students who use the web, since it requires intelligent use of a search engine.

More generally, building a specific piece of analysis and criticism into an essay question, and making sure that students know that they will be assessed on their analytic and critical skills, makes it much more difficult for them to find ready-made answers.

#### **5. Don't ask the same question or set the same task twice**

Students can often get hold of essays written by a previous cohort, and the word gets around if the assessment on a particular module remains much the same from one year to the next. It is important to make sure you set substantially different questions or tasks each year. This is much easier to do if your questions are highly specific (otherwise you are likely to run out of appropriate questions for a course taught over many years).<sup>22</sup>

### **Collusion**

Students sometimes copy from each other; and this can be difficult to

---

<sup>22</sup> In a personal communication, Martin Benjamin has raised the question, which arises especially in the history of philosophy, of what to do about ‘old chestnut’ questions which have proved successful at eliciting good work from students in the past. My answer is that I have suggested a whole battery of techniques for reducing the likelihood of plagiarism, without implying that every single one should be applied to every assessment. If it is felt educationally desirable to recycle old questions, then other means should be used to counteract the increased scope for plagiarism. For example, you might ask students to evaluate papers on the same topic from previous years, or to show you a draft outlining work in progress.

detect in a large pile of scripts. Although copying can be by mutual consent, it occasionally involves actual theft of a script or a computer file. It is good practice to warn students to look after their work carefully, and to have robust departmental procedures for the submission of essays—telling students to place essays in an open box or pigeonhole makes life much too easy for a potential thief.

If two students have submitted substantially the same essay, and neither confesses to stealing from the other, it should be relatively easy to establish which was the author by questioning them about its contents, or comparing it with their other work. However, I have had quite heated discussions about what to do in the unlikely event of neither being proved guilty. My personal view is that, as in a court of law, both should be found innocent, and that it would be absurd to compromise by imposing a 50% penalty on each, proportional to the 50% probability of guilt.<sup>23</sup> But I have come across the view that both should be found fully guilty, on the grounds that it is as much of a crime to let another student see your work as it is to copy the work of others. One colleague was even surprised that there was no Leeds University regulation to this effect.<sup>24</sup>

Although such a case is purely hypothetical, it does raise the important question of how far students should be permitted, or even positively encouraged to collaborate. I believe that collaboration should be encouraged, for a number of reasons:

- In my experience, the students who learn most tend to be those who work with each other outside formal teaching sessions. Co-operative work includes reading and commenting on essay drafts, sharing the teacher's comments on previous work, reporting on sources read, discussing the issues, and so on.
- Students who have literacy problems or can't express themselves clearly can get much more practical help from fellow students than from hard-pressed teachers.
- Philosophy provides relatively little scope for team work (an attribute highly valued by employers), and any opportunity for co-operative

---

<sup>23</sup> In a personal communication, Martin Benjamin has suggested an interesting variant: that the essay should be treated as having a single author, with each student being given half the mark.

<sup>24</sup> The official position at Leeds is that there is no ban on letting students see each other's work, but that if two essays are substantially the same, both students will be found guilty of plagiarism in the unlikely event that one doesn't confess.



rather than competitive learning, however informal, should be welcomed.

- Even if we wished to outlaw collaboration, there would be no way of policing it; and it is bad practice to enact legislation which cannot be enforced.

Nevertheless, we are still left with the problem of drawing the line beyond which honest collaboration turns into deceitful collusion. Part of the solution is to make it a plus point if students acknowledge the help they have received, with the proviso that excessively derivative work will receive a low mark. This is no different from our own practice as academics. We ask colleagues to comment on drafts of books or articles before submission for publication, and we acknowledge their contributions (as I have done in the present document).

Where students have co-operated in the preparation of an essay, but done the final writing-up independently, there will no doubt be similarities in what they say—but I do not see this as a problem. They have worked together, and learned together, and each has come up with their own, individual literary product. The problem arises only when substantial sections have more-or-less identical wording. This would indicate that one student has copied from or paraphrased the other, and it should be treated as a case of cheating.

Of course, the situation is very different if the point of the exercise is that a group of students should write a single product collaboratively. Here there need to be sticks and carrots to ensure that each student makes a solid contribution to the final result; but failure to do so is laziness rather than cheating (though it still might warrant punishment).

## Unseen examinations

It is often assumed that, provided they are properly invigilated, unseen examinations are a fool-proof method of ensuring that what students write is their own work.<sup>25</sup> One of the consequences of increased worries about cheating is that some institutions have expanded the quantity of

---

<sup>25</sup> However, cheating is becoming ever more sophisticated with modern technology. See Cole, S. and Kiss, E., 'What can we do about student cheating?', *About Campus*, May/June 2000, pp. 5-12, quoted in Carroll and Appleton 2001, p.6.

unseen examinations at the expense of written coursework.<sup>26</sup> This tendency is to be regretted, not merely for the standard reasons against unseen examinations as the main mode of assessment, but because they actually encourage the bad study habits of which plagiarism is an extreme example.

Consider the following case:<sup>27</sup> a philosophy student with a photographic memory reproduces a published article in an unseen examination, and fails to acknowledge it. Is it plagiarism or not? I should say it is, because the means of storing the text (in the head rather than on paper) is irrelevant. But what if she *had* acknowledged the source? Even though it would not be plagiarism, I think we would very unhappy about giving her any marks for her work, since it was wholly derivative. To move a little further down this slippery slope, what would we say if she had memorised her *course notes*, and reproduced the relevant part in her exam script? Here, much would depend on whether her notes represented her own thinking, or were extracts or paraphrases from secondary literature, lecture notes, etc. But, even if the former, I think we philosophers would still feel uncomfortable about what she was doing, since she was treating the exam as a memory test, rather than as an opportunity to display her philosophical ability.

The upshot is that, if we are mainly assessing our students' ability to write philosophically, it is as important in unseen exams as in coursework to make sure that they understand the criteria by which they will be assessed, and that questions are asked in a way which forces them to apply their own philosophical thinking, rather than regurgitate what they have memorised. For example, they might be asked to apply a general theory to a particular case, or to comment on a passage not included in the required reading for the course.

In short, unseen exams are no panacea for plagiarism, and they encourage undesirable work habits. If properly designed, they can have a useful role to play in assessment, by forcing students to work at the whole of a course, and testing their ability to extemporise under pressure. However, it is much better that sat examinations should constitute just one element of an array of assessment methods, with

---

<sup>26</sup> The pressure to revert to sat examinations is well described by David Punter in 'The Death of the Essay', *English Subject Centre Newsletter Online*, 1, May 2001, at <http://www.english.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/general/publications/newsletters/newsissue1/index.htm> (accessed 11.08.03).

<sup>27</sup> I owe this example to Dudley Knowles of the University of Glasgow in a private conversation.

suitable safeguards against cheating. Oral assessment is particularly useful for establishing whether students have really digested what they have learned, and it is largely immune to cheating.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. Good practice

Proper acknowledgment of sources is one of the key features of academic good practice. Indeed, it is almost definitive of *academic* practice, since it is so rare outside academia. Consider the following examples:

- *Politics*. It is common practice for political parties to steal each other's ideas, and to flatly deny that they have done so. More revealingly, in the recent case of the 'dodgy dossier' about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, the unacknowledged copying of a PhD thesis was described as 'academic' plagiarism—by implication, an act which would be condemned by academics as plagiarism, but not necessarily by others.
- *Journalism*. Newspapers are always paraphrasing stories first reported in other papers, and they are usually attributed only if the original report becomes part of the story. Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that, in journalistic circles, the word 'exclusive' means 'not plagiarised'. I once caught a student plagiarising, and at the formal hearing he was accompanied by his father, who was a journalist on a broadsheet. He said that, although he accepted that his son had plagiarised by our academic criteria, what he had done would be considered perfectly good practice in journalism. Ironically, the following week his paper carried an article on plagiarism (by a different journalist)—and the main story had been lifted, without attribution, from an article in a different paper published a few days earlier.<sup>29</sup>
- *Cookery books*. Although most recipes are *rechauffés* (with greater or lesser variations), sources are rarely acknowledged (Elizabeth David is a notable exception).

---

<sup>28</sup> But not completely so. In Italy, most assessment is oral, and there was a recent case where students had bribed staff to ask questions they were warned about in advance. See the *Times Higher*, 25.07.03, p.13.

<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, I cannot refer to my sources without revealing the identity of the plagiarist, which would be unethical.

- *Popular non-fiction.* There is a smooth gradation from academic to non-academic writing, with one of the characteristics of the latter being lack of references to back up assertions.
- *Dictionaries.* Dictionaries are a distinct genre of academic writing, in which it is accepted practice to pillage earlier dictionaries, with at best a general acknowledgment in the preface.

Only a small minority of philosophy graduates go on to further study and then an academic career. The fact that academic practice on referencing is so out of tune with the rest of the world raises the question of whether we should continue to set such high standards for our undergraduates. Why, for example, should a student bent on a career in journalism nearly fail to get a degree at all because his practice is journalistic rather than academic? Might it not be better to set more realistic standards, such as minimum compliance with copyright law? The full rigour of academic practice is relevant only to those who are likely to become academics themselves, and this can be left to the postgraduate stage.

My response is that, while academic practice is sometimes over-fussy (especially in disciplines other than philosophy, where even common sense seems to need a supporting reference), it is nevertheless *good* practice. Rather than accommodating ourselves to the sloppiness and even downright dishonesty of the outside world, we should raise its standards by populating it with graduates who have a clear sense of the need to acknowledge debts to others. Good journalists can and do refer to their sources in ways which do not involve footnotes and bibliographies in the classic academic style.

Again, the academic essay is becoming increasingly restricted to undergraduate work. Many philosophy students have had no previous experience of writing essays (some A-levels do not require them, and an increasing proportion of entrants have had no post-compulsory education), and very few of our graduates will ever have to write an essay in the future. So why do we lay so much stress on a form of writing which is of little use, and which is most open to plagiarism?

Here I would recommend encouraging students to use different literary styles. For example, the dialogue form has a distinguished history in philosophy, because it allows an argument to be pursued in depth. One of my students submitted an imaginary dialogue between Jeremy

Paxman<sup>30</sup> and Kant as a substitute for a traditional essay. I thought it was very good, but short of a first, because Kant should have been subjected to more penetrating criticism. Another possible style would be a report with an executive summary—just the sort of thing employers are looking for.

### A post-modern challenge<sup>31</sup>

An alternative view is that the whole idea of intellectual property has been made obsolete by the denial of the primacy of the authorial voice. A text is what its readers make of it, and different readings are potentially infinite. Ownership lies as much in the reader as in the author.

This tendency has been accelerated by increasingly open access to texts. In the old days, students were confined to a limited diet of materials, closely controlled by librarians and academics. But in the digital age, students can access almost anything they like. What matters is not ownership of material (which is freely available anyway), but the use that students make of it. Employers want graduates who can ransack the web and other resources, and apply the materials they find to the project in hand. This requires high-level skills, such as assessing the reliability of sources, selecting what is relevant, analysing what is meant, debating the pros and cons of different positions, and synthesising everything into a clearly comprehensible whole. Who said what is hardly relevant, and a requirement that students should think original thoughts will simply deflect them from cultivating these more important skills. The world will be a better place if there are no barriers to the sharing of ideas.

My reply is that, although I agree with much of the above, I do not see why students should be relieved of the minor chore of giving proper references to their sources. Even outside academia, it matters what sources have been used, since some are more authoritative than others.

### Philosophical academic literacy

The expression ‘academic literacy’ has been coined to denote the family

---

<sup>30</sup> A UK TV interviewer famous/notorious for the ferocity of his questioning.

<sup>31</sup> For this section, I am indebted to a deliberately contentious piece by my colleague David Mossley. The piece was removed from the PRS-LTSN website because too many readers thought it represented PRS-LTSN policy rather than a stimulus to debate. I shall re-visit the whole issue in much greater detail in my forthcoming ‘Plagiarism Really Is A Crime: A Counterblast to Anarchists and Postmodernists’, which will be somewhat more sympathetic to anarchism and postmodernism than the title suggests.

of features that distinguish academic from non-academic writing—of which the rigorous citation of sources is just one. However, different disciplines have different sets of conventions, and the expression ‘academic literacies’ in the plural is used to reflect these internal differences. Thus ‘philosophical academic literacy’ is the sum of the rules we expect philosophical writings to observe if they are to be published in a form acceptable to the philosophical community. Some of these rules are common to other disciplines, but others are not. For example, in philosophy:

- we encourage the use of ordinary language;
- we do not outlaw expressions of subjectivity (the first-person pronoun is perfectly acceptable, as are expressions such as ‘I think’<sup>32</sup> or ‘I believe’);
- we prefer active to passive verbs;
- we set little store by referenced appeals to facts, particularly where the facts are common knowledge;
- we tolerate inconclusive answers;
- we take a dim view of appeals to authority;
- we lay great stress on reasoned argument and independence of thought.

Little has been published on the analysis and articulation of specifically philosophical academic literacy, and it is a topic worthy of further investigation.<sup>33</sup> As a preliminary, the most striking difference between analytic philosophy and just about every other discipline is the deliberate avoidance of acknowledging sources—which presents our students with very bad role models if they are to avoid accusations of plagiarism. To give just two examples, in the preface to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein writes:

---

<sup>32</sup> Almost from day one students are introduced to Descartes’ *ego cogito*—even though it is a common criticism in the philosophical literature that all he was entitled to say was ‘a thought was observed.’

<sup>33</sup> The classic text is Geisler, C., *Academic Literacy and the Nature of Expertise: Reading, Writing, and Knowing in Academic Philosophy* (Hillsdale, New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), xvii+354pp. It is surprising that this seminal work does not seem to have given rise to further publications on the topic.

I do not wish to judge how far my efforts coincide with those of other philosophers. Indeed, what I have written here makes no claim to novelty in detail, and the reason why I give no sources is that it is a matter of indifference to me whether the thoughts that I have had have been anticipated by someone else.

I will only mention that I am indebted to Frege's great works and to the writings of my friend Mr Bertrand Russell for much of the stimulation of my thoughts.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, Ryle's *Concept of Mind*<sup>35</sup> discusses the views of many historical philosophers, but without any bibliography or page references to the texts. There are many other examples of 20th-century classics in analytical philosophy which completely contravene the requirements we impose on our students. Going further back into the history of philosophy, there are almost no major philosophers who reference their sources properly until we get back to the scholastics (Leibniz is an exception). It is a major question how we can get our students to conform to 21st-century good practice, when earlier writings held up as a model would be failed for lack of referencing (and there were indeed problems over getting Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* accepted as a doctoral thesis, so that he would be qualified to practise as a teacher at Cambridge).

It should be immediately obvious that, since different disciplines have different literacies, students on joint degrees, or taking only a few elective modules in philosophy, are likely to have difficulty adapting to conflicting expectations.<sup>36</sup> For example, an engineering student might be marked down for questioning established safety standards in an engineering course, but equally for *failing* to criticise received wisdom in a philosophy course. This can even be a problem when the disciplines are quite similar. I once caught a History/Philosophy student plagiarising in

---

<sup>34</sup> Wittgenstein, L., *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. Pears, D.F. and McGuinness, B.F. (London, Routledge, 1961, repr. 1974), p.3. Laurence Goldstein, 'Wittgenstein's Ph.D. Viva—a Re-Creation', *Philosophy*, 74, 1999, 499–513, discusses the extent to which Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, submitted as a PhD thesis, was plagiarised from the ideas of others. He comes to the conclusion that 'had the dissertation been judged by normal standards of originality and quality of philosophical argumentation, it would have failed.' My thanks to Peter Simons for drawing my attention to this witty and scholarly article.

<sup>35</sup> Ryle, G., *The Concept of Mind* (London, Hutchinson, 1949).

<sup>36</sup> The different expectations in different disciplines are emphasised by Lea, M.R. and Street, B.V., 'Student Writing in Higher Education: an academic literacies approach', *Studies in Higher Education* 23.2, 1998, pp.157-172.

an essay on Kant. When I confronted her with what she had done, she burst into tears, and said ‘But this is how we are expected to write essays in history. The trouble with you philosophers is that you expect us to *think*.’ No doubt my history colleagues would reject her analysis; but it is telling that a final-year student had failed to notice that thought was required in history as well as in philosophy—and, more worryingly, that she hadn’t yet acquired the *ability* to think independently in philosophy, even though she knew it was expected of her.

Although definitions of plagiarism are usually institution-wide, they may be applied differently in different disciplines. As I hinted earlier, students on journalism courses might be allowed to get away with what would be stamped on as plagiarism in philosophy. It is unfair on the students if we punish them severely for failing to adhere to philosophical good practice, unless we have made every effort to educate them into that good practice.

### Promoting philosophical literacy

More generally, there is the problem of initiating students into academic and specifically philosophical literacy, when they are unlikely to have had any previous experience of either. I am not in a position to generalise about how students are taught at school, or how they are assessed across the whole spectrum of A-levels. However, there are widespread complaints that, despite the rhetoric to the contrary, the emphasis is on regurgitation of pre-digested course materials. This is a criticism which has even been directed against Philosophy A-level. A-level students have little (or sometimes no) experience of working through primary texts, seeking help from secondary sources and acknowledging that help, or articulating their own thoughts and reasonings about what they have read. It is quite unrealistic to expect incoming students to know what to do with the reading lists, lectures, tutorials, and essay questions we throw at them, unless we make this a central focus of our educational programme. The situation is not helped by the fact that, in many institutions, students are given the least individual attention in their first year when they most need it, and the most in their final year when they ought to be becoming autonomous learners.

Quite apart from UK A-level entrants, we have an increasing number of international students. Many of these come from cultures where rote learning is the explicit educational aim, and where it is unthinkable to question the authority of teachers or set texts. I was once advisor to a Chinese philosophy lecturer on a study visit, who referred to



me as ‘father professor’ (and my wife as ‘mother professor’), with all the deference to authority this implies. In the light of such cultural differences, it is an uphill struggle to convince students that their traditional practices are liable to be treated as plagiarism, and that they are expected to be critical of established authorities.<sup>37</sup>

Over the past few years, it has become standard practice to issue students with handbooks including advice on how to read, take notes, write essays, avoid plagiarism, and so on. This is certainly a step in the right direction. However, handbooks in themselves are not enough, because:

- students might not read them;
- if they do read them, they might not absorb the advice;
- even if they do absorb the advice, they might not be able to apply it.

The message will get home only if the advice is fully integrated into methods of teaching and assessment. If the handbook describes what a good philosophy essay will look like, then there should be clearly formulated assessment criteria, such that essays which do not conform to them will fail, or get low marks. Comments on essays should focus at least as much on helping students to conform to the criteria next time, as on correcting errors of fact or interpretation. And teaching methods should be directed towards helping students to produce high-quality assessed work—a goal unlikely to be achieved by a narrow diet of stand-up lectures and group discussions.

In short, an integrated programme of teaching and assessment which focuses on helping students to produce work which conforms to the criteria for philosophical academic literacy should make cheating much less likely. Even if it does occur, derivative work will probably be failed anyway as not conforming to the criteria—which takes much of the anxiety out of the issue of plagiarism.

### **Do we practise what we preach?**

As teachers, we are our students’ primary role models. We tell them about the importance of giving references in their essays. But are we equally fastidious in our lectures and course hand-outs? If we lecture to

---

<sup>37</sup> Hunt 2002 makes the point that emphasis on original thought is peculiar to modern Western culture.

them off the tops of our heads without attribution, and write hand-outs which are a pure distillation of what we have thought for ourselves and learned from others, it is hardly surprising if students do the same in their essays. It is unfair if we crack down on them for doing what we do ourselves—yet it is no mean challenge to ensure that our own teaching conforms to the standards we expect of our students. There should be a greater convergence between our actual practice, and what we tell our students to do.

Another issue which is likely to confuse students is whether their teachers' written and oral pronouncements are to be treated as a secondary source like any other, or as having a special, privileged status. After all, at school they were expected to reproduce what they were taught; and now that they are charged fees, they may feel that their teachers' knowledge and wisdom is what they have paid for. It's an old joke that students mustn't plagiarise—except from their lecturers. On the other hand, our teaching materials are as much our intellectual property as our publications;<sup>38</sup> and we are sending mixed signals to our students if we expect them to acknowledge one type of source and not the other. For some years now I have told my students to acknowledge my notes, email answers to queries, and the such like, as secondary sources like any other. Although there is still a tendency to under-acknowledge my hand-outs and notes taken in class, in general the requirement works very well, and the better students produce extremely well referenced essays.

## 5. Detection of cheating

Prevention is better than cure. But however much we design out opportunities for cheating, we must still be on our guard.

Some forms of cheating are very difficult to detect:

- essays written for a fee by a postgraduate;
- essays bought from an essay bank;<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Or as little, given that technically our employers own everything we produce as academics.

<sup>39</sup> Though some essay banks are free. Here, for example, is a bank of philosophy essays: <http://www.revise.it/reviseit/EssayLab/Undergraduate/Philosophy/> (accessed 09/08/03). For an example of a subscription service, see [next page]

<http://www.ukessays.com/philosophy.html> (accessed 30.12.03). It charges £70.00 per 500 words for a 2.1-standard essay, and £52.50 extra per 500 words for a first-class

- essays copied from essays written in previous years, or at another institution.

The problem is made worse by the fact that few of us know our students well enough to spot an essay written in an uncharacteristic style—and even if we did, the growing pressure to anonymise all marking would make this inapplicable. Nevertheless, there are procedures which should flush out otherwise undetected cases:

- systematic checking for rogue marks for particular pieces of work (though this won't be effective if a student has paid for someone else to produce all their written work, or has commissioned an essay of a specified grade);
- in the case of electronic submissions, checking the editing time in File/Properties/Statistics (a very short editing time is a sign that most of the content has been pasted from elsewhere);
- incorporating an element of oral assessment, in which students are interrogated about what they have written.

However, when cheating is from published sources (as it usually is), it is likely that only *parts* of an essay will be plagiarised, which makes the cheating easier to spot. It can be detected by:

- the examiner's knowledge of the source;<sup>40</sup>
- abrupt changes in style;<sup>41</sup>
- a sudden change to American spelling (or to correct spelling and grammar);
- terminology or knowledge beyond the likely capacity of an undergraduate;
- irrelevance to the question;

---

one; and I like the fact that it retains the copyright of the essays, so that students won't submit them for assessment as their own work.

<sup>40</sup> Like the classics master who caught a pupil reading from his own translation of a text, and said to him 'As it says in the Bible, "The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib"' (*Isaiah* i.3).

<sup>41</sup> If you have the essay in digital form, you can compare selected passages using the Flesch-Kincaid index and other measures in MS-Word: Tools, Spelling and Grammar, Options, check Show Readability Statistics.

- anachronisms or other give-aways (‘Wittgenstein is one of the most important philosophers of this century’, ‘As I said in Chapter 2’, failure to delete the URL—and so on);

It need not take much time to convince yourself that a passage is plagiarised. What does take a lot of time is trying to identify the source. From a legal point of view, it is unnecessary to do so, provided you have sufficient grounds (such as the above) for the balance of probability to be that the student has copied something without acknowledgement.<sup>42</sup> However, some universities require the actual source to be produced, because they are scared of losing the case if the student appeals.

## Electronic detection

There are a number of software packages for detecting plagiarism electronically.<sup>43</sup> In the UK context, the most relevant is the plagiarism detection service currently provided free of charge by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)—though in fact the software is supplied by Turnitin.com in the USA.<sup>44</sup> The service cannot be accessed directly, but only through your institution (assuming it has registered). It has a number of advantages and limitations:

### Advantages

The advantages of the JISC service are that:

---

<sup>42</sup> See Carroll and Appleton 2001, p.29, who go into considerable detail as to the legal aspects of disciplinary committees.

<sup>43</sup> For some comparisons of different software packages, see Alsop, G. and Thompsett, C., *Plagiarism: Online Tools to Relieve the Tedium of Detection*, August 2001, at [http://www.seda.ac.uk/ed\\_devs/vol2/plagiarism.htm](http://www.seda.ac.uk/ed_devs/vol2/plagiarism.htm) (accessed 28.12.03); Culwin, F. and Lancaster, T., *A Review of Electronic Services for Plagiarism Detection in Student Submissions* (2000), at <http://www.ics.ltsn.ac.uk/pub/conf2000/Papers/culwin.htm> (accessed 28.12.03); and a more recent article ‘Plagiarism, Prevention, Deterrence and Detection’ at <http://www.ilthe.ac.uk/1108.asp> (ILTHE members only) (accessed 20.12.03). However, the technology is developing so fast that comparative reviews are out of date by the time they are published.

<sup>44</sup> More recently, UK-based CFL Software Development has made its CopyCatch Gold software available free of charge to institutions, and apparently it is able to detect paraphrasing. See *Times Higher*, 08.09.03, p.7. Further details are available at <http://www.copycatchgold.com/> (accessed 09.08.03).

- it marks passages which are similar to passages in texts available on the internet, and provides links to them;
- it checks essays against all other essays that have been submitted to Turnitin.com from the UK (including essays in the same batch), although it cannot check them against essays submitted from outside the EU because of the Data Protection Act;
- it also holds an expanding database of published material previously only available in print (publishers are willing to release this material, so that they can use the service to check articles submitted by academics for publication);
- since essays can be quickly downloaded in batches, it can pick up plagiarism unsuspected by the marker.

### Limitations

The limitations of the JISC service are that:

- it can only indicate identical passages—it will not pick up paraphrasing, and academic judgment is still required to assess whether cheating has occurred (arguably this is not really a limitation, since electronic detection is merely a tool, and not a ‘magic bullet’ to solve the problem instantaneously);
- essays have to be submitted electronically, or laboriously digitised;
- since students own the copyright to their work, their permission must be obtained in advance;<sup>45</sup>
- it cannot search materials that are available only in hard copy (a large proportion of works readily available in a university library);
- it does not search websites for which a fee is payable—and these include most electronic journals and essay banks.

---

<sup>45</sup> It is likely that, within the near future, all institutions will require students to sign their consent at registration. However, as with all registration material, a signature does not mean that students have absorbed the information. As and when their work is submitted to the plagiarism detection service, they should be given a clear explanation of what plagiarism consists in, and why the detection service is being used. On a separate point, Levin 2003, p.18, encourages students to claim copyright for their work using the © symbol. I think this an excellent idea—not so much for the reason Levin gives (to discourage teachers from stealing their work), but because it will encourage students to see their work as a polished, original product, in the same league as published academic writing.

I tested the Service on a batch of about 110 essays, after I had marked and returned them. I wasn't expecting to detect any plagiarism from the internet, since I had warned the students what I was going to do, and had received a signed consent form from each of them. To my surprise, it revealed that one essay was largely copied from a single web page, and it took very little time to establish that the rest was paraphrased from the same page (I have, of course, reported the culprit for disciplinary action). I was, however, relieved to note that I had already failed the essay for lack of referencing or reasoned argumentation, and failure to address the question. A fuller report on my experience is available at

<http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/PlagDetec.doc> .

If essays have been submitted in hard copy only, and if your suspicions are aroused, you may detect plagiarism very quickly by performing an advanced Google search on distinctive words or phrases—or even better by using a number of different search engines, since none of them cover everything.

## 6. Conclusion

Improving detection techniques and issuing dire warnings of punishment will not put an end to plagiarism, any more than jails and a police force have eliminated crime. If anything, a punitive approach makes it more difficult to build an academic community in which good practice is internalised by our students. In order to reduce the occurrence of plagiarism to a minimum, the emphasis should be on positively developing and rewarding good practice, and on restructuring assessment tasks so as to eliminate the temptation and opportunity to cheat. Much of the anxiety aroused by suspicion of plagiarism will be dissipated if plagiarised work will fail anyway, as not conforming to clearly stated assessment criteria.

## 7. Sources and Resources

Plagiarism in UK higher education has become a subject of published discussion only since 1995.<sup>46</sup> Since then there has been a rapidly expanding literature, with a large degree of consensus about how plagiarism should be dealt with. Much of the advice I have passed on is in the realm of 'common knowledge' (at least as far as concerns

---

<sup>46</sup> Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead 1995, p.159.

plagiaronomists), and I have not attempted to identify the first originator of each individual item.<sup>47</sup> My main sources are Jude Carroll of Oxford Brookes University, and Phil Race of the University of Leeds, both for their published writings, and for workshops they have conducted at the University of Leeds—though I know they do not agree with everything I have suggested here. Anything philosophy-specific is my own, unless otherwise acknowledged.

As far as I am aware, virtually nothing has been published specifically relating to plagiarism in philosophy, apart from advice issued to students by individual departments in handbooks and on websites. However, there are many resources which discuss the general issues in greater detail than I have here, and provide extensive bibliographies. The following is a selection, in no particular order:

Carroll, Jude, and Appleton, Jon, *Plagiarism: A Good Practice Guide* (Oxford: Oxford Brookes University and Joint Information Systems Committee, 2001), 43pp. This can be downloaded from: [http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/faculties/art/information\\_studies/Imri/Jiscpas/docs/brookes/brookes.pdf](http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/faculties/art/information_studies/Imri/Jiscpas/docs/brookes/brookes.pdf).

Stefani, Lorraine, and Carroll, Jude, *A Briefing on Plagiarism* (York: LTSN Generic Centre, Assessment Series No. 10, 2001), 14pp. Although the Assessment Series was distributed in hard copy to all HE institutions, it can also be downloaded from:

[http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/application.asp?app=resources.asp&section=generic&process=filter\\_fields&type=all&id=1&history](http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/application.asp?app=resources.asp&section=generic&process=filter_fields&type=all&id=1&history) . This is significantly less detailed than Carroll and Appleton 2001.

Carroll, Jude, *A Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education* (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, Oxford Brookes University, 2002), 96pp. This book costs £14.95, and it can be ordered from:

<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/publications> . It goes into greater detail than Carroll's other writings on plagiarism, including useful advice on disciplinary procedures and punishment. There is an extensive bibliography and list of resources. The book is supported by a very useful and informative website:

---

<sup>47</sup> Carroll and Appleton 2001, p.8, and Carroll 2002, p.5, make the same point. They also draw attention to the irony that a work on plagiarism might itself count as partly plagiarised.

[http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/4\\_resource/plagiarism.html](http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/4_resource/plagiarism.html) .

The Council of Writing Program Administrators, *Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement of Best Practices*, at

<http://www.wpacouncil.org/positions/WPAplagiarism.pdf> .

Bone, Alison, *Plagiarism: a guide for law lecturers*, UK Centre for Legal Education, updated December 2003, at

<http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/resources/plagiarism.html> . This brief guide includes many useful links, and an extensive bibliography.

Franklyn-Stokes, A. and Newstead, S.E., ‘Undergraduate Cheating: who does what and why?’, *Studies in Higher Education* 20.2, 1995, 159-172. This claims to be the first published study of plagiarism in UK higher education.

Ashworth, P., Bannister, P., and Thorne, P., ‘Guilty in Whose Eyes? University students’ perceptions of cheating and plagiarism in academic work and assessment’, *Studies in Higher Education* 22/2, 1997, pp.187–203.

This is the outcome of extensive interviews with students, and, as the title implies, it provides very revealing insights into students’ understanding of and attitudes towards cheating and plagiarism.

Levin, Peter, *Beat the Witch-hunt! Peter Levin’s Guide to Avoiding and Rebutting Accusations of Plagiarism, for Conscientious Students*, November 2003, available at

<http://www.study-skills.net> . Levin is a long-standing teacher at LSE, who has latterly been involved in mentoring students from a range of disciplines. His guide is primarily directed towards students, and some academics may find some of his remarks overly critical of traditional academic practice. Nevertheless, the Guide is packed with good advice of benefit to teachers.

Hunt, Russell, ‘Four Reasons to be Happy about Internet Plagiarism’ *Teaching Perspectives* (St. Thomas University) 5, December 2002, pp.1-5, available at:

<http://www.stu.ca/~hunt/4reasons.htm> . This is an excerpt from a longer, draft article, ‘In Praise of Plagiarism’, available at:

<http://www.stu.ca/~hunt/plagiary.htm> . It seems clear that Hunt and I have been thinking on similar lines for many years. However, I would be more cautious about flagging internet plagiarism as a blessing



in disguise, since this devalues the sincere and justified concern that most academics feel about the criminal aspect of plagiarism.

There is much useful information and advice on the website of the Joint Information Systems Committee's Plagiarism Advisory Service, including a link to its Plagiarism Detection Service:

**[http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/faculties/art/information\\_studies/Imri/Jiscpas/site/jiscpas.asp](http://online.northumbria.ac.uk/faculties/art/information_studies/Imri/Jiscpas/site/jiscpas.asp)** .

The PRS-LTSN has a web-page devoted to plagiarism, which we hope to populate with more subject-specific materials in due course:

**<http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/links/#plagiarism>** .

A good site with many links is:

**<http://kerlins.net/bobbi/education/writing/plagiarism.html>** .

## 8 Acknowledgments

I sent a draft of the present document to a number of people, some of whom provided detailed and constructive comments, for which I am very grateful. Although I have incorporated most of their suggestions, ultimate responsibility for the text is mine, and none of those listed below should be taken as necessarily approving everything in it:

Peter Ashworth, Martin Benjamin, Andrew Brooks, Jude Carroll, Fiona Duggan, Donna Engelmann, Graham Gibbs, Russ Hunt, Danni Lamb, Peter Levin, David Mossley, Clare Saunders, Pat Scanlon.

Article

# **From A-level to Higher Education: Student Perceptions of Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religious Studies**

---

**Mike Fearn and Leslie J. Francis**

*Welsh National Centre for Religious Education  
University of Wales, Bangor*

---

## **1. Introduction**

**A**t a time when full-time undergraduate programmes in theology and religious studies are finding it difficult to recruit students, as evidenced by the recent closure of several such programmes, it is wise to examine the traditional pathways of entry into such courses. The immediate progression from A-level study to undergraduate courses remains sufficiently core to the business of higher education providers of undergraduate programmes in theology and religious studies to merit closer scrutiny.

The thesis of this paper is that the perceptions and expectations of conventional entrants to undergraduate courses in theology and religious studies are shaped by their experiences of religious education in the secondary school and in the further education sector, especially at examination level through GCSE and A-level programmes. The aims of the present paper, therefore, are threefold: to provide a brief overview of the changing context in which religious education is taught throughout the state maintained sector of schools; to examine the existing research-based literature on the motivation of students to study religion at A-level and beyond; and to report new findings concerning the perceptions and expectations of studying theology and religious studies at undergraduate level held by those current A-level religious studies students who intend to pursue the subject in higher education.

## **Religious education in schools**

Mainly as a consequence of the pioneering initiatives of the churches to build schools in England and Wales during the nineteenth century

Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies

**Volume 3, No. 2, Spring 2004, pp. 58-91**

© Copyright PRS-LTSN, 2004

through voluntary bodies like the National Society and the British and Foreign School Society (see Francis, 1987), religious education was largely taken for granted as an essential component of the school curriculum. The 1870 Elementary Education Act assured that in practical terms religious education in Board Schools was non-denominational in character (see Rich, 1970). However, it has been argued that the key politicians who shaped the legislation, Forster and Cowper-Temple, were of the opinion that the Act should not have prevented denominational religious education (see Murphy, 1972).

For the first time the 1944 Education Act created the statutory requirement that religious education should be taught in all state maintained schools (see Dent, 1947). The non-denominational 'religious instruction' within county schools was to be determined by locally agreed syllabuses, while voluntary aided schools were required to provide denominational religious instruction in accordance with their historic trust deed. Voluntary controlled schools could also provide denominational religious instruction for the children of those parents who requested it. Clearly in 1944 religious education was conceived as a faith-based subject.

The 1988 Education Reform Act continued in many ways to confuse the matters of religious education and the matters of religious faith. According to the 1988 Education Reform Act, religious education remained outside the national curriculum and subject to locally agreed syllabuses (see Cox and Cairns, 1989). The churches continued to play a central role in the Agreed Syllabus Conferences which developed and authorised the local syllabuses and in the Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education which were given responsibility for maintaining the delivery of religious education at the local level. The view that religious education was still to do with religious faith was also maintained by the conscience clause which permitted parents to withdraw pupils from religious education lessons.

In spite of the apparent assumptions of the legislative context, enormous changes had taken place in educational theory underpinning religious education between the 1944 Education Act and the 1988 Education Reform Act. Key to such changes was the pioneering work of Ninian Smart in the higher education sector and through the Schools Council Working Party which he chaired. Schools Council Working Paper 36, *Religious Education in Secondary Schools*, changed the emphasis of religious education in secondary education from a matter of developing faith to a matter of studying religious traditions (see Schools Council,

1971). This paper was largely written by Smart.

## Student motivation

Although there have been considerable changes in the philosophy underpinning the provision of religious education in schools, there has been remarkable stability in pupil attitudes toward the subject. Reviews of research concerning pupil attitudes toward religious education from the early years of the twentieth century to the present day have concluded that religious education remains one of the least popular subjects in secondary school (Francis and Lewis, 1996). However, in spite of the general lack of popularity of the subject, a significant and growing minority of pupils are now taking a real interest in religious education at GCSE level and at A-level.

In a pioneering pilot study, Francis, Fearn, Astley and Wilcox (1999) set out to examine the motivation of A-level religious studies students to study religion at A-level and to progress to studying religion at degree level. Three main conclusions have so far emerged from this pilot study and from subsequent work building on it (see Fearn, 2002). First, the data demonstrate that at A-level twice as many students were motivated to study religion by a ‘religious studies’ approach to the subject. However, while the major interest at A-level is focused on religious studies, the major interest at university level study is more likely to be a faith based approach. Second, the data demonstrate that motivation to study religion remains linked to the students’ own religious faith. Practising churchgoers are likely to hold a different view from non-churchgoers regarding the nature and content of religious studies programmes in which they express interest. Third, the data demonstrate that studying religion both at A-level and at undergraduate level is a highly feminised activity. Many more females than males express an interest in the subject. At the same time, males who express interest in studying religion may emphasise somewhat different aspects of the subject matter in comparison with females who express interest in studying religion.

## Mapping the subject

A-level religious studies students who wish to make the progression from school to studying religion in higher education may find themselves confronted with a mesmerising range of choices. On the face of the matter, the choice between ‘religious studies’ and ‘theology’ programmes may appear quite straightforward, but once the university prospectus

arrives the whole issue may seem so much more complex. Departments which run both theology and religious studies options generally have modules common to both. In some cases the name of the module (and even the brief description) may provide little insight into the perspective taken by the programme of study. In some cases the terminology used in the module title may be unfamiliar to the potential candidate.

A survey of publicity material from university departments of theology reveals the absence of any coherence or core element within the discipline. One might imagine the situation where graduates in theology and religious studies from different universities in the UK (or perhaps more interestingly, from the same university) have no common experience of being instructed in any single aspect of method or content which is deemed to be a vital component in an undergraduate programme in theology.

Courses in this fragmented discipline may include the academic quest for 'God in cinema' 'religion in rock music', and the like. The discipline may also include the study of classical biblical languages, the study of patristics, political revolutionary theologies of the oppressed, or the study of Christology. The absence of core subject matter may be seen to be mirrored by an absence of universally agreed methodology. Linguists, historians, sociologists, archaeologists, philosophers, and psychologists may all find themselves teaching in university departments of theology.

Against this background, the present study has assembled a large number of module titles collected from publicity material from university departments of theology and religious studies. A sample of religious studies A-level students who intend to study religion at undergraduate level were asked to rate their level of interest in these modules. Their responses should enable us to assess the relative likely popularity of different provisions within the academy. Further analyses will then examine the extent to which males and females express different preferences and the extent to which churchgoers and non-churchgoers express different preferences. Such analyses should enable us to assess the value of targeting specific programmes of study to different groups of students.

## 2. Method

### Measures

The detailed questionnaires included the following measures in addition to age and sex: measures of interest in theology and religious studies, measures of frequency of church attendance, and future educational aspirations.

#### **Interest in theology and religious studies.**

Departments of theology, religious studies, and related subject fields and disciplines were identified from the AUDTRS Handbook. Having identified these departments, a systematic review of their publicity material was undertaken. Thirteen discrete areas emerged as being the core foci within departments in the higher education sector in England and Wales. Across these thirteen key areas, there are literally hundreds of different courses on offer. Some are very similar, with only very slight differences in their names. In order to operationalise this research the list of modules was rationalised in order that the participants could indicate the level of interest that they may have in different courses, rated on a 5 point scale reflecting a range between low levels of interest (1) and high levels of interest (5).

#### **Church attendance.**

Frequency of church attendance was assessed on a 5-point scale ranging from 'never', through 'once or twice a year', 'sometimes', 'at least once a month', to 'at least once a week'.

#### **Future educational aspirations.**

Participants were asked whether or not they intended to pursue a degree in the areas of either theology or religious studies. Respondents were asked to respond with either 'yes', 'no', or 'don't know'.

### Sample

A-level religious studies students following syllabi of three examination associations in England and Wales participated in the study. Completed questionnaires were returned by 1,103 students, representing a response rate of 60%.

According to future educational intention, 17% of students were firmly committed to progressing to do a degree in the broad areas of

theology or religious studies. A further 19% were not yet fully committed, but remained open to undertaking undergraduate study in this area. This left nearly two thirds (64%) of A-level religious studies students who were clearly not interested in pursuing theology and religious studies at undergraduate level.

The following analyses are based only on the 181 students who were clear about their intention to study theology or religious studies in higher education. Of the 181 students, 34 were male and 147 were female. Sixty-seven were regular churchgoers who attended services at least once a month (37%), 28 attended several times a year (16%), while 85 attended less frequently than three times per year (47%), and one of the respondents provided no information relating to frequency of attendance at a place of worship.

## Analysis

Initially a frequency count shows overall levels of interest among the group of participants showing the proportion who rated each area 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale. This analysis is followed by a series of chi-square analyses exploring the differences in responses between males and females, and between those who attend church at least once a month and those who attend church less than three times per year.

## 3. Results

### Six world faiths

The first section of the survey examined the levels of interest shown in studying the six main world faiths generally considered to be represented in England and Wales: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Sikhism. The data presented in table 1.1 demonstrate that these six faiths can be conceived within three groupings.

Two-thirds of students (68%) expressed an interest in Christianity. Between two-fifths and half of the students expressed an interest in Buddhism (47%), Judaism (45%), and Islam (41%). Between a quarter and a third of students expressed an interest in Hinduism (33%) and Sikhism (24%).

The sex differences displayed in table 1.2 demonstrate that females held a significantly higher level of interest than males in Hinduism, Judaism, and Sikhism. Overall women were more interested than men in the study of world religions.

The religious differences displayed in table 1.3 demonstrate that

churchgoers held a significantly higher level of interest in Christianity and a significantly lower level of interest in Buddhism, compared with non-churchgoers. However, church attendance was not significantly related to the level of interest shown in Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Sikhism.

## Ways of studying religion

The second section of the survey examined the overall perceived attraction of the different methodological perspectives for the study of religion presented in British universities. These perspectives employ the tools of philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and sociology. The section also assessed the perceived attraction of those programmes of study which set out to provide an overview of methodological perspectives. The data presented in table 2.1 make it clear that courses branded as single methods of study were considerably more attractive than courses that attempt to provide an overview of a range of perspectives.

The two ways of studying religion which appealed most highly to students are Philosophy of religion (82%) and Psychology of religion (80%). The Sociology of religion was slightly less attractive (72%), and the Anthropology of religion was considerably less attractive (55%). Courses described as Perspectives on the study of religion were least attractive (47%).

Tables 2.2 and 2.3 demonstrate that there were neither significant sex differences nor significant religious differences in preference for ways of studying religion.

## Religion in the modern world

The third section in the survey examined the overall level of interest shown in studying aspects of religion in the modern world, including New religious movements, Religious cults, the New age movement, and Interfaith dialogue. The data presented in table 3.1 demonstrate that two out of every three students (67%) expressed an interest in courses which set out to examine the broad theme of Religion in the modern world. Interest remained close to this level for courses concerned with Religious cults (66%) and with New religious movements (60%). There was less interest, however, in courses concerned with the New age movement (48%) and much less interest in courses concerning Interfaith dialogue.

Table 3.2 demonstrates that there were no significant sex differences in levels of interest expressed in courses concerned with



religion in the modern world.

Table 3.3 demonstrates that there were no religious differences in levels of interest expressed in courses concerned with New religious movements, Religious cults, or the New age movement. Churchgoers, however, showed a significantly higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in courses described as Religion in the modern world and Interfaith dialogue.

## Religion and contemporary issues

A number of departments in higher education offer courses linking religion with a specific issue of salience within the contemporary world. The fourth section of the survey identified four such issues concerned with gender, media, politics, and with the environment. The data presented in table 4.1 demonstrate that the level of interest experienced in such courses varied considerably from one issue to another. Over two-thirds of students expressed interest in Religion and gender issues (71%). Three fifths expressed interest in Religion and the media (62%) and just over a half in Religion and politics (55%). Interest fell to 40% in regard to Religion and the environment.

Table 4.2 demonstrates that there were no significant sex differences in respect of levels of interest in courses concerned with relationship between religion and gender issues, politics, and the environment. However, females recorded a significantly higher level of interest in courses concerned with religion and the media.

Table 4.3 demonstrates that there were no significant religious differences in preferences for courses concerned with religion and contemporary issues.

## Religious traditions

The fifth section of the survey examined responses to those courses offered within higher education concerned with specific religious traditions. Five specific named courses were included in the survey: African tribal religions, Ancient Egyptian religion, Ancient Roman religion, Ancient Greek religion, and Chinese religions.

The data presented in table 5.1 demonstrate that fewer than half of the students expressed interest in any of these courses. The level of interest ranges from 46% for Ancient Egyptian religion, through 45% for African tribal religions, 44% for Ancient Roman religion, 43% for Ancient Greek religion, to 39% for Chinese religions.

According to table 5.2, there were no significant differences in

the levels of interest expressed by males and females in Ancient Egyptian religion, Ancient Roman religion, Ancient Greek religion, and Chinese religion. However, females were significantly more likely than males to express an interest in African tribal religions.

Table 5.3 demonstrates that there were no significant religious differences in levels of interest expressed in courses concerned with religious traditions.

## Languages in the study of religion

Languages play an important part in gaining access to original religious texts, and as a consequence departments in the higher education sector offer courses in a number of key languages relevant to different religious traditions. The sixth section of the survey identified seven such languages offered by various departments: Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Arabic, Sanskrit, Pali, and Aramaic. The data presented in table 6.1 demonstrate that these languages appealed only to a minority of students.

Just over a third of students expressed an interest in Greek (36%), just under a third expressed an interest in Hebrew (30%). The proportions then fell to 24% who express interest in Latin, 18% in Arabic, 17% in Sanskrit, 16% in Aramaic, and just 9% in Pali.

The sex differences displayed in table 6.2 demonstrate that females displayed a higher level of interest than males in the classical languages associated with biblical study and Christian theology, namely Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and Aramaic. There were, however, no significant sex differences in levels of interest shown in Sanskrit, Pali, or Arabic.

The religious differences displayed in table 6.3 demonstrate that churchgoers showed a significantly higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in studying Hebrew. There were, however, no significant religious differences associated with levels of interest shown in Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Sanskrit, Pali, or Arabic.

## Old Testament studies

The Old Testament is offered in higher education both as the study of broad themes and as the study of specific books or forms of literature. The seventh section of the survey examined the level of interest shown in courses broadly described as Old Testament, and as Literature and theology of the Old Testament, and in more narrowly focused courses described as the Pentateuch, as the Prophetic literature, and as the Psalms.

The data presented in table 7.1 demonstrate that two in every five students expressed an interest in the broadly based courses: 41% in the Old Testament, and 39% in the Literature and theology of the Old Testament. The proportions dropped to 32% who showed an interest in the Prophetic literature, to 30% who showed an interest in the Psalms, and to 18% who showed an interest in the Pentateuch.

The sex differences displayed in table 7.2 demonstrate that there were no significant sex differences in levels of interest shown in the broadly based courses on the Old Testament, on Literature and theology of the Old Testament, or in the more narrowly focussed courses on the Psalms and the Prophetic literature. On the other hand, females displayed a significantly higher level of interest than males in courses on the Pentateuch.

The religious differences displayed in table 7.3 demonstrate that there were no significant differences between churchgoers and non-churchgoers in levels of interest expressed in the broadly based courses on the Old Testament and the Literature and theology of the Old Testament, or in the more narrowly focused courses on the Pentateuch or the Prophetic literature. On the other hand, churchgoers showed a significantly higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in courses on the Psalms.

## **New Testament studies**

Like the Old Testament, The New Testament is offered in higher education as the study of broad themes and as the study of specific books or forms of literature. The eighth section of the survey examined the level of interest shown in courses described broadly as New Testament, and more narrowly focused courses, namely: New Testament Greek, New Testament Epistles, New Testament exegesis, Gospels and Acts, Hebrews and the General Epistles, Matthew and the Synoptic Gospels, Paul: life and thought, New Testament Greek texts: John and Romans.

The data presented in table 8.1 demonstrate that fewer than half of the students were attracted by courses described as New Testament (45%). Within the more tightly focused courses, the greatest level of interest was shown in the Gospels: 47% expressed an interest in a course styled Gospels and Acts and 39% expressed interest in a course styled Matthew and the Synoptic Gospels. New Testament Epistles attracted 32% of the students, followed by Paul: life and thought (30%), New Testament Greek texts: John and Romans (29%), Hebrews and the

General Epistles (20%), and New Testament exegesis (20%).

The data on sex differences displayed in table 8.2 show no significant differences between levels of interest expressed by males and by females in this area.

The data on religious differences displayed in table 8.3, however, demonstrate that churchgoers showed a significantly higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in all the areas of New Testament study specified in the survey.

## Early Church

The study of the Early Church played an important part in traditional courses of theology. The ninth section of the survey examined student interest in six courses currently offered within this broad area: Theology and history of the Early Church, Dead Sea Scrolls, Early Christian texts, Baptism and Eucharist in the Early Church, Patristics, and St Augustine and his age.

The data presented in table 9.1 demonstrate that the topic within this broad field of greatest attraction to students concerned the Dead Sea Scrolls (46%). Early Christian texts were seen as of interest to 37% of the students, Theology and history of the Early Church was seen as of interest to 29% of the students. St Augustine and his age was considered to be of interest to 28% of the students. Courses described as concerned with Patristics were of interest to only 12% of the students.

The data on sex differences displayed in table 9.2 record no significant differences between the levels of interest expressed by males and by females in this area.

The data on religious differences presented in table 9.3 demonstrate that churchgoers showed a significantly higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in studying courses concerned with Early Christian texts, with Baptism and Eucharist in the Early Church, and with Patristics. There were no significant differences, however, between churchgoers and non-churchgoers in levels of interest expressed in Theology and history of the Early Church, Dead Sea Scrolls, or St Augustine and his age.

## Church history

Courses in Church history cover a wide range of specialist topics. The tenth section of the survey examined the overall level of interest shown in six different specific courses, namely Theology and history of the Reformation, the English Reformation, Martin Luther and the German

Reformation, Seventeenth century Puritanism, Christianity from Kant to Harnack, and Newman and his age. The data presented in table 10.1 demonstrate that fewer than two in every five students expressed interest in any of these courses. The highest level of interest was shown in Christianity from Kant to Harnack (38%). Interest in Martin Luther and the German Reformation was expressed by 35% of the students, but interest in the English Reformation fell to 24%, and interest in Theology and history of the Reformation was at 22%. Other areas of Church history emerged as minority interests, with only 15% of students expressing an interest in Seventeenth century Puritanism, and 14% in Newman and his age.

The data on sex differences displayed in table 10.2 record no significant differences in the levels of interest expressed by males and females in this area.

The data on religious differences displayed in table 10.3 demonstrate that churchgoers displayed a significantly higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in terms of these specified courses: English Reformation, and Newman and his age. There were, however, no significant differences between churchgoers and non-churchgoers in respect of the other four specified courses.

## Theological perspectives

A highly diverse range of courses is provided by departments in higher education concerning different theological perspectives. The eleventh area of the survey examined the overall level of interest shown in eight specific courses advertised under the following names: Biblical theology, Making of Christian theology, Apologetics, Incarnational theology, Systematic theology, Christian social ethics, Foundations of Christian ethics, and Christian worship. The data presented in table 11.1 demonstrate that there was substantial diversity in the levels of interest shown in both the general theological courses and in the more narrowly focused courses. As many as three fifths of the students were interested in Christian social ethics (61%) and in Biblical theology (60%). A half of the students were interested in pursuing courses in Foundations of Christian ethics (51%) and in Christian worship (50%). Between a third and two fifths of the students expressed an interest in studying Making of Christian theology (38%) and Incarnational theology (36%). Only a quarter of the students expressed an interest in courses concerned with Systematic theology (25%), and only one in five was willing to express an interest in studying Apologetics (19%).

The data on sex differences displayed in table 11.2 show that females displayed a higher level of interest than males in courses concerning Christian ethics. They showed significantly higher levels of interest than males in Christian social ethics, and in Foundations of Christian ethics. Furthermore, the data display no significant differences in the levels of interest expressed by males and females in any other area in this cluster.

The data on religious differences displayed in table 11.3 show that churchgoers held significantly more interest than non-churchgoers in five of the eight courses in theological perspectives. Whereas churchgoers displayed significantly more interest than non-churchgoers in Biblical theology, Making of Christian theology, Apologetics, Christian social ethics, and Christian worship, there was no difference between the two groups in the level of interest shown in Incarnational theology, Systematic theology, or Foundations of Christian ethics.

## Contemporary theologies

Theology is a dynamic and evolving subject which has given rise to a range of contemporary theologies. The twelfth section of the survey focused on ten courses that map onto this area, three of which represent broadly based approaches, namely: Modern theology, Contemporary theology, and Theology, modernity, and post-modernity. Seven of the courses are more narrowly focused: Environmental theology, Feminist theology, Liberation theology, Theological hermeneutics, Christianity in the North Atlantic world, Eastern Asian theology, and Latin American theology. Data presented in table 12.1 show that the two broad courses concerning Modern theology and Contemporary theology were interesting to well over half of the students (54% and 57% respectively), whereas the broadly based course Theology, modernity, and postmodernity was considered interesting to only a third of the students (33%). Of the more narrowly focused courses, Feminist theology generated the highest levels of interest with half of the students (49%) claiming an interest in that subject. Over a quarter of the students expressed an interest in Liberation theology (28%) and in Christianity in the North Atlantic world (28%), and just under a quarter indicated an interest in Eastern Asian theology (22%). Fewer than one in every five students indicated an interest in Latin American theology (18%), Environmental theology (17%), and Theological hermeneutics (16%). The data on sex differences displayed in table 12.2 show that females were significantly more interested in studying feminist theology than

males. No other items in this cluster generated significantly different levels of interest between males and females.

The data on religious differences displayed in table 12.3 show that only three items were perceived in significantly different ways by churchgoers and by non-churchgoers. Churchgoers showed significantly higher levels of interest than non-churchgoers in Modern theology, Theological hermeneutics, and in Christianity in the North Atlantic world.

## Doctrine

Christian doctrine is either implicitly or explicitly located at the heart of Christian theology. The thirteenth section of the survey examined levels of interest generated by courses which relate to doctrine. The data presented in table 13.1 demonstrate that this group of courses generated a relatively high level of interest among the students. Courses with titles that directly involve God or Jesus were deemed to be the most interesting. Two thirds of the students (67%) expressed an interest in God and the world, three in every five students expressed an interest in Christ in the Christian tradition (59%), and a half were interested in courses concerning Jesus and Christology (51%). It is interesting to note that, on the other hand, courses concerning Christology were considered interesting to only two students in every five (41%). Between a third and a half of the students expressed an interest in the Doctrine of Creation (48%), Eschatology (41%), Doctrine of the Trinity (40%), Trinity and the Church (38%), and the Doctrine of Salvation (35%). Ecclesiology appealed to only one student in every five (20%).

The data on sex differences displayed in table 13.2 demonstrate that females showed a higher level of interest than males in studying Jesus and Christology. No other significant sex differences emerged with regard to courses concerning aspects of doctrine.

The data on religious differences displayed in table 13.3 demonstrate that churchgoers showed a higher level of interest than non-churchgoers in seven of the ten courses. Only Ecclesiology, Eschatology, and God and the world did not generate significantly different levels of interest among churchgoers and among non-churchgoers.

## 4. Conclusions

This study has examined the perceptions of A-level religious studies students of studying theology and religious studies in higher education. Four main conclusions emerge from the data.

First, the data demonstrated that A-level religious studies students represent an important recruitment ground for departments of theology and religious studies in the higher education sector. In the present sample as many as 17% of the students have expressed an intention to study theology or religious studies at degree level. Perhaps equally important, a further 19% remained open to the idea that they may pursue such a course at degree level. Three practical implications emerge from this conclusion. First, it remains important for departments of theology and religious studies in the higher education sector to keep an eye on changes in religious education and religious studies in the secondary and further education sectors, since changes in these sectors may impact on the skills and expectations of traditional entrants to departments of theology and religious studies. Second, it is important for higher education departments to listen to A-level religious studies students and to understand their perceptions. The students' perceptions of the market may well help to determine which departments of theology and religious studies survive and which do not. Third, it is important for departments in the higher education sector to try to influence A-level religious studies students to pursue courses in the subject area at degree level. Direct marketing to such students through schools may be cost effective.

Second, the data demonstrated that, for one reason or another, many courses currently available in higher education appear unattractive to A-level students. This is bad news for minority interest courses. For example, all of the following courses appealed to less than one in four of those students who have indicated an intention to pursue a degree level course in theology or religious studies: Sikhism (24%), Latin (24%), The English Reformation (24%), Baptism and Eucharist in the Early Church (24%), Theology and history of the Reformation (22%), Eastern Asian theology (22%), New Testament exegesis (20%), Ecclesiology (20%), Hebrews and the General Epistles (20%), Apologetics (19%), New Testament Greek (19%), Pentateuch (18%), Latin American theology (18%), Arabic (18%), Sanskrit (17%), Environmental theology (17%), Aramaic (16%), Theological hermeneutics (16%), Seventeenth century Puritanism (15%), Newman and his age (14%), Patristics (12%),



Hermeneutics (12%), and Pali (9%).

There are three practical implications which may be drawn from this conclusion. First, some minority interest subjects which experience difficulty in recruiting sufficient students may be forced to close, with potentially damaging effects to staff research, and to recruitment of doctoral students in such areas. Second, it may be that rationalisation of academic resources across the sector can ameliorate some of these problems. If skills in minority subjects are centralised, they may be enabled to flourish. Third, it may be possible to improve recruitment in some of these minority interest areas by marketing them more attractively. It may be that course descriptors written by experts alienate applicants who do not have sufficient background in key specialist areas to be interested by marketing material.

Third, the data demonstrated that there are clear sex differences in perceptions held by males and by females. Recruitment of males is difficult, yet there are some areas which appear interesting to at least a half of the male students: Philosophy of religion (82%), Psychology of religion (77%), God in the world (68%), Sociology of religion (62%), Christianity (61%), Religion and gender issues (59%), Religion in the modern world (56%), Religious cults (56%), Dead Sea Scrolls (53%), Christ in the Christian tradition (50%), Biblical theology (50%), Religion and politics (50%).

Departments which major in such areas may be able to target accordingly, more specifically to males. There are practical implications which may be drawn from this conclusion. First, departments may find it helpful to profile past male students who are working in interesting posts, as examples of the ways in which males enter successful careers through courses at degree level in theology or religious studies. Second, departments should ensure that males and females are both well represented in departmental publicity material, so as to counter the view that theology and religious studies are highly feminised areas of study.

Fourth, the data demonstrated that there are clear differences between churchgoers and non-churchgoers. The following subjects, for example, appeal to at least two thirds of churchgoers, but under two thirds of non-churchgoers: Christianity, New religious movements, Religion in the modern world, Biblical theology, Christ in the Christian tradition, Christian social ethics, Christian worship, God and the world, Gospels and Acts, and Modern theology. Departments which major in these areas may wish to recognise that student motivation to study may be faith-related. There are two practical implications which may be

drawn from this conclusion. First, marketing such courses through churches may be an appropriate means of attracting relevant courses to the attention of churchgoing students. Second, departments may wish to ensure that applicants from church-related backgrounds are aware that they are going to be academically trained in a manner which is nurturing, supporting, and positive to their faith. In some contexts links with local churches may be developed to attract and to support students.

The present analysis has been based on a survey of 1,103 A-level religious studies students. The findings have been analysed and interpreted to help departments of theology and religious studies in the university sector to develop and market their programmes of study more effectively. However, both students' interests and emphases in A-level religious studies programmes continue to change and to develop. The higher education sector may be well advised to invest in further research capable of monitoring such changes and developments in order to ensure that the higher education sector in theology and religious studies is able to respond in appropriate and timely ways.

## 5. References

- Cox, E. and Cairns, J.M., *Reforming Religious Education: the religious clauses of the 1988 Education Reform Act* (London: Kogan Page, 1989).
- Dent, H.J., *The Education Act 1944: provisions, possibilities and some problems* (3rd ed.), (London: University of London Press, 1947).
- Fearn, M., "A socio-psychological profile of subject perceptions of A-level religious studies students" Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Wales, Bangor, 2002.
- Francis, L.J. *Religion in the Primary School: partnership between church and state?* (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1987).
- Francis, L.J., Fearn, M., Astley, J. and Wilcox, C., "The relationship between Christian commitment and motivation to study religion at A-level: a preliminary investigation", *Journal of Education and Christian Belief*, 3, 1999, 115-122.
- Francis, L.J. and Lewis, J.M., "Who wants RE? A socio-psychological profile of adolescent support for religious education", in Astley, J. & Francis, L.J., *Christian Theology and Religious Education: connections and contradictions*, (London: SPCK, 1996), pp. 223-246.
- Murphy, J., *The Education Act 1870* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1972).
- Rich, E.E., *The Education Act 1870* (London: Longmans, 1970).
- Schools Council, *Religious Education in Secondary Schools* (London: Evans Brothers and Methuen, 1971).

## 6. Tables

**Table 1.1 Six world faiths**

	%
Buddhism	47
Christianity	68
Hinduism	33
Judaism	45
Islam	41
Sikhism	24

**Table 1.2 Six world faiths by sex**

	Male %	Female %	$X^2$	P<
Buddhism	38	49	1.2	NS
Christianity	61	70	1.1	NS
Hinduism	15	38	6.5	.01
Judaism	27	49	5.8	.05
Islam	27	44	3.4	NS
Sikhism	6	29	7.7	.01

**Table 1.3 Six world faiths by churchgoing**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Buddhism	60	33	10.6	.001
Christianity	54	87	18.3	.001
Hinduism	39	28	2.0	NS
Judaism	49	46	0.1	NS
Islam	44	37	0.7	NS
Sikhism	24	25	0.1	NS

**Table 2.1 Ways of studying religion**

	%
Anthropology of religion	55
Philosophy of religion	82
Psychology of religion	80
Sociology of religion	72
Perspectives on the study of religion	47

**Table 2.2 Ways of studying religion by sex**

	Male %	Female %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Anthropology of religion	41	59	3.4	NS
Philosophy of religion	82	82	0.0	NS
Psychology of religion	77	80	0.2	NS
Sociology of religion	62	74	2.1	NS
Perspectives on the study of religion	35	50	2.3	NS

**Table 2.3 Ways of studying religion by church attendance**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Anthropology of religion	55	59	0.3	NS
Philosophy of religion	84	82	0.1	NS
Psychology of religion	77	81	0.4	NS
Sociology of religion	72	70	0.0	NS
Perspectives on the study of religion	42	58	3.8	NS

**Table 3.1 Religion in the modern world**

	%
Religion in the modern world	67
New religious movements	60
Religious cults	66
New age movement	48
Interfaith dialogue	31

**Table 3.2 Religion in the modern world by sex**

	Male %	Female %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Religion in the modern world	56	69	2.3	NS
New religious movements	46	63	3.6	NS
Religious cults	56	68	1.8	NS
New age movement	35	50	2.5	NS
Interfaith dialogue	27	31	0.2	NS

**Table 3.3 Religion in the modern world by church attendance**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Religion in the modern world	57	82	11.3	.001
New religious movements	59	66	0.7	NS
Religious cults	73	60	3.0	NS
New age movement	51	46	0.3	NS
Interfaith dialogue	24	44	6.8	.01

**Table 4.1 Religion and contemporary issues**

	%
Religion and gender issues	71
Religion and the media	62
Religion and politics	55
Religion and the environment	40

**Table 4.2 Religion and contemporary issues by sex**

	Male %	Female %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Religion and gender issues	59	74	2.9	NS
Religion and the media	47	66	4.2	.01
Religion and politics	50	56	0.4	NS
Religion and the environment	35	41	0.4	NS

**Table 4.3 Religion and contemporary issues by church attendance**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Religion and gender issues	69	67	0.1	NS
Religion and the media	61	60	0.4	NS
Religion and politics	54	55	0.0	NS
Religion and the environment	35	47	2.1	NS

**Table 5.1 Religious traditions**

	%
African tribal religions	45
Ancient Egyptian religion	46
Ancient Roman religion	44
Ancient Greek religion	43
Chinese religions	39

**Table 5.2 Religious traditions by sex**

	Male %	Female %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
African tribal religions	24	50	7.0	.01
Ancient Egyptian religion	38	48	1.1	NS
Ancient Roman religion	36	46	1.1	NS
Ancient Greek religion	29	46	3.2	NS
Chinese religions	29	41	1.6	NS

**Table 5.3 Religious traditions by church attendance**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
African tribal religions	46	43	0.1	NS
Ancient Egyptian religion	54	40	2.3	NS
Ancient Roman religion	52	40	1.9	NS
Ancient Greek religion	47	43	0.2	NS
Chinese religions	45	35	1.9	NS

**Table 6.1 Languages in the study of religion**

	%
Greek	36
Hebrew	30
Latin	24
Arabic	18
Sanskrit	17
Pali	9
Aramaic	16

**Table 6.2 Languages in the study of religion by sex**

	Male %	Female %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Greek	18	40	6.1	.05
Hebrew	12	35	6.9	.01
Latin	9	28	5.5	.05
Arabic	12	19	1.0	NS
Sanskrit	18	17	0.0	NS
Pali	9	9	0.0	NS
Aramaic	3	19	5.3	.05



**Table 6.3 Languages in the study of religion by church attendance**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Greek	32	42	1.6	NS
Hebrew	24	39	4.1	.05
Latin	26	19	0.9	NS
Arabic	17	10	1.1	NS
Sanskrit	18	16	0.0	NS
Pali	10	3	0.7	NS
Aramaic	12	22	3.1	NS

**Table 7.1 Old Testament studies**

	%
Old Testament	41
Literature and theology of the Old Testament	39
The Pentateuch	18
The Prophetic literature	32
The Psalms	30

**Table 7.2 Old Testament studies by sex**

	Male %	Female %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Old Testament	35	40	0.2	NS
Literature and theology of the Old Testament	44	37	0.6	NS
The Pentateuch	6	20	4.0	.05
The Prophetic literature	21	35	2.5	NS
The Psalms	21	33	1.9	NS

**Table 7.3 Old Testament studies by church attendance**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Old Testament Literature and theology of the Old Testament	34	49	3.6	NS
The Pentateuch	13	24	3.1	NS
The Prophetic literature	29	39	1.5	NS
The Psalms	18	52	20.3	.001

**Table 8.1 New Testament studies**

	%
New Testament	45
New Testament Greek	19
New Testament Epistles	32
New Testament exegesis	20
Gospels and Acts	47
Hebrews and the General Epistles	20
Matthew and the Synoptic Gospels	39
Paul: life and thought	30
New Testament Greek texts: John and Romans	29

**Table 8.2 New Testament studies by sex**

	Male %	Female %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
New Testament	41	46	0.3	NS
New Testament Greek	15	20	0.5	NS
New Testament Epistles	24	33	1.2	NS
New Testament exegesis	15	22	0.8	NS
Gospels and Acts	38	49	1.2	NS
Hebrews and the General Epistles	12	22	1.7	NS
Matthew and the Synoptic Gospels	29	41	1.5	NS
Paul: life and thought	24	31	0.8	NS
New Testament Greek texts: John and Romans	27	29	0.5	NS

**Table 8.3 New Testament Studies by church attendance**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
New Testament	33	63	13.3	.001
New Testament Greek	14	28	4.7	.05
New Testament Epistles	22	49	12.0	.001
New Testament exegesis	12	36	12.5	.001
Gospels and Acts	34	66	14.9	.001
Hebrews and the General Epistles	13	31	7.6	.01
Matthew and the Synoptic Gospels	28	52	9.1	.01
Paul: life and thought	19	51	17.3	.001
New Testament Greek texts: John and Romans	21	39	5.5	.05

**Table 9.1 Early Church**

	%
Theology and history of the Early Church	29
Dead Sea Scrolls	46
Early Christian texts	37
Baptism and Eucharist in the Early Church	24
Patristics	12
St Augustine and his age	28

**Table 9.2 Early Church by sex**

	Male %	Female %	$X^2$	P<
Theology and history of the Early Church	27	29	0.1	NS
Dead Sea Scrolls	53	45	0.7	NS
Early Christian texts	35	37	0.0	NS
Baptism and Eucharist in the Early Church	18	25	0.9	NS
Patristics	6	14	1.4	NS
St Augustine and his age	27	28	0.0	NS

**Table 9.3 Early Church by church attendance**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Theology and history of the Early Church	24	34	2.2	NS
Dead Sea Scrolls	44	49	0.5	NS
Early Christian texts	29	46	5.6	.05
Baptism and Eucharist in the Early Church	12	40	16.2	.001
Patristics	10	21	3.9	.05
St Augustine and his age	26	30	0.3	NS

**Table 10.1 Church history**

	%
Theology and history of the Reformation	22
The English Reformation	24
Martin Luther and the German Reformation	35
Seventeenth century Puritanism	15
Christianity from Kant to Harnack	38
Newman and his age	14

**Table 10.2 Church history by sex**

	Male %	Female %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Theology and history of the Reformation	29	20	1.3	NS
The English Reformation	18	25	0.9	NS
Martin Luther and the German Reformation	32	35	0.1	NS
Seventeenth century Puritanism	12	16	0.3	NS
Christianity from Kant to Harnack	32	38	0.5	NS
Newman and his age	12	14	0.1	NS

**Table 10.3 Church history by church attendance**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Theology and history of the Reformation	18	27	1.9	NS
The English Reformation	18	31	3.9	.05
Martin Luther and the German Reformation	32	39	0.8	NS
Seventeenth century Puritanism	15	18	0.2	NS
Christianity from Kant to Harnack	38	42	0.3	NS
Newman and his age	8	21	5.0	.05

**Table 11.1 Theological perspectives**

	%
Biblical theology	60
Making of Christian theology	38
Apologetics	19
Incarnational theology	36
Systematic theology	25
Christian social ethics	61
Foundations of Christian ethics	51
Christian worship	50

**Table 11.2 Theological perspectives by sex**

	Male %	Female %	$X^2$	P<
Biblical theology	50	62	1.8	NS
Making of Christian theology	32	39	0.5	NS
Apologetics	12	21	1.6	NS
Incarnational theology	32	37	0.2	NS
Systematic theology	21	27	0.5	NS
Christian social ethics	46	64	4.0	.05
Foundations of Christian ethics	35	54	4.0	.05
Christian worship	41	52	1.2	NS

**Table 11.3 Theological perspectives by church attendance**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Biblical theology	51	76	10.3	.001
Making of Christian theology	28	51	8.0	.01
Apologetics	13	30	6.9	.01
Incarnational theology	33	34	0.0	NS
Systematic theology	24	30	0.8	NS
Christian social ethics	57	73	4.2	.05
Foundations of Christian ethics	45	60	3.4	NS
Christian worship	34	69	17.9	.001

**Table 12.1 Contemporary theologies**

	%
Modern theology	54
Contemporary theology	57
Environmental theology	17
Feminist theology	49
Liberation theology	28
Theological hermeneutics	16
Christianity in the North Atlantic world	28
Eastern Asian theology	22
Latin American theology	18
Theology, modernity, and postmodernity	33



**Table 12.2 Contemporary theologies by sex**

	Male %	Female %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Modern theology	44	57	1.7	NS
Contemporary theology	46	59	2.1	NS
Environmental theology	12	18	0.7	NS
Feminist theology	18	57	16.7	.001
Liberation theology	21	30	1.2	NS
Theological hermeneutics	18	15	0.2	NS
Christianity in the North				
Atlantic world	21	30	1.2	NS
Eastern Asian theology	24	21	0.1	NS
Latin American theology	12	19	1.0	NS
Theology, modernity, and postmodernity	35	32	0.1	NS

**Table 12.3 Contemporary theologies by church attendance**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Modern theology	46	69	7.9	.01
Contemporary theology	54	64	1.4	NS
Environmental theology	15	21	0.8	NS
Feminist theology	45	51	0.5	NS
Liberation theology	32	24	1.1	NS
Theological hermeneutics	11	24	5.0	.05
Christianity in the North				
Atlantic world	20	43	9.6	.01
Eastern Asian theology	22	21	0.0	NS
Latin American theology	21	16	0.5	NS
Theology, modernity, and postmodernity	27	42	3.6	NS

**Table 13.1 Doctrine**

	%
Christ in the Christian tradition	59
Christology	41
Jesus and Christology	51
Doctrine of Creation	48
Doctrine of Salvation	35
Doctrine of the Trinity	40
Ecclesiology	20
Eschatology	41
Trinity and Church	38
God and the world	67

**Table 13.2 Doctrine by sex**

	Male %	Female %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Christ in the Christian tradition	50	61	1.4	NS
Christology	27	44	3.6	NS
Jesus and Christology	32	55	5.7	.05
Doctrine of Creation	41	50	0.9	NS
Doctrine of Salvation	32	35	0.1	NS
Doctrine of the Trinity	32	42	1.1	NS
Ecclesiology	12	22	1.7	NS
Eschatology	33	42	0.9	NS
Trinity and Church	24	41	3.5	NS
God and the world	68	67	0.0	NS

**Table 13.3 Doctrine by church attendance**

	No %	Yes %	X <sup>2</sup>	P<
Christ in the Christian tradition	47	72	9.3	.01
Christology	32	55	8.5	.01
Jesus and Christology	37	61	9.2	.01
Doctrine of Creation	41	60	5.5	.05
Doctrine of Salvation	25	51	11.0	.001
Doctrine of the Trinity	25	60	19.1	.001
Ecclesiology	17	27	2.4	NS
Eschatology	39	42	0.1	NS
Trinity and Church	28	49	7.1	.01
God and the world	62	75	2.6	NS

Article

# Perceptions of Relevance and Conceptual Challenges of Studying Psychology among Theology Students

---

**Olivera Petrovich**

*Department of Experimental Psychology  
University of Oxford*

---

## 1. Introduction

Psychology is a highly relevant discipline to theological and religious studies yet it is only given a minor role in most academic programmes and often it is not included at all. When psychology is a component of the theology curriculum, its content is typically psychoanalysis and pastoral psychology, both of which are associated with mental health and emotional problems in adult life. The Oxford course in the Psychology of Religion, offered to Theology (single honours) and Philosophy and Theology (joint honours) students, is distinct in that its content is broader, addressing religious development across life span and stressing the importance of empirical research and evidence in the study of human behaviour. The rationale of the course is to approach religion as a psychological rather than just cultural and social phenomenon, by providing an overview of the key religious topics (see below) in light of modern psychological methods and theories. In short, the aim of the course is to enable students to differentiate between psychology and the other disciplines of religious studies notably anthropology, sociology, history and philosophy of religion.

The Psychology of Religion course consists of one term of lectures (eight) and one term of tutorials (eight) per student. The lectures cover topics such as origin of religious concepts in human development, different aspects of religious experience (e.g., prayer, conversion), moral development, and religious cognition across life span as well as psychology of religion applied to health and education. In connection with each topic, students receive guidance for further reading that includes modern empirical studies of different aspects of religious behaviour and experience, in addition to some of the classical titles from the history of psychology (James, Freud, Jung). In tutorials, students

Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies

**Volume 3, No. 2, Spring 2004, pp. 92-113**

© Copyright PRS-LTSN, 2004

have a greater choice of topics which to research for their weekly essays on a specific question and subsequently discuss its content and style of argument. They attend tutorials either singly or in pairs and are free to schedule them at any point between their prelims and finals.

Psychology of Religion is a popular option for theology students<sup>1</sup> but it is not clear why, that is, what exactly motivates the students to select a paper that is outside their main discipline. For instance, is it a genuine interest in human religious nature, a pleasant diversion from their main discipline, or a strategic choice in order to broaden their educational skills and thereby secure better employability prospects? Furthermore, once they have chosen the paper, it is not clear whether the students perceive it as relevant to their study of theology and what its conceptual challenges are. Such queries are relevant especially in view of the empirically based content of the Oxford course.

Students' understanding of psychology as a science of human religious experience in the broadest sense is a question of interest for at least two reasons. First, the current science-religion debate leaves out psychology as a science of mental life and behaviour. Instead, the most commonly involved sciences are physical and biological, including neuroscience and neuro-physiology. Second, investigating students' understanding of how modern psychology works may provide hints for helping students interpret and apply research findings obtained by psychological methods in a more informed and critical manner to their work in theology. Finally, finding out about students' experiences with the current Psychology of Religion paper is relevant to any further integration between psychology and theology or religious studies. Given the popularity of psychology as such, on the one hand, and the potential relevance of scientific psychology to the science-religion debate, on the other, it is both desirable and likely that further links should be forged between psychology and theology at degree level.

In short, the current project was designed to examine the impact of teaching a predominantly science-based psychological content to humanities students, most of whom have no prior familiarity either with psychology or with scientific approaches as part of their degree studies. By virtue of choosing Psychology of Religion as one of their papers, Theology<sup>2</sup> students place themselves in an interdisciplinary context;

---

<sup>1</sup> The numbers taking the paper between 1993 and 2003 have ranged from 5 to 16 whereas there are papers with one or two students taking it.

<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, I shall refer to both single and joint honours students studying theology as "Theology" students.

consequently, their experiences of studying psychology of religion may have wider implications for interdisciplinary issues in higher education.<sup>3</sup> As we shall see from the experiences conveyed by the students, the question of integration across different disciplines is highly pertinent from the viewpoint of both teachers and students who are engaged in interdisciplinary education (e.g., Gasper, 2001; Klein, 1990; Squires et al., 1975). In order to interpret Theology students' views of psychology correctly, they will be compared directly with a group of PPP<sup>4</sup> students who likewise study on an interdisciplinary degree programme that includes philosophy.

## 2. Fieldwork

### 2.1. Participants

Forty students from the University of Oxford (20 students from the Faculty of Theology and 20 students from the Department of Experimental Psychology) participated in the project. Among the Theology group, 10 students were male and 10 female. The majority of students were in their early 20s, with the exception of two mature students. At the time of interviewing, nine students were studying for the joint Final Honours School (FHS) in Philosophy & Theology and 11 single FHS in Theology. Fourteen participants were finalists; four were in their second year, and two in their first year. Thirteen of the students had attended tutorials with me as their tutor (mostly singly), three students were tutored by a theologian with a background in psychology, three were due to take the paper the following term, and one student who had intended to take the paper had subsequently changed her mind. Only one of the 20 Theology students had attended the core lectures one term prior to having tutorials, as I recommend. Nine students had attended at least several lectures one year after they had completed the tutorials, whilst six students did not attend any lectures but relied on their tutorials only. The information about students' attendance at the

---

<sup>3</sup> There has been little research in the learning and teaching in humanities, compared with science subjects (Ramsden, 1992), and virtually no published work on student learning that involves theology. The interdisciplinary combination of theology and psychology is not mentioned anywhere in the literature on learning in higher education.

<sup>4</sup> PPP stands for a degree programme consisting of Psychology, Philosophy & Physiology; the most common combination for students is Psychology & Philosophy or Psychology & Physiology, whilst some take all three. For the description of the sample of students in this project, see next section.

core lectures in Psychology of Religion will become relevant when we look at the challenges that they encounter in studying psychology.

Of the 20 PPP students, 12 were male and eight female, with a similar age distribution to that of their Theology counterparts, including one mature student. Nineteen were finalists and one student had just completed year two of her course. Seventeen students were studying psychology with philosophy and three with physiology.<sup>5</sup> As for their familiarity with religion as an academic study, four PPP students were doing the Philosophy of Religion paper as one of their philosophy options (two of whom also did religious studies at A-level) and one studied religion as part of her first degree abroad.<sup>6</sup>

Participants were recruited for the project via their college e-mail addresses, by receiving a brief message that explained the purpose of the project and appealed to their good will for taking part before leaving Oxford in return for a small financial reward.

## 2.2. Design

The questions asked in each interview can be grouped according to their potential to elicit students' (a) reasons for choosing psychology and any prior familiarity with the subject, (b) perceptions of its relevance to theology, (c) conceptual challenges of empirical psychology for theology students, and (d) conceptions of psychology as a science and its usefulness in the study of religion as a human phenomenon. Whenever appropriate, Theology and PPP students' responses will be compared directly. The main interest of such a comparison is that PPP students do not have the option of studying psychology of religion, however, based on their choices of Philosophy of Religion as a paper, a number of them seem to be interested in religion as a subject of study.

---

<sup>5</sup> The three Psychology & Physiology students had begun to study philosophy as their third subject (i.e., full PPP), however, they soon gave up philosophy to reduce their overall workload.

<sup>6</sup> Three other PPP students, who did not participate in the current project, also chose Philosophy of Religion as their finals option. In other words, of the 32 students enrolled in the FHS Psychology & Philosophy, seven (22%) elected to do the Philosophy of Religion paper as one of their philosophy options. They had no option of selecting Psychology of Religion as one of their papers because this paper is currently offered by the Faculty of Theology and there are no cross-disciplinary links between the two faculties (i.e., Theology and Experimental Psychology).

## 2.3. Method

Data pertaining to each issue above were obtained by interviewing each participant. Although a questionnaire would have been a more economical procedure to use, the limitations of questionnaire as a method were judged to be a major constraint on the aims of the project. More specifically, questionnaires may yield ambiguous responses, which, unless followed up with further questions, would have to be eliminated from data analysis.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, that is, the same set of pre-planned questions was asked of all the participants albeit in a somewhat different sequence, deliberately allowing for flexibility and spontaneous flow in response to each question. The interviews were taped as well as recorded by pen and were subsequently fully transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, as planned, and included some additional questions to those reported here.<sup>7</sup> All the participants received a small fee for taking part in the project, which was paid from a grant awarded to me by the LTSN Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject (PRS-LTSN) Mini-Project Fund.

Because of the relatively small size of the samples, interview data were analysed mainly qualitatively according to the category of response, restricting numerical analysis to only a few summaries in terms of frequencies or percentages and presented in tables (see below). Data pertaining to each section of the project will be reported separately for Theology and PPP students, followed by direct comparisons where relevant.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Motives for studying psychology and prior familiarity with the subject

Students' responses to the question why they chose Psychology of Religion indicate that the majority of Theology students select the paper out of a general interest in people or in religious behaviour more specifically (Table 1). In addition, five students said that psychology was

---

<sup>7</sup> The additional questions tackled students' approaches to studying and conceptions of learning, and the findings were reported in a Portfolio titled "Learning and teaching in interdisciplinary contexts", which was completed as a requirement for a Diploma in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, University of Oxford, 2003.



a good choice because its approach to religion was different from that found in their theological papers and as such brought “a breath of fresh air” to their overall study.

Two students cited their scientific interests as a reason for including psychology in their degree programme whilst one elected to do psychology because it was going to be useful in his future pastoral work.

Table 1: Motives for choosing to study psychology among Theology and PPP students

	Interest	Different	Science	Career	Chance	Other
Theology	12	5	2	1	-	-
PPP	4	-	4	1	2	9

Surprisingly, only four PPP students said that they had a specific interest in psychology; nine stated that their main interest was actually philosophy (Other) but, because there was no possibility of studying single honours philosophy at Oxford, they chose psychology as a good combination with philosophy. Four PPP students were interested in psychology as a science subject whilst two chose it almost accidentally, having discovered psychology as a degree discipline at the point of applying. Similar to the Theology group, one PPP student chose psychology with a view to his future employment prospects. Listed below are some of the typical examples of each group’s reasons for choosing psychology (Theology examples: 6, 14; PPP examples: 15, 18).<sup>8</sup>

6 I guess it was just for a bit of variety, really, and because quite a lot of papers in theology are historical and biblical studies which I didn’t find that interesting... As an option paper I wanted something that was a bit more thoughtful and, perhaps, related to questions that I have myself. So, I guess, the psychology of religion was... sort of answered questions about religion and its place in other people’s lives. It answers quite a lot of questions that I have in theology. Like why people are religious and that applies to the question why people believe in different religions.

14 Because I wanted a change from the Biblical papers and, also, I wanted a more practical paper.

<sup>8</sup> Numbers in bold indicate different students and were assigned arbitrarily in the process of analysing data.

15 PPP caught my attention because I thought it was really a great combination. I was very interested in doing philosophy, anyway....

18 I've always been interested in science, especially biology, but also very interested in philosophy. The combination of biology and philosophy is obviously psychology.

The two groups are also similar with regard to their prior familiarity with psychology as a discipline. As Table 2 indicates, 12 Theology and 16 PPP students had no prior familiarity with the discipline of psychology (i.e., had not studied it before) whilst eight Theology and four PPP students have done some psychology before coming to Oxford. This includes A-level courses, a major in psychology completed abroad or, simply, having read some mainstream psychological texts.

Table 2: Prior familiarity with psychology as a discipline among Theology and PPP students

	None	Some
Theology	12	8
PPP	16	4

For the majority of students in both groups, Freud and Jung were the most representative names of the discipline before studying psychology at degree level. If we take into account that many Theology students also study philosophy as part of their degree, the difference between the two groups regarding their motives for studying psychology is even smaller.

### 3.2. Relevance of psychology to theology

Data reported in this section pertain to Theology students only.<sup>9</sup> Participants were asked for their views on (a) how the two disciplines fitted together, and (b) whether psychology was relevant to their study of theology. The two questions elicited consistent responses per student and can be reported jointly. The majority (17) saw the two disciplines as directly related and dealing with common questions and concerns albeit in a different way. Moreover, in the opinion of five (out of 17) students

---

<sup>9</sup> Given that the majority of PPP students have not studied religion or theology, they were not systematically questioned about the relevance of psychology to theology.

cited below, psychology and theology are in need of further and deeper integration.

1 I don't think it's where it belongs, but I think it's where it has to be at present, given the nature of Philosophy & Theology. Where do you think it belongs?—Honestly, I think it belongs as a compulsory paper and it should be in there as well as the others. I find it absolutely essential, almost practical, and... a practical and scientific balance almost to the rest of my studies. I think that anyone who goes into the church should do Psychology of Religion paper. And I think it is brilliant for every theology student because it takes a very different look at what we are studying.

2 There should be a course called PPT (Psychology, Philosophy & Theology). It would be fantastic to have that kind of course. Psychology is about human behaviour and religious belief is a form of behaviour, so that's why they are related. But you need the philosophical component also.

10 Psychology ought to make a big difference to theology but the present structures don't allow it. There are many people who think that theology is quite different and should not be mixed with the social sciences. John Millbank (author of *Theology and Social Theory*) is against looking at theology from other disciplines.

11 I think it's an area that needs to be expanded. There isn't a great deal of overlap between psychology of religion and theology papers. There is more scope for overlap. Can you give me some examples?—Psychology of morality and the ethics of Bonhoeffer, it would be interesting to see what psychology has to say about that. It does seem that both psychology and theology are approaching the same thing but from different angles, and it's difficult to think of them as two separate entities but it's also difficult to give specific examples of how they can interact. I know that you can't apply psychology to two thousand years ago but the conversion topic derives from Christianity and the NT.

12 I think they are both necessary. For example, if there is a definite trend for everyone to personify sacred things, then you need the psychological tests, the data, which just the scientific aspects of psychology can provide. And perhaps the theological school isn't as rigorous in collecting that data ... if it does it at all.

In contrast to the views endorsing direct and meaningful links between psychology and theology, two students perceive them as

independent and in no need of a closer dialogue, whilst one stated that psychology was fundamentally opposed to religion:

9 I always put psychology more with sceptics ... the people who want to prove something is not true or show that prayer isn't really talking to God. That always seems to be if you watch something on TV or read about psychologists ... it's always a philosopher or a theologian (who) said that prayer is really talking to God but a psychologist came along and said, No, it's not that. I always see psychologists interfering where they really shouldn't be. With certain aspects of faith, like prayer, I almost think it's not an issue that can be tested. Because even if you do show that something happens to people when they pray or could be conditioned by society or something, it still means ... . Religiously, it still means a lot to that person.

Overall, students' responses to the relevance question ranged from highly relevant in specific ways (e.g., for pastors) to marginally and generally relevant, no more than any other discipline that educates one's thinking. Amidst clear views regarding the possible relationship between psychology and theology, there were sporadic instances of a confounded understanding concerning the role of each discipline in the study of religion. For example, psychological issues (e.g., differentiating religious belief and emotion) are sometimes seen as a subject of theological and philosophical enquiry rather than of empirical research, as the following two examples show.

6 I guess you don't really have any empirical evidence about religion but only about people. Religion is so subjective.

4 I think with theology you quickly come to the conclusion that you can't reach God through reason, so it has to be faith, and that's quite interesting from a psychological point of view. You see that there is a connection with philosophy of religion but it's not made for you.

The simplest explanation of any such misconceptions among the Theology students is their non-attendance at the introductory lectures where methodological points are repeatedly addressed and the nature of empirical psychology highlighted as distinct from the non-empirical disciplines studying religion. It is a common trend among Theology students not to attend lectures on the grounds that they can cover the syllabus by reading. In other words, they transfer their attitude to lectures in the arts subjects to psychology, without realising that accessing

information in psychology presupposes some familiarity with its research methods. A few of the typical explanations for not attending lectures are cited below.

3 No ... To be honest, I don't find that they are helpful. Lots of time they cover the stuff that you can read about. I prefer to hear about people's own work ...

No. That was mainly my fault. It's an awful excuse, but it's quite far away.

13 I always put my non-lecture commitments first because ... generally ... I am happy in the library reading.

By contrast, PPP students regard lectures as an important source of information and learning in psychology, as the following example illustrates.

15 Psychology lectures are essentially compulsory ... absolutely necessary, but philosophy not at all.

It is of interest to mention that PPP students were equally prone to hold confounded notions about the roles of psychology and theology, which became obvious at different points during the interviews. In the case of PPP students, however, the more likely explanation of their misconceptions is the lack of any educational input about religion.

### **3.3. Conceptual challenges of psychology for theology students**

Three questions tapped the challenges of studying psychology as part of a theology curriculum. First, Theology students were asked to say what they found to be difficult in psychology. Next, and as an indirect way of approaching the same issue, they were also asked what, if anything, was easy in psychology. Finally, in order to determine whether their views of psychology have changed as a result of the course, i.e., whether and how the challenges were overcome, the students were asked what they thought of psychology now, after the course. These questions were put to the 16 Theology students who had completed the course.

### 3.3.1. Difficult aspects of studying psychology

Not surprisingly, the most common difficulties for Theology students consisted of the understanding of tables, statistics, technical terms, and the lack of background knowledge of science in general.<sup>10</sup>

2 I avoided them (tables); I read only the theory.

16 Trying to think from the viewpoint of a scientist ... Data, evidence ... Very different from the other papers ... Lots of technical terms to get to grips ...

It wasn't so much difficult, it was new, and you... you sort of start from a different position so you have to kind of think before you start. You are just not used to things like methods and evidence and that kind of stuff. You don't really talk much about that in your normal theological papers. It's more ideas than facts and evidence. So it took a bit of getting used to.

On the whole, Theology students do not find psychology to be conceptually difficult; rather, they appear to be frustrated by the lack of experience with research methods.

2 The core paper has been beneficial to me in that it has given me an insight into how psychology tackles religion. But I have a gap on the research side.

5 We should do some tiny research... (There is) not enough feel that it is a science, just reading about it. Would this not increase the amount of technical detail that theology students would have to learn?—But it's the same in theology. In order to study certain papers I have to learn Greek or Hebrew or Latin, if I want to do Patristics.

12 There wasn't that much that was too hard ... Conceptually, I think, it was a bit easier than something like Buddhism or the Nature of Religion, which were a couple of papers I did recently. But in terms of workload, it's roughly the same.

15 I've never done psychology ... having to learn all the language ... I don't know. It's not like reading a book ... but it's not abstract, it's very

---

<sup>10</sup> It may be of interest to point out that a number of PPP students too find statistics difficult to understand and manage, and are initially surprised to find it to be a major component of psychological study.

certain. I found that difficult. Also, no practical experience in psychology... How would that help?—Perhaps being involved in some research.

Reading articles from psychological journals was frequently mentioned as being comparatively difficult albeit, in many cases, an enjoyable challenge, as the example below suggests.

13 At first, a daunting range ... when I look at my first essay. But the best thing about psychology is the short chunk given to read, not a whole book like in theology. It's a really good way of getting a broad perspective in a short time.

An important source of frustration for a number of students has been the perceived lack of connection between psychology and theology when such connections appear obvious. The following two students make the point rather eloquently.

1 Through the whole paper, most of the psychologists I read, they seem almost quite... pleasantly baffled about theology. I got the feeling that perhaps a module on theology for the psychologists would be helpful in their studies. Because there were some conclusions that were drawn and some discussions, which, I didn't feel, were quite subtle. Although they had valuable insights, their research was only ever scratching the surface of theology and I felt there was a lot more (?) but to do that, you need a better understanding of what theology is.

10 (There is) no connection between psychology and theology; psychology never cites theology, a discipline of several centuries (standing). Theology also has explanations but psychology pays no attention. In psychology, it may not be accepted that one can study something that has no conclusion. Perhaps it was just my limited reading, but I often felt that theological terms were being taken for granted, but on second examination the terms were being taken in out-dated ways.

### 3.3.2. Easy aspects of studying psychology

What Theology students find easy about studying psychology are the relatively compact readings (journal articles), a focused approach, its familiar subject matter (people), Freud and Jung literature and, for two students, its methodological clarity.

1 I found that the reading was more focused and condensed than in theology... Like once having to read a 4-page article! That never happens in theology, never less than 20-30 pages. I felt I made a lot of progress through my reading... And, in some ways, it was also quite easy because I chose to do it; it was my option out of interest. So, in that respect, there was always something about it which was more enjoyable than the others, the compulsory papers.

6 I guess the fact that it is studying people so you can always relate to something. The subject matter is not alien, basically.

10 Freud and Jung, the language is familiar. Cognitive psychology is also easy; it's about using models. Theology also uses models.

5 That's a difficult question. I really enjoy science and wanted initially to study science but then became very interested in philosophy. So, when I enjoy something, it's easy. The choice of topics within psychology made it even easier.

13 Oh, it's a very interesting contrast to the rest. It gave me a chance to find out about the scientific approaches... wonderfully, much more rigorous, a real breath of fresh air.

Whilst PPP students were not asked this question in the same context, they repeatedly conveyed that psychology was conceptually a great deal easier for them than philosophy.

### 3.3.3. Perceptions of psychology after studying it

As an additional way of finding out about the challenging aspects of psychology for Theology students, they were asked what they thought of the subject after the course as opposed to before starting it. Students' changing conceptions of a subject indicate whether or not learning and understanding has taken place (e.g., Biggs, 1999; Ramsden, 1992). One of the main course aims appears to have been achieved, namely, all the interviewed students did become aware of the empirical character of psychology and its different way of thinking about certain familiar phenomena (examples 1, 4, 16). Another significant change in the understanding of psychology among the majority of students is the perception of it as distinct from psychoanalysis (examples 10, 12). As pointed out earlier, the majority of both Theology and PPP students anticipate studying Freud and psychoanalysis, as part of their course and,



Theology students in particular, are little prepared what to expect in the paper.

1 The biggest thing I found was the research and the studies. Not just asking what these statistics tell us but can we trust these statistics. There is so much that I found quite surprising, its scope... religious experience, prayer, conversion, mysticism... It studied a lot more and a lot more widely than I thought it would and, as a Christian, I don't want to believe in something that is all in my head, as it were. I accepted that psychological explanations are very different. Coming from a charismatic background and to find, for example, that worship services are one of (?) triggers, enabled me to understand the possible influence of music on the brain... I mean to understand the effect of religious stimuli; it gave me a better ground to ask whether what I experience was the effect of God or just me.

4 I think it shows you a different approach. And it reminds you that there is a different, more scientific way of looking at things than one does in philosophy and theology.

16 Much more scientific than I had expected.

10 I would avoid PA, which is too laden with assumptions... Freud and Jung are kind of theologies in their own right. Big gain for me is to see how people think using models, as in cognitive psychology. People interpret the world by using a mental schema and how religion can be thought about... Social psychology is very reductionist. It gives you lots of statistics and figures and no meaningful interpretation.

12 I was surprised at how empirical it was. I thought it would be less so... when you are combining the two topics, psychology and theology, so that surprised me. And, also, I was kind of expecting more of psychoanalysis... I was expecting that to play a large part of the course. Is it a disappointment that it didn't?—Not really... We did two topics... two major essays on it... In fact, now I am surprised that it did take up such a large part of the course (laughs).

Although the material presented so far sufficiently indicates that Theology students do perceive psychology as a science, the next stage of the report looks at this question more specifically by comparing directly the views of Theology and PPP students.

### 3.4. Scientific psychology and religion

This part of the project was designed to investigate students' conceptions of psychology as a science, on the one hand, and the applicability of psychological research methods to the study of religion, on the other. The comparison between Theology and PPP students is appropriate for the following reasons. First, whilst the two groups have a similar level of prior familiarity with psychology as a discipline, they differ markedly with regard to their prior background in science in general. To illustrate, Theology students do not typically take science subjects at A-level (although a few in the current sample have done), whereas PPP students typically take at least two, but usually more, sciences. Secondly, the pattern of prior familiarity with religion as a discipline among the students within each of the two groups is almost a reverse of that for science. For example, the majority of Theology students have studied religion at A-level whilst significantly fewer PPP students took A-level religious studies. Finally, Theology students have all chosen Psychology of Religion as one of their optional papers whereas none of the PPP students has studied psychology of religion either formally or informally. Accordingly, the question of interest in this comparison is whether the two groups arrive at a different conception of psychology as a science and to what extent they think that religion as a human phenomenon can be studied by scientific psychology.

#### 3.4.1. Psychology as a science

Theology students. Of the 19 respondents<sup>11</sup>, eight seem to view psychology as sufficiently scientific on account of its methodological rigour (examples 1, 7, 11, 12) whilst the remaining 11 are aware of its constraints as a science (example 6). Three of those 11 had attended seminars in philosophical psychology and concluded that psychology was still closer to philosophy than to science (example 5).

1 I would say that psychology is a science. And I'd say that, especially in contrast with philosophy and theology, partly because it has so much interest in the situations in the world... it takes its evidence from how people behave and what they do... And there is a lot of discussion about proper methodology and whether the criteria for reaching a conclusion are valid. And the studies... studies are a big thing. Because in philosophy and theology you get a bit of armchair psychology... that's as far as it

---

<sup>11</sup> One interview in each group yielded a response to this question that could not be clearly categorised.

goes, whereas psychology is much more concerned about how people actually (?) and also the consequences of the changes on them. I think those are the hallmarks of a science.

7 I suppose, if you take a science to be an approach, or a kind of methodological way of looking at things, may be to that extent .... Yeah, it is ... Empirical data.

11 Well ... Scientific to me in terms of the methods that are undertaken; otherwise you wouldn't present its results in a table or give you a statistic that psychology would. It's a different approach because it's using experiments, whereas theology isn't. Psychology is purely scientific.

12 I think it's totally science.

6 It is, if you look at its methods, backed up by evidence. (But) Limitations are that you are always... you always rely on people's testimony. It all depends how honest the individual can be.

5 It depends on who teaches psychology... how close they are to philosophy.

PPP students. Of the 19 respondents, all have agreed that the Oxford course is either very scientific or quite scientific but that in many other universities psychology can be rather different because it would often include Freud and psychoanalysis (examples 1, 5, 20). Most of the students also agree that certain areas of psychology are at present more scientific than others but progress continues to be made and all areas of psychology should eventually become fully scientific (example 12). Interestingly, PPP students seem to differ in their judgement whether psychology can ever become a hard science, even when it uses well-designed research methods (example 19).

1 In this university, very, in the sense that it is experimentally orientated. It has a solid methodological background, not Freud and Jung... It is disproving or supporting various theories with experimental evidence... Also, the biological aspects, and those are scientific. In other psychology courses... in other universities, they focus on the less experimental aspects such as Freud or Jung or folk theories.

5 Oh, definitely. The main thing about sciences is the approach to drawing conclusions, and the psychological approach is experimental and in that it is experimental, it is scientific. I suppose other people say that

with psychology you have to make too many inferences and the (?) too complicated to understand with experiments but, I think, you can use those exact same arguments on something like the structure of the universe, which is a science as well.

20 The approach here in Oxford is very scientific. It is very methodological, it is very data oriented... I feel that my education beforehand was like a philosophical approach, there was much more theory, not so much about scientific experiments.

12 It can be very scientific; that's a good thing. I don't think (that) anything is beyond the reach of being studied scientifically, absolutely, but some things are very difficult to get at, at the moment, but will eventually... Like very abstract things are quite hard to analyse. But it will change in the future, by and by.

19 Yes, but not a hard-core science, which I consider physics and chemistry to be. That doesn't mean it's not hard, just that it's not so...(?).

So, the conceptions of psychology as a science do not seem to be vastly different between PPP students and those studying Theology but who have completed the core paper in Psychology of Religion. Whilst there is a wide range of views within each group, PPP students tend to use stricter criteria when judging the scientific status of psychology than their Theology counterparts, which is even more clearly stated in their responses to the next question.

### 3.4.2. Religion as a topic for scientific psychology

Theology students. Whether or not religion can be studied by scientific methods, depends not only on the students' conceptions of psychology as a science but also on their implicit definitions of religion. Exploratory rather than systematic questions about the latter revealed that many students adopt a definition of religion that reflects the diversity of views in the literature.

Nine students answered "Yes" when asked if religion could be studied by psychology (example 2), one answered "No" (example 4), whilst the remaining ten said that psychological methods could be applied to religion "up to a point" (examples 8, 9, 14, 19, 20).<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Students 8, 9, 19, and 20 have not yet done the paper.

2 I think that psychology helps to enlighten the implications of religious belief. It definitely can. Philosophy can't answer religious questions.

I think religion does fall apart under science and reason but I think that's...a lot of Christians probably accept that you cannot reach that conclusion through reason and scientifically but you have to...

8 Up to a point... there are certain things that, I think, science can't ever prove or show, and are just matters of faith. It's the same in philosophy: you can reason up to a point and eventually... I think it's Kant, isn't it, who made a difference between faith and reason; there is a gulf between them and you have to choose what to go for.

9 I think religion can, because religion is man-made. I don't think that faith can. People try to do experiments to see if... experiments like Buddhist monks going into meditation if their brain waves change. I don't think that's faith. I think faith is a belief in something that even if all the doctrines are taken away, and there is no Bible and no place to worship, there would still be a belief that there is something higher than you.... that after death you don't just die and rot away. It is given to you by God rather than by someone telling you to believe.

14 The more human aspects of it can, but religion is also of a very particular type, and as such, science cannot throw much light on it. And, also, religion is a very personal thing and as such stands outside science. I think that religious belief is different from most other emotions and understandings of the human mind. They kind of correlate with something that is beyond studying...

19 Certain aspects of it can... the more historical or sociological, but if you are talking about God, by definition it's impossible. In order to study things scientifically, we must observe them. But when we are talking about God, God is up there and we are down here, and there is no reason that, because we talk to Him today and He talks to us or answers us, why that will happen tomorrow. Like with human relationships but even more difficult. It's not repeated to order... you cannot study it scientifically.

20 I think up to a point, yes. I think it can be studied scientifically, objectively, in that you can make observations... you can look at patterns of behaviour, look at history, but I think it is very difficult to quantify people's behaviour, and I think that's the problem with psychology and sociology as well and why they think what they think. You might find clues so you can see some things that may have led them to think of

behaviour in a certain way but you just can't know what's inside a person's head.

The last category of response (“up to a point”) is of interest because it demonstrates both the subtleties of understanding among the students (e.g., genuine methodological concerns) and, also, their misconceptions about the nature of the psychological approach. Among the misconceptions is the notion that psychology may be in a position to say something about God; that personal aspects of religion are beyond the reach of psychology; and that psychology can tackle only the historical and sociological aspects of religion. Such responses undoubtedly reflect confusion between psychological and theological aspects of religion.

PPP students. The question whether religion can be studied by scientific psychology yielded extremely interesting, and often extensive, responses among PPP students. All twenty students agreed at some point in the interview that religion could and should be studied by psychology, however, the majority of them thought that psychology of religion was a branch of social psychology and that only the social aspects of religious behaviour and experience could be studied by psychological methods (examples 1, 7). Only upon being shown the topics included in the Psychology of Religion syllabus, did PPP students admit that religion had cognitive aspects also. But they were still of the view that philosophy was the best framework within which to study mental representations (thoughts), including religious, whereas psychology was concerned with biological bases of behaviour. Several were manifestly aware of the possible links between the brain and certain religious experiences (example 17), including a student who suggested that it would be interesting for psychology to study the “God-spots” in the brain. Not surprisingly, religion was also seen as an aspect of Psychological Disorders.

Although the PPP students' understanding of psychology as capable of studying religious thought is disappointingly limited, a number of them readily saw that psychological methods were entirely appropriate in the study of religion as an aspect of human thought (examples 3, 12, 19).

1 There are aspects of religion which can be studied scientifically... cultural aspects, or seeing how religion develops within the individual but there is something that cannot be studied empirically, that is beyond the rational domain.

7 You can study the experiences that religion invokes and try to reduce that to a physiological level, for example, brainwaves. But for how religion changes behaviour, I think that a sociological approach is far more fitting.

17 It seems as plausible to think that it would be possible to approach it empirically, but I wonder whether we are in a position to do so yet, given that we have absolutely no idea about how reasoning or complex representations, beliefs, are represented in the brain. We just don't know how that stuff works. So... we wouldn't be able to form interesting models, I wouldn't have thought.

3 I think it could be; it would provide a nice twang with philosophy of religion. Religion suffers because people don't give it enough thought. It would be fascinating to understand the psychology of it. It's really interesting. I'd love to read some papers on it.

12 Moral development without religion has been studied, so why not with religion... religion is a major part of great many people's lives.

19 Definitely... why people believe, and how people can believe so much to devote their whole lives to religion. I think that that is extremely relevant.

What is paradoxical about PPP students' conception of scientific psychology is that it appears to be fundamentally unaware of the ongoing science-religion debate, where different sciences grapple to understand a number of, essentially psychological, questions (e.g., origin and the nature of religious mental states).

## 4. Discussion

The investigation reported here deals with a topic that involves a relatively small group of Theology students (20); nevertheless, its findings are of interest to all degree programmes involving theology or religious studies that include some teaching of psychology. The findings of this investigation are equally relevant to psychology degree programmes, although those implications will be considered in a separate report.

Contrary to the general trend of teaching the "traditional" psychology of religion topics in theology departments, namely, psychoanalysis, pastoral, and social psychology, the data obtained in the

current project provide clear evidence that theology students perceive scientific psychology as both relevant to their studies and interesting. From the viewpoint of the perceived relevance of psychology to theology, it is understandable that many students would like to see a greater component of psychology as part of their theology degree and would prefer a more integrated interdisciplinary input from the two disciplines. Integration does not only mean establishing the links between two disciplines but also understanding what the unbridgeable differences are (Gasper, 2001). In this regard, teaching of scientific psychology to theology students makes a greater interdisciplinary contribution to their education than the more literary psychological approaches.

There are two reasons why mainly scientific psychology rather than just psychoanalysis and pastoral psychology should be taught in introductory courses for theology students. First, psychoanalysis, pastoral and health psychology generally are applied areas and, to be useful, they require a prior grasp of psychological research method and theory in order to appreciate realistically their findings. Secondly, the science-religion debate would be broadened by increasing students' awareness of psychology as a science of mental life. Put simply, psychology could be seen as the most relevant of the sciences to theology students.

Although Theology students appear to have a more correct understanding than their PPP counterparts regarding the contribution that psychology can make to the study of religion, both groups of students often confound religion as a psychological topic with religion as a theological topic. Put differently, the comparison with PPP students shows that misconceptions about religion as a psychological variable are not limited to humanities students. Consequently, opportunities should be provided for psychology students to acquire a basic understanding of religion as a human phenomenon in order to broaden their research interests. The fact that seven out of 32 PPP students (22%) choose the Philosophy of Religion paper suggests an interest in religion, contrary to the stereotypes about an incompatibility between scientific and religious interests.

The main benefit of teaching psychology of religion to psychology students would be filling a gap in their understanding of the history of psychology. It could be argued that, as far as their understanding of religion goes, PPP students' conception of psychology is closer to that of Wundt, who defined of psychology as a study of



sensory processes, than of William James, who saw psychology as the science of mental life. In other words, James had a clear vision of psychology of religion as a branch of natural science and a methodologically demanding subject.

The main practical problem in teaching mainstream psychology to theology students would be the lack of psychology staff with sufficient interests in theology so as to make relevant links between the two disciplines. This problem, however, is not insurmountable. Introducing the option of some theological education to psychology courses would soon rectify the deficit. Furthermore, even the teaching of general introductory psychology, rather than psychology of religion, could be useful to theology students as it might stimulate their own insights and creative links between the two disciplines.

In summary, although psychology is perceived as a very different paper from their theological papers, most students do not find it conceptually difficult and would prefer to study it in greater depth as part of their theology degree.

## Acknowledgements

The current project was supported by a grant from the PRS-LTSN Mini-Project Fund. I am grateful to Dr Simon Smith for his assistance in the application process and to the forty students who agreed to participate in the project.

## Bibliography

- Biggs, J., *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1999)
- Gaspar, D., *Interdisciplinarity: Building Bridges and Nurturing a Complex Ecology of Ideas* (The Hague, Netherlands: Institute of Social Studies, Working paper series, No. 331, 2001)
- Klein, J. T., *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory, and Practice* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1990)
- Petrovich, O., *Learning and Teaching in Interdisciplinary Contexts* (Unpublished Portfolio for the Diploma in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, University of Oxford, 2003)
- Ramsden, P., *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* (Routledge, 1992)
- Squires, G., Simons, H., Parlett, M., & Becher, T., *Interdisciplinarity* (London: The Group for Research and Innovation in Higher Education, 1975)

Article

## Text-Based Teaching and Learning in Philosophy<sup>1</sup>

---

**Keith Crome and Mike Garfield**

*Department of Politics and Philosophy  
Manchester Metropolitan University*

---

### Introduction

This article addresses the role of text-based teaching and learning in philosophy. Text-based teaching and learning can be defined as teaching and learning in which reading a text with students is the focus of pedagogical activity, the objectives of the course being primarily related to, and fulfilled through, the reading of a text, or series of texts. The practice differs from the more traditional lecture and seminar discussion based approach.

The basic points and arguments that we put forward here derive from a report that was written in order to clarify the distinctive and significant features of the text-based method of teaching as it is practised in the Department of Philosophy at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). However, we believe that the issues that the report raised have a broader relevance, for there has recently emerged a concern with the role of reading in the teaching of philosophy. In January 2003 the LTSN Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies organised a one-day conference on *Teaching the Reading of Primary Texts*.<sup>2</sup> In the same year S. Guttenplan, J. Hornsby and C. Janaway—all of whom teach at Birkbeck College—published *Reading Philosophy: Selected Texts with a Method for Beginners*, an introduction to philosophy that attempts to instruct students in the “skills which experienced philosophers use in reading”.<sup>3</sup> These two events are perhaps no more than beginnings, but

---

<sup>1</sup> A longer version of this paper is available at: <http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/philosophy/articles/cromegarfield.html> where it can also be downloaded as a .pdf file.

<sup>2</sup> *Teaching the Reading of Primary Texts*, January 2003, Leeds University. Contributions from this day conference are available on the PRS-LTSN web-site: <http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk>.

<sup>3</sup> S. Guttenplan, J. Hornsby and C. Janaway, *Reading Philosophy: Selected Texts with a Method for Beginners* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 2.

they are nevertheless significant in their raising the issue of the relation between reading and the fundamental aim of all philosophy tuition—getting students to do philosophy. It is our intention to contribute towards the understanding of this connection, and we hope that our remarks will serve to stimulate further debate concerning this topic.

## 1. Reading

Reports on educational provision often draw attention to the fact that a significant proportion of students who have attained the pre-requisite standards for admission to Higher Education lack many of the reading skills demanded by the course of study they are to follow. The authors of one study remark that whilst “the term ‘reading for a degree’ has been around for a long time (...) reading is a skill that relatively few learners have developed as systematically as they could”.<sup>4</sup> They continue that it is important to explicitly acknowledge that the activity of reading involves numerous skills, the development and continued exercise of which should form an integral element of teaching in Higher Education.

It is sometimes suggested that the numbers of students lacking such skills points to a systemic failure of secondary education to provide them, as under pressure from league tables, etc, schools look to impart just that information that is required for their pupils to perform successfully in examinations. On the other hand, it could be said that what has increased is the recognition of the deficit of such skills, and this is perhaps attributable to the increased emphasis in HE upon students’ acquisition of explicit, transferable skills and competencies in addition to subject-specific content. Irrespective of the particular merits or faults of these identifications of the cause of the problem, the acknowledgement that a significant proportion of students in HE lack the reading skills required by their course of studies would seem to be important. Without acknowledging that there is a ‘skills deficit’ in this area it is impossible to take any action to remedy it. It is tempting to attribute the recent interest in the pedagogical importance of reading in philosophy to a combination of these two factors. Whilst it would perhaps be wrong to suggest that both concerns over the inadequacy of students reading skills upon entry to HE and the necessity to impart to students transferable skills and competencies through the course of their studies have not, in some measure at least, played their part in this interest, it would be as wrong, we will argue, to reduce this interest entirely to such concerns.

---

<sup>4</sup> P. Race & S. Brown, *500 Top Tips for Tutors* (London: Koogan Page Ltd, 1993), p. 20

In the first instance, however, it is important to note that the best insights of studies into this aspect of learning and teaching show that it is far from being the case that students can simply be taught a series of reading skills that form a fixed acquisition which can then be deployed in the act of reading. As many educationalists have come to realise, it is always possible to read without any genuine insight or understanding of what is read: the act of reading does not absolutely require either the intuition or imaginative apprehension of what is at issue in order for the words on the page to have meaning.<sup>5</sup> Such a failure of comprehension is frequently referred to in studies on the subject as ‘passive’ as opposed to ‘active’ comprehension. It is passive because the reader relies on a stock of previously acquired meanings in order to understand the text she is reading, rather than actively engaging with the text itself. In an active comprehension the act of reading is inherently reflexive: one learns to read by reading. In other words, the activity of reading is not reducible to the simple act of deciphering characters on a page, and in all but the most straightforward of texts, the text itself defines its own terms, and defines how it is to be read. The ability to read well is not acquired through a fixed set of abstractly acquired skills, and cannot be abstractly imparted: if it is necessary to teach students to read, then this must be done concretely and by repeated engagement with various types of writing and texts.

Such a consideration is particularly relevant to philosophy. *The Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy* stresses that “learning in philosophy has to be an active process”, a requirement that necessitates that “provision in any module should include a substantial element of learning through the student’s own thoughtful **reading**”.<sup>6</sup> As the observations above have shown, it cannot be assumed that students already possess this ability to read critically and thoughtfully, nor should it be assumed that they will discover it spontaneously for themselves. It follows that an integral aspect of teaching philosophy will be teaching that involves the act of reading. But, for the reasons already given, it cannot be assumed that the requisite type of reading can be taught as a skill or competence within a single study skills type unit, in abstraction from a continuous engagement with a single, or series, of philosophical

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Race & Brown, op. cit., and also G. J. Fairbairn & C. Winch, *Reading, Writing and Reasoning: A Guide for Students*, 2nd Edition, (Bristol, Open University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> *Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy*, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2000, §29 (1).

texts. One of the best ways for tutors to encourage and facilitate the development of a flexible, independent capacity to read in students is to develop a pedagogical practice of text-based teaching and learning in the classroom.

## 2. Text-based Teaching and Learning and the Definition of Philosophy

The intrinsic difficulty of reading a philosophical text leads one to expect that the relationship between the act of reading and the teaching of philosophy would have featured as a subject of explicit pedagogical and philosophical reflection. In the introduction to this study we cited two indications of a growth of interest in this area. It would perhaps be unrealistic to think that this interest has emerged *ex nihilo*, and yet this is how things seem when one looks for preceding pedagogical studies. We were unable to find any directly relevant studies ourselves, and nor were the PRS-LTSN able to suggest any sources when we contacted them. The comprehensive review of the American journal *Teaching Philosophy*, undertaken by John Sellars for the *PRS-LTSN Journal*, did not identify any material connected to the issue of text-based teaching and learning.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, whilst Sellars argues in his concluding reflections upon teaching scholarship in philosophy that “philosophy is a subject primarily devoted to the analysis of complex arguments” and expressly draws attention to the fact that such arguments do not take place in the “ether” as it were, he only remarks the necessity for reflection on the issue of “teaching students how to write well”.<sup>8</sup> The question of reading, and of text-based teaching and learning, does not emerge as a pedagogically relevant issue, despite its implicit importance to the issues that Sellars raises concerning the teaching of philosophy.

Sellars’ oversight is indicative of the general tendency to ignore the role of reading in the teaching of philosophy. The tension between the admission of the necessity that philosophy students read primary texts critically and well, expressed in the *Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy*, and the tendency to overlook practices that would serve to develop this ability is caught nicely in a statement by K. Hawley in an article concerned with evaluating different formats for philosophy teaching. She writes:

---

<sup>7</sup> J. Sellars, ‘Some Reflections on Recent Philosophy Teaching Scholarship’, *The PRS-LTSN Journal*, Vol.2., No. 1, Summer 2002, pp. 110-28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

We cannot teach philosophy through lectures alone. Lectures can play an important role in introducing issues and literature, but reading, writing and discussion are also required. So lectures are usually supplemented by tutorials or seminars—these provide a forum for discussion, an incentive for reading, and preparation for writing.<sup>9</sup>

What this quotation expresses is that view according to which learning philosophy requires reading on the part of the student, whilst reading itself is not to be taught: seminars and tutorials merely having the function of encouraging the student to read.

It will be helpful to attempt to determine if there is a correlation between such a view and any specific presuppositions about the nature of philosophy, as clearly how philosophy is taught, and how it is supposed best taught, is consequent upon what philosophy is thought to be. Without doubt it is important to recall that, as the authors of the *Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy* state, in its academic form, philosophy is a rigorous discipline that is *traditional* in nature. It is therefore impossible to imagine that philosophy could ever be taught without reference to canonical texts. Nevertheless if the pedagogical significance of text-based teaching and learning is underemphasized or not recognised at all, it is because a certain understanding of philosophy conceives the discipline as essentially ahistorical, that is to say, as primarily concerned with abstract and supposedly universal skills of critical reasoning and argumentation. On the basis of this understanding, and in relation to the skills of formal reasoning, logical analysis and argumentation, hermeneutics may be considered as important, but will nevertheless nearly always form a secondary or subordinate element of a philosophical education. According to such a view, depending on its provenance a canonical text will contain a more or less clear, more or less adequate, expression of a philosophical issue or idea, which is susceptible to further clarification and greater adequacy of expression. Where taught, hermeneutical skills would simply enable the student to recognise the necessary obscurities within such canonical formulations.

Such an idea of philosophy has been more closely associated with the analytic—as opposed to the continental—variant of the discipline, the latter having a more historically based approach to the subject than the former. For what is called continental philosophy what

---

<sup>9</sup> K. Hawley, 'Using Independent Study Groups with Philosophy Students', *The PRS-LTSN Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 2002, p. 90. My italics.

is at issue is less a matter of discovering what is right of wrong with a particular philosopher's conception of causality say, but of recognising in it a particular constitution of reality. What matters is not so much the adequacy of approach evinced by different philosophers towards a particular problem, but power and creativity of philosophical discourses that have effectively constituted our experiences of the world and ourselves since the time of the Ancient Greeks. Given such a conception of philosophy it would seem that there can be little question of seeking to abstract philosophical ideas from their embodiment in a text.

It is unquestionably important to attempt to determine if there is a correlation between the analytic and continental conceptions of philosophy that predispose theoretical reflection and practical implementation towards or away from a recognition of the potential importance of text-based teaching and learning in philosophy. Yet it is necessary to be avoid being too schematic, or for that matter, schismatic: rather than suggesting that an analytic and ahistorical approach to philosophy excludes text-based teaching and learning whilst a continental approach privileges it is necessary to recognise that in practice things are more complex and open. In the first instance, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which any philosophy tutor would not help a student in reading a text. Secondly, and as the *Reading Philosophy* textbook testifies, important pedagogical reading practices are undertaken in departments that are not traditionally regarded as espousing a 'continental' approach to the subject. However, it seems to be the case that the origins of the lack of concern with teaching reading in philosophy can at least be attributed to the ahistorical and analytic conception of philosophy.

### 3. The Practice of Text-Based Teaching and Learning at MMU

In the following section, we outline the text-based teaching and learning strategies practiced at MMU, with the intention of making clearer what such a practice might involve, its advantages and disadvantages. It is important to remark that whilst the method of text-based teaching and learning is practiced throughout the department it is not something imposed unilaterally upon staff. It is more an ethos that has evolved from a shared, coherent commitment to the importance of the practice of reading to the teaching of philosophy, and it is actualised through a range of differing approaches.

The philosophy courses currently available to students at MMU are of both author and theme based types. All courses are taught through

a mixture of lectures and seminars, and students are able to see tutors for individual tutorials by arrangement. Year One units do not include any single-author courses; all units are introductory, and the preponderance are concerned with the study of particular texts rather than issues. Exemplary in this respect is a course entitled *Problems of Philosophy*, which does not directly address canonical problems, but concentrates on the study of four canonical texts: Plato's *Phaedo*, Descartes' *Meditations*, Hume's *Enquiry* and Kant's *Prolegomena*. The unit seeks to introduce the student to historically and philosophically different modes of argumentation. Students are encouraged to make comparisons and draw distinctions between the different modes and styles of argument and the different concerns of the four authors, not with the aim of assessing their validity, but in order to arrive at an appreciation of their creative potential and limitations and their historical significance. Second and Third Year courses are a mixture of single author, joint author and subject area units. Second and Third Year units that are subject area oriented are still predominantly directed towards consideration of authors and texts. Thus whilst text-based teaching and learning does not preclude issue based courses, it inflects teaching towards the study of texts and authors.

Typically the practice of text-based teaching and learning involves students reading a text—or selection from a text—in seminar sessions. It is, in essence, a method of teaching through textual interpretation. The students are required to demonstrate their understanding by identifying, re-articulating and discussing the particular philosophical point at issue in the text. The advantage of such an approach is that it places the student at the centre of the philosophical activity. The text is addressed in such a way that the students are brought to see the philosophical issue for themselves by way of reading. The text offers the students a common material focus, which dislocates or displaces the tutor as the centre of attention within the seminar as an individual who is able to offer an authoritative account or summary of an argument or an issue. Under the guidance of the tutor, but with the text as their focus, students are brought themselves to engage with an issue in its philosophical significance.

In addition to providing a common focus to pedagogical activity which forces the students into a direct engagement with the philosophical issues at stake in a particular text, such a method also has the advantage of bringing students to recognise that philosophising is intrinsically demanding. Far from being the negative point that it might



at first seem, such a recognition means that the student comes to see that doing philosophy is not a matter of 'having ideas' that are simply clothed in written language, but rather the act of articulating an idea is itself philosophical, and that every idea needs to be worked out and worked through. As a consequence, "thinking for oneself" as the *Subject Benchmark Report* puts it, considered as a process of engaging with, working out, articulating and re-articulating a given argument, becomes the centre of the teaching process.

Such a method of teaching can be contrasted with the practice of providing students with introductions to, and summaries of, philosophical arguments, texts and positions. Whilst apparently restricting the student's focus to a text, and eschewing critical assessments of that text, text-based teaching and learning provides students with the opportunity to discover for themselves both the questions that underpin any given concept or text, and the significance of philosophical thought as such. It is here that one of the difficulties of the text-based approach to teaching and learning becomes apparent: in being asked to engage directly with a text, students can quite often feel that they are involved in a philological rather than critical and philosophical exercise. However, such a difficulty is perhaps one of the intrinsic challenges of teaching philosophy that the tutor has to meet. The primary role of the tutor being to bring the student to an independence of approach from out of their textual engagement, rather than providing them with abstractly imposed criticisms that separate them from the text and its argument. Only through a direct approach to the text, which runs the risk of being simply philological, can the student develop an articulation between themselves and the text that neither simply repeats it without engaging with it, nor expresses arguments that are only, and at best, occasioned by it.

It is because it provides a means for encouraging students to engage philosophically with philosophical arguments that text-based teaching and learning is held to be important. In relation to the reading of a text, students are found to be able to articulate for themselves a philosophical issue, and thus discover their own philosophical voice. As one member of the Philosophy Department at MMU has suggested, such a method of teaching might even be regarded as the touchstone of philosophical pedagogy: without that students are brought and taught to engage with, understand and re-articulate primary philosophical texts, they will never understand philosophy itself, and will always remain insecure in their own philosophical judgement. Certainly it is always

possible that the tutor can end up repeating an argument to students, but reading in seminars with students, and allowing the text to become the central focus of the seminar, reduces the likelihood of that happening. For with text-based teaching, the text is not treated as a repository of issues and arguments that are more or less well expressed, but as the place of a genuine and unique philosophical experience. The text can fulfil this role because, when the student is directed towards a close engagement with it, he or she is required to repeatedly hypothesise and interrogate it in order to understand it. At its most successful this kind of engagement transforms the words on the page into a living force that asks questions of the student, and forces him or her to reflect on their own assumptions and experiences.

In the introduction to this article we said that text-based teaching and learning could be defined as teaching and learning in which the reading of a text is the focus of pedagogical activity. It is an approach in which the text has a unique, irreplaceable value for the teaching of philosophy. It is perhaps now possible to add that such an approach must be distinguished from one that simply acknowledges that it is desirable that students undertake the reading of primary texts insofar as doing so enables them to develop the capacity for independent analysis and critical engagement with philosophical ideas. It should also be distinguished from an approach that simply stresses that where it is an objective of a degree course that students should read primary texts, they should be taught how to do so. Such an approach does not necessarily have any specific philosophical reason for requiring students to read, but only the pedagogical justification of showing students what they are supposed to do when they read. In contrast, underpinning a text-based teaching and learning approach to philosophy is the understanding that there is an intimate and unique bond between an appropriately engaged or active reading of a philosophical text and the act of doing philosophy itself.

A clear and positive justification can thus be given for adopting a text-based approach to teaching philosophy. Text-based teaching and learning should not be considered a remedial method, intended to make good a deficiency in students' reading skills. Rather it should be viewed as an approach that is intrinsically linked to what must be the aim of all philosophy teaching, getting students to do philosophy. In addition, a further motivation for this approach can be given: we have often found lecturers expressing the concern that, increasingly, students have acquired writing skills that are good enough for them to reach an average

level of attainment in assessments, whilst the lecturer still has the feeling that they have not made a genuine attempt to engage philosophically with the issue in question. As we have already suggested, such a tendency is sometimes ascribed to developments in secondary education, where students are encouraged to master skills that will secure them good marks in exams. However, it is probably worth remarking that this concern goes back as far as the problem posed to the very first philosophers of distinguishing their own work—or a genuine philosophical understanding—from the skilful, but empty, use of words that marked out the practice of the sophists. In the end, irrespective of whether one attributes this particular problem to recent causes or views it as an ancient, and perhaps constant, phenomenon, text-based teaching and learning offers one way of dealing with it, insofar as it compels students towards a philosophical engagement with a particular issue. What should be noted, and it is worth underlining this, is that this particular justification for text-based teaching and learning derives not from a concern that students lack certain skills, but rather from a concern that they have mastered certain skills all too well.

#### 4. Writing and Text-Based Teaching and Learning

As we have already noted J. Sellars, in his wide-ranging review of the journal *Teaching Philosophy*, suggests “teaching students how to write well should be every philosophy teacher’s highest priority”.<sup>10</sup> Sellars prefaces his recommendations concerning teaching writing skills by observing that philosophers have tended to view with suspicion a concern with ‘style’ rather than ‘content’. Locating this suspicion in a Platonic disdain for rhetoric, oratory and, indeed, writing, Sellars suggests that such an attitude is unhelpful. Taking as an alternative the views of John of Salisbury and Cicero, he invokes the idea, common to both, of the “eloquent philosopher”. To modify the well-known Kantian expression, for Sellars words without wisdom are empty, whilst without words wisdom is mute. Sellars is cautiously insistent upon the reciprocal envelopment of thinking and articulating. He argues that it is not just that one without the other is of little value, but that “thinking clearly and writing clearly cannot really be divorced from one another”.<sup>11</sup> Sellars makes the point that, given that students are primarily assessed by means of written examinations and essays, their ability to write should be

---

<sup>10</sup> J. Sellars, op. cit. p. 125.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

scrutinised and nurtured. Moreover, for Sellars such modes of assessment are not contingent to doing philosophy; rather they reflect the very nature of philosophy itself. Drawing out the implication of his claim that thinking and writing are inseparable, he remarks that philosophical arguments are not disembodied, but “exist in language”.<sup>12</sup> Thus the issue, he says, is less whether to teach students writing skills, but how best to do so. Accepting the force of Sellars’ argument, the question that we want to address in this section is how the method of text-based teaching and learning might answer to such an imperative.

Sellars’ claims concerning the essential reciprocity between philosophical thinking and writing are echoed in the arguments we have put forward in the previous section. However, as we have already remarked, whilst Sellars clearly identifies a number of weaknesses and omissions in the scholarship on the teaching of philosophy, and despite his emphatic arguments for the need to teach philosophy students how to write, he nevertheless fails to identify text-based teaching and learning as an issue. This, we suggested, was surprising given Sellars’ own characterisation of philosophy as a subject primarily devoted to the analysis of complex arguments. One might suppose that such a view would dispose anyone who held it towards acknowledging the importance of teaching students not only to present such arguments in written form, but along with that, teaching them how to read and respond to such arguments. This in itself would be sufficient to justify the method of text-based teaching and learning. However, not only is it the case that we contingently encounter such arguments in the form of written texts that must be read, but, as we have argued, it is in the reading of a text that the student comes to encounter the full richness, complexity and difficulty of a properly philosophical articulation of a problem. This response to Sellars’ argument, we should note, does not invalidate his point that teaching students to write well is one of the most important pedagogical issues for philosophy, even though a recognition of the role text-based teaching and learning in philosophy provision might recast some of his considerations, recommendations and conclusions.

Aside from any of the particular differences between the views expressed in this article and those expressed or implied in Sellars’ review, and beyond any particular similarities, we feel that what is most obviously shared is a commitment to enabling students who are studying the subject to do philosophy. The arguments that we have advanced

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

have gradually moved beyond the initial considerations we made concerning the act of reading and have sought to express the vital bond that links doing philosophy to the act of reading a philosophical text. We have tried to suggest that in the context of teaching, what doing philosophy means is nothing other than the process of articulating an argument. Such a process will more often than not be difficult for the student. Again, and it is important to emphasise this, admitting that students do struggle to articulate philosophical arguments should not be seen as an indication of intellectual weakness on their part. The opposite is perhaps the case: such a struggle can be an indication that they have genuinely encountered a philosophical argument, encountered it as what it is—something that intrinsically makes demands of anyone, and not just the ‘student’, to articulate. In this respect, showing students philosophers formulating and reformulating a problem in a text can help them to realise that their own struggle is not a peculiar, personal difficulty, and not even a difficulty that is peculiar to students alone, but one that is intrinsic to the discipline of philosophy as such.

What we understand by ‘articulation’ should not be limited simply to the articulation of thought and voice, but also covers written articulation. Through text-based teaching and learning students are brought to develop not only their powers of philosophical comprehension; they are also to build upon their ability to write philosophically. Engaging with an argument, an idea, or a problem from the ‘inside’, that is to say, through its expression and development within argument of a text, rather than through its abstract representation by a tutor or commentary, allows the student to gain a valuable perspective on what it means to articulate an idea, to open it out and explore it as a living philosophical issue. It is perhaps worth remarking that it is important not to confuse the ability to articulate an issue philosophically with the ability to write well: teaching someone to write philosophically is not the same as teaching them to write eloquently; it is matter of getting them to express—perhaps sometimes with difficulty—a philosophical issue philosophically. It is the difficulty and demands of a genuine philosophical articulation that lie behind Plato’s disdain for superficial oratory and his valorisation of ‘content’. It is because Plato knew that it is the struggle to allow the matter of philosophy to speak itself through words that is important, that he did not condemn speech, writing or articulation as such, but only the superficial preference for elegance of expression over a real and genuine attempt to say or write something. Recognising this lends weight to a view we have already

expressed and that Sellars also shares: teaching students to write ‘well’ in relation to philosophy should not be regarded as making good a deficiency, providing them with something that they should, ideally, already possess. Perhaps what, if anything, needs to be remedied is the ability of students to write well in a rhetorical sense without doing any philosophy.

## 5. The Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy

Subject Benchmark Statements have the function of making explicit the academic characteristics and standards of an honours degree in specific academic disciplines. The Benchmark Statement for Philosophy provides a set of standards for the provision of philosophy, gives an account of the attributes and competencies that philosophy students can expect to have acquired, and gives benchmark standards for assessment. Along with an institution’s own evaluation documents, the Benchmark Statement provides a means for reviewers to assess provision when assessing a particular degree programme. G. MacDonald Ross has argued that the significance of the benchmark document is likely to become all the greater in the future inasmuch as any new cycle of subject reviews that take place will most likely abandon a method of evaluating a department’s provision on the basis of its ability to meet self-set objectives, and will instead consider the appropriateness of the standards its has set itself.<sup>13</sup>

We have already shown that the *Benchmark Statement for Philosophy* gives sufficient grounds to justify a programme of philosophy that embraces text-based teaching and learning. Where it is held to be desirable or even necessary that a student should be able to read philosophical texts philosophically, and do so independently of secondary literature and tutor-provided summaries, then it is also necessary that students be taught how to read. Given the nature of the texts that they are required to read, and the very nature of reading itself, such teaching cannot be accomplished by precept, but by example.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> G. MacDonald Ross ‘External Pressures on Teaching’, *The PRS-LTSN Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Winter 2002, p. 111.

<sup>14</sup> In a document issued at the PRS-LTSN day conference on *Teaching the Reading of Primary Texts* (Leeds University, 8th Jan. 2003), G. MacDonald Ross argued: “If it is an objective of a module that students should read a primary text, then this should be clearly stated as a learning outcome; time should be spent on developing the skill; and success should be explicitly assessed... A classic method of teaching is to teach by example. You can demonstrate the process of making sense of a text in class, so that

Whilst the general remarks made in the *Benchmark Statement* justify the practice of text-based teaching and learning, it is necessary to show how the Benchmark criteria are applicable to this in practice. The document identifies nine *General Philosophical Skills* that should be acquired by students enrolled in a degree programme in philosophy. These skills in turn form the basis for assessment of a student's level of attainment, a typical level of attainment reflecting an adequate ability in most of these skills. These skills are:

1. Articulacy in identifying issues in all kinds of debates
2. Precision of thought and expression in the analysis and formulation of complex and controversial problems
3. Sensitivity to the interpretation of texts drawn from a variety of ages and/or traditions
4. Clarity and rigour in critical assessment of arguments presented in such texts
5. Ability to use and criticise specialised philosophical terminology
6. Ability to abstract, analyse and construct sound arguments and identify logical fallacies
7. Ability to recognise methodological errors, rhetorical devices, unexamined conventional wisdom, unnoticed assumptions, vagueness and superficiality
8. Ability to move between generalisation and appropriately detailed discussion, inventing or discovering examples to support or challenge a position, and distinguishing relevant and irrelevant considerations
9. Ability to consider unfamiliar ideas and ways of thinking, and to examine critically presuppositions and methods within the discipline itself

It will be obvious that the method of text-based teaching and learning directly answers to some of these criteria. The skills listed under 3 and 4 are explicitly hermeneutical in character. However, inasmuch as the method is premised on an intrinsic link between doing philosophy and reading, then a good number of the other skills listed will also be developed. Insofar as the student is encouraged to engage with the

---

students can practise a similar technique in their own private reading. This helps to answer the question of what students are supposed to do when they are told to read slowly and deeply". This document can be found on the PRS-LTSN web site at: <http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/generic/readingmain.html> .

philosophical point being raised in the text that is being read, then he or she will necessarily be called upon to articulate the underlying point at issue (1). The skill listed in last place (9)—the ability to consider unfamiliar ideas and ways of thinking—will also be developed through an engagement with primary texts taken from across the philosophical tradition. The other skills and abilities listed will be progressively fostered from out of such an engagement and in relation to other tasks, teaching methods and modes of assessment. For example, a genuine ability to appreciate the nuances and range of use of philosophical terminology (5) is derivable from teaching that focuses upon close textual engagement.

Undoubtedly these are abilities that it is necessary for graduates in philosophy to have acquired, and abilities that any competent philosopher must possess in some significant measure. However, it should perhaps be acknowledged that such abilities do not suffice of themselves to distinguish, nor to produce, a philosopher: on the one hand, students from many disciplines within the humanities would be required to have such skills; on the other hand, a student with all these skills would not necessarily be a philosopher, nor would he or she necessarily make a good philosopher. When philosophy is taught it is not just a set of skills or abilities that are being nurtured in the student, but a disposition or attitude. The *Benchmark Statement* implicitly recognises this in the definition that it gives of philosophy. This definition can be seen to comprise of two aspects, one positive, the other negative. In the negative sense it recognises that an education in philosophy cannot consist in the simple acquisition of facts and arguments; in the positive sense it states that “philosophy seeks to understand, and critically question, ideas concerning the nature of reality, value and experience that play a pervasive role in our understanding of the world and ourselves”.<sup>15</sup> Taking both the negative delimitation and the positive appreciation of what philosophy is into account leads us to recognise that being a philosopher or doing philosophy is not about what one knows, but is a disposition towards knowing (in this sense it is not inappropriate to recall that the very term ‘philosophy’—the love of wisdom—speaks of a disposition). In this sense, to teach philosophy is to awaken or intensify an attitude on the part of students towards the world and towards experience, an attitude of openness that allows the world, and their experience of it, to ask questions of them.

---

<sup>15</sup> Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy, §9.



It is perhaps not possible to say anything more about such a disposition here than this. Any attempt to do so is sure to provoke disagreement. What can be said, however, is that the method of text-based teaching will help to develop in students to this disposition as it is instanced in philosophers philosophising. It might be objected that such a disposition is a prerequisite of reading philosophically, and without assuming the possession of such a disposition it would be impossible to explain how anyone could be sensitive to anyone else's philosophising. But such an objection only has a purchase if teaching is thought to be imposing something from the outside, rather than allowing something innate to develop and refine itself by being actualised. Indeed an attitude of disposition is disclosed and learns to recognise itself and refine itself through its being exercised.

## Concluding Remarks

Text-based teaching and learning has received scant attention as a form of pedagogical practice within philosophy provision. However interest in the role of reading in the teaching of philosophy is beginning to make itself apparent, and our reviews of both the small amount of literature devoted to pedagogical issues in relation to philosophy and the *Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy* indicate that there is a clear justification for such a method of teaching. It is important not to allow the positive aspects of the method to obscure the difficulties that such an approach entails. It is certainly the case that this method asks more of students than simply outlining arguments for them does, and not all students will appreciate this. However, it does seem that the majority of students do finally come to appreciate the honesty of such a direct, unmediated engagement with philosophical texts, and because of this, develop a genuine confidence in their own critical and philosophical abilities. It is also the case that such a method demands a lot more from the tutor: not only must they carefully prepare each session, they must themselves listen carefully, sympathetically and critically to what students say about a text. It is clear, however, that both student and tutor benefit from a commitment to this method of teaching and learning philosophy.

## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the support of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Manchester Metropolitan University, who commissioned the report on which article is based. They would also like to thank the Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre of

the learning and Teaching Support Network for their assistance. Thanks are also due to all the members of the Philosophy Section at MMU.

## Bibliography

- Crome, K., *Text-Based Teaching and Learning*,  
<http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/generic/readingcrome.html>
- Crosby, K, Pattison, S & Skilton, A., 'Supporting Questioning in Theology and Religious Studies', *The PRS-LTSN Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 2002
- Fairbairn G. J. & Winch, C., *Reading, Writing and Reasoning: A Guide for Students*, 2nd Edition (Bristol: Open University Press, 1996)
- Garfield, M., *Text-Based Teaching and Learning*,  
<http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/generic/readinggarfield.html>
- Guttenplan, S. Hornsby, J. & Janaway, C., *Reading Philosophy: Selected Texts with a Method for Beginners*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003)
- Hawley, K., 'Using Independent Study Groups with Philosophy Students', *The PRS-LTSN Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 2002
- McDonald Ross, G., *Teaching the Reading of Primary Texts*,  
<http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/generic/readingmain.html>
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *Subject Benchmark Statement for Philosophy*, 2000
- Race, P. & Brown, S., *500 Top Tips for Tutors*, (London: Kogan Page, 1993)
- Sellars, J., 'Some Reflections on Recent Philosophy Teaching Scholarship', *The PRS-LTSN Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 2002
- Subject Review Report, *The Manchester Metropolitan University: Philosophy*, November 2001, Q523/2001
- Subject Review Report, *Ulster University: Philosophy*

Discussion

## Using Role Play as a Way in to the History of Science

---

**Charlotte Sleigh**

*University of Kent*

---

### Introduction

In 2001 I started using role play as an introduction to the history of science (Sleigh, 2003). I wrote a role play which formed the first seminar in the history module 'Introduction to Literature and Science', whose participants were first year undergraduates, mostly taking literature degrees. Drawing on role play literature, this paper discusses the aims and potential benefits of using role play as a way in to the history of science. Practical aspects of role play planning are described, and the actual outcomes in my own experience are evaluated.

Before this, it will be helpful to define precisely what is here meant by role play. A great deal of role play literature discusses it in the context of psychology (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997), whether organisational (workplace training etc.), clinical (therapeutic) or research-orientated (finding out how people behave in certain conditions). Of these, the first two types are about changing participants' everyday attitudes or behaviours through empathetic play or play in which participants act as themselves (van Ments, 1983: 51). The idea is that through debriefing and repetition the behaviours engendered by the play become ever more 'natural' until they are expressed in real life. Role play in the teaching of history has no such aim; although it aims to change attitudes it is not in the directly transferable sense of learning to be more assertive, less racist or whatever. It is about gaining insight into a process, rather than improving one's performance within that process.

In this sense it begins to approach the psychologist's third use for role play—research—with the difference that through reflection and discussion, the 'experimental subjects' are also the researchers. As such it is close to the definition of 'sociodrama' offered by van Ments, where 'the emphasis ... is on the problems associated with the social role which an actor is playing rather than the individual's problems' (van Ments, 1983: 156). Yardley-Matwiejczuk (1997: 65) draws on an earlier

distinction between ‘role taking’ and ‘role playing’ to make a similar point; the emphasis of the former is merely on inference and understanding of the other participant(s). (A third option, ‘playing at a role’, introduces the possibility of including an element of deceit in the play. If role play were developed as a part of a historiographically orientated course, this might be an interesting avenue to explore.) ‘Role taking’ is much closer to what is described here.

Another commonly used term is ‘simulation’. The implication here is that there is a normative pattern of interaction towards which the role players should tend. As such, it is more appropriate to language teaching or psychological training than history teaching. Nevertheless, the defining qualities of simulation offered by Jones, 1982, are useful for the purposes of teaching history:

1. It must have ‘reality of function’, in other words, the participants must step inside the role they have accepted and act accordingly ...
2. The environment is simulated. There is no contact with the real world.
3. A simulation must have a structure. The participants must not pretend or invent. They must have all the facts and information provided for them.

Jones’ fairly rigid conditions (he adds to point 1 ‘there must be no fooling around’—an unnecessarily killjoy approach in my opinion) certainly work well as a starting point, though one could imagine more sophisticated role play where they was scope for pretence and invention on the part of players.

The remainder of the paper will continue to refer to ‘role play’ for the sake of simplicity, within the definitions and restrictions described above.

## Aims of role play

### 1) Skills-based:

a) To accustom students to participating in seminars—There has been a great deal of work on the frustrating dynamics that can all too easily develop in the group context (see Beckham, 2003: 76-7); it would be a most unusual tutor who did not recognise the common difficulties of silence and resistance in the seminar room. Addressing the aim of student participation is particularly important in the first seminar of a series, since behaviour in this seminar sets the pattern for the remainder

of the course (Entwhistle et al., 1992, pp. 41-50; Davis et al., n.d., section 10.2). Role play, because of its unexpected and compulsorily participatory nature, has the potential to start things positively and to prevent undesirable group dynamics from crystallising.

b) To establish the pattern that all seminars are, to a certain extent, an intellectual ‘game’—It can take a while to become assured that the tutor will regard a student at least as highly for refining an initial opinion in the course of discussion as for saying something ‘clever’ at the outset. Students often fail to appreciate the provisional nature of seminar discussion, and hence remain too shy to speak. Such students do not understand that ideas can be exchanged and critiqued without their approbation or disapprobation being taken personally. Some even find it hard to understand or accept the non-personal engagement of the role play set-up (van Ments, 1983: 122-4 and personal observation). Nevertheless, role play offers a more obvious possibility for students literally to play a part in a seminar if that part takes the form of an adopted persona. Role play provides the safety of a mask, sheltering behind which the student can try out ideas and arguments (Porter Ladousse, 1987: 7; van Ments, 1983: 24-5).

Porter Ladousse (1987: 11) suggests a debriefing discussion of the feelings engendered by participation in role play, asking students to evaluate their position on a spectrum of ‘natural’ to ‘embarrassed’. She reports that the variety of responses to this question always astonishes class members, who tend to expect everyone to feel the same as them. This exercise could provide a good link into talking about seminar participation in general and how it functions.

## 2) Understanding-based:

a) To develop generic historical understanding—Defining role play carefully allows one to think through fairly precisely what generic skills it exercises. Elements of generic understanding mentioned by the QAA History Benchmark statement that might be fostered in part through role play include (iii) Independence of mind, and initiative; (iv) Ability to work with others, and have respect for others’ reasoned views; (v) Ability to gather, organise and deploy evidence ... ; (vi) Analytical ability, and the capacity to consider and solve problems ... ; (x) Empathy and imaginative insight (Fletcher et al, 2000).

Of these, (iii), (iv) and (x) are the skills most obviously involved in role play. Experiencing historical processes through role play

challenges both analytical and imaginative attitudes more effectively than reading or listening to lectures (van Ments, 1983: 23). The process also enables the student ‘to cope with the idea of uncertainty’ (*ibid.*), a vital step in weaning students from the idea that the answers are at the back of the book.

Role play is an interesting technique in that it offers the possibility to go beyond trivial empathy involving personal experience as it is often interpreted in schools (for example, ‘what it felt like to be in the Blitz’), and instead employs empathy as a route into thinking about historical processes.

b) To develop specific HTSM understanding—Role play might help with the very specific ‘corrective’ aspect of the HTSM Benchmark Supplement to the History Benchmark Statement (Gooday et al, 2002). This emphasises the need to challenge students’ assumptions about science, such as those of the internality of scientific ‘progress’, the epistemologically self-evident existence of ‘fact’ and the ‘purity’ of the ‘scientific method’ (for a recent survey of contemporary historiography in HSTM see Golinski, 1998). Graeme Gooday has outlined in his paper (Gooday, 2003) a list of ways in which students of HTSM should ‘develop an understanding of HSTM as consisting of multifaceted processes’, and all of these are consonant with the aim of role play within HTSM.

My own use of role play took place within the context of a course on literature and science, delivered to groups mostly consisting of English Literature undergraduates. Humanities students often suffer from science-phobia, feeling that science is something too ‘clever’ for them, a closed book upon which they could never knowledgeably comment. This role play was specifically designed to show that a minimal grasp of technicalities is easy, and most importantly that the social dimensions of science, upon which they *can* easily comment, are in fact a central part of the scientific process. I deliberately picked a debate (global warming) with which students were vaguely familiar but whose outcome is not yet certain, so that students were not tempted to retreat to ‘fact’ as an explanans for events.

The unpredictable linguistic features of role play (Porter Ladousse, 1987: 6) were also useful in the context of a course on science and literature. In character, students naturally used different language to describe the same phenomena. Derogatory or technical terms could be applied, depending on their perspective. This feature also proved a

useful starting point for discussion, bearing in mind recent work on the power of language and metaphor not only to reflect but also to shape science (Beer, 2000).

## Setting it up

Van Ments (1983), Porter Ladousse (1987) and Yardley-Matwiejczuk (1997) all give useful general advice about the set-up, running and debriefing of role play. All sources are agreed upon the importance of three stages in the process: preparation, running and debriefing.

In the context of preparation, van Ments (1983: 82-3) stresses the importance of not giving emotionally-loaded descriptions to the characters, but rather allowing the students to develop this aspect of their role from factual details. This may be more important if the aim of the role play is particularised empathy, which is not the case in a history class. He also suggests some possible ways around the inevitable problem that the number in the class does not match the number of characters in the role play. These include ‘doubling’ characters (two students per role—the strategy I have used thus far) or writing a committee into the scenario, whose numbers can be flexible (which I plan to try next time). There are also issues to consider regarding role assignment—whether or not genders of roles and players should be matched, or natural temperaments to fictional characters. My own strategy, given the first, participatory, aim of the exercise, has been to assign roles completely at random, allowing students to swap if they feel extremely uncomfortable with their lot.

Another key element of writing the scenario, according to at least one commentator, is the importance of allowing players to affect the outcome of the role play (van Ments, 1983: 110). There is room for debate here. Yardley-Matwiejczuk states that ‘if you have a highly circumspect goal ... a role play that has already been predetermined or highly scripted (a closed role play) is likely to be useful, certainly as a starting point’ (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997: 107; see also p. 140, points 4-6). Although Yardley-Matwiejczuk is discussing role play in relation to interventionist psychological goals, her point may also stand with regard to the HTSM historiographical goals of this exercise; role play in this particular instance was intended to make a circumspect point about the social contingency of scientific development. Again, this highlights how the exercise was closer to a simulation or sociodrama than role play as commonly understood. Nevertheless, it struck me that allowing students

to alter the outcome of the scenario would make this point even more clearly, and so I have written this possibility into the latest draft.

Debriefing is just as important as the role play itself. Most authors agree that the period allowed for this should be at least as long as the scenario (van Ments, 1983: 131). The questions must be pitched carefully to bridge between what the participants experienced and the point(s) that the tutor wishes to make. The first time I did this, I pitched the questions at much too high a level. Besides addressing the HTSM aims of the exercise, a discussion of the exercise itself might also be used to help students reflect upon its two skills-based aims.

## Does it work?

### 1) Skills-based:

a) To accustom students to participating in seminars—Here, I felt that the exercise was helpful. Some students found themselves speaking before they realised it, and the pattern stuck for the year. In their module evaluation forms, students have consistently highlighted a dramatic improvement in their speaking skills, and informal verbal feedback has described the groups as having livelier than average discussion. I think the role play was an important starting point for this. How would one *prove* that this exercise encourages a predisposition to speak up in seminars generally? Each group is so different it is virtually impossible to imagine an empirically valid answer to this question. (It is also ironic that this is the answer one instinctively wants when the exercise was designed to highlight the socially contingent nature of scientific experiment.)

The set-up, running and debriefing of a role play all contribute to the sense of productive involvement on the part of students, and hence to their participation in future seminars. The next evolutionary stage in the global warming role play will be to add one or two points at which the story bifurcates, so that the class actually decides which path things take. This additional sense of empowerment, besides making even more strongly the point about historical contingency, should create additional motivation for participation if van Ments is correct.

b) To establish the pattern that all seminars are, to a certain extent, an intellectual ‘game’—A small minority of students found it very hard to play along with the global warming role play, and to dissociate their characters’ opinions from their own. These same students found it



difficult to take an objective stance on books throughout the year. For instance, when Emily was asked “Do you think Jack London intended his readers to think of the dogs in *The Call of the Wild* as immoral or amoral?” (having first explored the meaning of those terms) she replied, “No, I don’t think you should fight or steal—that is wrong”. This highly subjective response was, I suggest, related to her failure to realise that she was not being called upon to form personal judgements for which she was morally responsible. (I am assuming here that all academics would agree that seminars are intellectual games: that although all academics would desire their students to exercise personal or moral responsibility on some level it can be displaced to outside of the *content* of seminar discussion. This assumption might, however be open to a rather interesting debate.).

Yet my hunch was that the exercise was helpful: that it loosened up the groups for the remainder of the year. Again, it is difficult to see how one would prove this, in other words that the role play enabled at least some students to make the leap into non-personal criticism. And, of course, it would take more than a single role play to allay students’ fear of being personally on the line in seminars; a consistently supportive atmosphere must be developed.

## 2) Understanding-based

a) Generic historical understanding—There was no doubt in my mind that the role play exercised the generic skills outlined above and did so, moreover, in an enjoyable manner. During the role play itself students exercised initiative in developing their characters, often in a very entertaining way; in character, they were required to respond to others’ views and to act empathetically and imaginatively. During the debriefing, students gathered, organised and deployed evidence from the play in order to answer questions, exercising analytical ability in order to consider and solve the questions posed.

The success of role play in this respect might lead one to wonder how much of a history course (including HTSM courses) might be based upon role play. A fictional role play such as this is clearly of limited use for any substantive knowledge-based learning. An exception to this might be a course significantly devoted to historiography, where more reflexive questions might be raised concerning what kind of things can be learned about history from role play, and to what extent the role play was a good model for actual historical processes. In the context of psychology, Yardley-Matwiejczuk claims that role play lays bare tacit

epistemological assumptions in psychological research and hence ‘offer(s) tools with which to facilitate ... reflexive scrutiny’ (Yardley-Matwiejczuk 1997: 5; for different epistemological interpretations of role play see pp. 9-14). Can the same thing be said for history? The global warming role play implicitly proceeds along the lines of interest theory; students might discuss to what extent its emphasis on agency and intentionality is valid, and explore other ways of writing historical role play. It strikes me that a total rejection of role play’s epistemological validity is a very interesting (and somewhat defeatist) claim, echoing Feyerabend’s statement that history is too complex for the best methodologist to imagine.

b) Specific HTSM understanding—Debriefing my students yielded some encouraging remarks, such as “I never realised that so many people can influence the direction science takes”; “I hadn’t really thought before about the human aspect of science” and “I guess I thought facts were somehow more obvious”. By the time of their first essays, some seven weeks later, however, they were making all the usual assumptions: that ‘literature’ (or in some cases, ‘the author’) is parasitic upon ‘science’, and that the most interesting or useful critique of the literature of science is whether or not the writer got the science ‘right’.

I am sure that this disappointing long-term result was not inevitable. Largely, I suspect, it stemmed from a failure to continue building on the insights students derived from the initial session. An ongoing role play, such as that used by Fincher and Utting (n.d.) might be one way to sustain the HSTM perspective. The nature of the syllabus also made it difficult for students in this instance, who for their first set text were implicitly required to take the insights from a contemporary perspective back to the early days of the Royal Society and *Gulliver’s Travels*. I suspect that the historical context was too alien to allow a translation of their previous perceptions.

This raises a question about the possibility of using ‘non-fictional’ role plays to delve into non-contemporary STM. There are few such role plays in existence, notably some inspired by Brecht’s treatment of Galileo (Allchin, 2000). What are the differences between fictional and ‘real’ (or reality-based) role plays such as the Galileo examples? The latter group forecloses the historiographical questions outlined in the previous section, arguably giving a misleading impression that it accurately captures the mechanics of historical contingency. Its chief value, therefore, lies perhaps in knowledge-based rather than

understanding-based outcomes. Students are familiarised with historical material and (with careful tutor critique) modes of argument—both of which, of course, are very valuable outcomes.

## Conclusion

Role play is definitely one useful way to work on important skills-based desiderata in both history and HSTM. Its value as an understanding-based historical and historiographical exercise is subject to some caveats, both theoretical and practical. Nevertheless, it has value in making a lively point about the social embeddedness of science. One might ask whether these outcomes should be assessed. On one hand, assessment should be consonant with the desired learning outcomes (Ramsden, 1992: 123-4); if role play is a good way to develop these, it would appear also to be a sensible assessment method. On the other hand, the entertainment value of the exercise would certainly be diminished were students anxious about their marks. Students' behaviour, both in acting and analysis, would almost certainly become more conservative and constrained. The possibility of assessing role play is discussed by Jarvis and Cain (2003).

One might also ask to what extent the specific understanding aims of role play in HSTM might apply to other students, such as STM undergraduates and even school children, whether in the context of a science or humanities-based curriculum. STM undergraduates are less likely to need affirmation that they can follow scientific details, but are just as likely to need encouragement to think of science as a social process. Role play might also perform both these functions in the proposed AS Level 'Perspectives in Science'. A common use of role play in non-HSTM academia is to encourage students to think about the ethical or social significance of their subjects (AAS, n.d.; Alden, 2000; Epstein, 1997; Sutcliffe, 2000). Thus role play can be seen as a way for scientists and non-scientists alike to see the social dimensions of science. For scientists this might be a prompt to consider applied questions of ethics and generally to motivate study through an appreciation of the discipline's social impact; this also holds for HSTM students with the additional function of offering a route into historical—and perhaps historiographical—understanding of science. It suggests a natural connection between the teaching of science and HSTM, a welcome possibility in the context of curriculum development and the Science Wars.

## Bibliography

- AAS, 'The Calcivirus Controversy: A Role Play', (Australian Academy of Science, n.d.) last modified: n.d.; accessed: 23 April 2003, location: <http://www.science.org.au/nova/001/001act05.htm>
- Alden, Dave, 'A Role Play for Environmental Economics', (Department of Economics, University of Melbourne, 2000) last modified: 12 July 2002; accessed: 23 April 2003; location: <http://www.economics.unimelb.edu.au/TLdevelopment/roleplay.htm>
- Allchin, Douglas, 'Retrying Galileo', (Resource Center for Science Teachers using Sociology, History and Philosophy of Science, 2000) last modified: 15 Oct 2000; accessed 23 April 2003, location: <http://www1.umn.edu/ships/modules/galileo.htm>
- Beckham, Rosemary, 'A Preliminary Report of Group Learning/Teaching in the Culture of Religious Studies', *PRS-LTSN Journal* 2 (2003): 73-166.
- Beer, Gillian, *Darwin's Plots*, 2nd edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)
- Davis, Barbara Gross, Lynn Wood and Robert C. Wilson, 'A Berkeley Compendium of Suggestions for Teaching with Excellence', last modified: n.d.; accessed 18 June 2003; location: <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/compendium/>
- Entwistle, Noel, Sheila Thompson and Hilary Tait, *Guidelines for Promoting Effective Learning in Higher Education*, (University of Edinburgh: Centre for Research on Learning and Instruction, 1992)
- Epstein, Richard, *The Case of the Killer Robot: Stories About the Professional, Ethical, and Societal Dimensions of Computing*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997)
- Fletcher, A. et al, *History Benchmark Statement*, Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2000, 12pp
- Fincher, Sally and Ian Utting, *Entraining Students in Professional Issues: Challenging their structures of Knowledge*, (n.d.), (Unpublished: Computing Laboratory, University of Kent)
- Golinski, Jan, *Making Natural Knowledge: Constructivism and the History of Science*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998)
- Gooday, Graeme, 'U-rated not X-rated: reassessing how science students could benefit from learning history of science' last modified September 23 2003, accessed February 9 2004, location: [http://www.prs-ltsn.leeds.ac.uk/hist\\_science/articles/urated.html](http://www.prs-ltsn.leeds.ac.uk/hist_science/articles/urated.html)
- Gooday, Graeme, et al, 'HTSM Benchmark Supplement to the History Benchmark Statement' (version 3.1), last modified: October 10 2002; accessed: 18 June 2003; location:

[http://www.prs-ltsn.leeds.ac.uk/hist\\_science/events/benchmarking\\_31.rtf](http://www.prs-ltsn.leeds.ac.uk/hist_science/events/benchmarking_31.rtf)

Jarvis, Louise and Joe Cain, 'Diversifying Assessment 2: Posters and Oral Presentations in Undergraduate History of Science', *PRS-LTSN Journal* 2 (2003), pp. 50-72.

Jones, Ken, *Simulations in Language Teaching*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982)

Porter Ladousse, Gillian, *Role Play*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)

Ramsden, Paul, *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*, (London: Routledge, 1992)

Sleigh, Charlotte, 'Global Warming Role Play', (Centre for History and Cultural Studies of Science, School of History, University of Kent) last modified: 18 June 2003; location:

<http://www.kent.ac.uk/history/staff/material/sleigh/roleplay.doc>

Sutcliffe, Mark, 'Using Role-Play in teaching Economics', (Economics LTSN, 2000) last modified: September 2002; accessed: 18 June 2003; location:

<http://www.economics.ltsn.ac.uk/handbook/games/>

van Ments, Morry, *The Effective Use of Role-Play: A Handbook for Teachers and Trainers*, (London: Kogan Page, 1983)

Yardley-Matwiejczuk, Krysia M., *Role Play: Theory and Practice*, (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage, 1997)

Article

# **An Electronically Enhanced Philosophical Learning Environment: Who Wants to be Good at Logic?**

---

**Susan A.J. Stuart**

*Department of Philosophy*

*University of Glasgow*

**Margaret I. Brown**

*Department of Computer Science*

*University of Glasgow*

---

## **Abstract**

Over the last academic year we have introduced electronic handsets, like those used on the television show ‘Who wants to be a millionaire?’ (Draper et al. 2002), into the teaching of philosophical logic. Logic lectures can provide quite a formidable challenge for many students, occasionally to the point of making them ill. Our rationale for introducing handsets was threefold: (i) to get the students thinking and talking about the subject in a public environment; (ii) to make them feel secure enough to answer questions in the lectures because the system enabled them to do this anonymously; and (iii) to build their confidence about their learning by their being able to see how they were progressing in relation to the rest of the students in the class. We have achieved all of these and more. Our experience has revealed that the use of handsets encourages a more dynamic form of student interaction in an environment—the lecture—that can, in the wrong hands, be utterly enervating, but they also provide an opportunity for the lecturer to respond to student difficulties at the time when they really matter. In this paper we will discuss our case and why handsets should be introduced, as a model of good pedagogical practice, more widely into the lecturing environment.

## Introduction

Of all the topics taught to undergraduate philosophy students philosophical logic can seem to be the most daunting, and not just for the students. Certainly in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Glasgow<sup>1</sup> many students give every impression of being maths or symbol phobic and are horrified by the very idea of working with something that can look very much like algebra. They inform you of their dread in the preceding tutorials; they pass on greatly embellished 'horror' stories of people who came a cropper in previous years; and then at the end of course in the feedback questionnaires there remains a stalwart few who provide some variation on the theme of "If I had wanted to do Maths, I would have applied for entry to the Science Faculty". It is true that they face a challenge in the classes that lie before them, and the challenge the lecturer faces is, consequently, no less substantial. Not only does the lecturer have to convince the students that this is a subject they can not only enjoy but succeed in, they have also to overcome the hurdle of the students' initial resentment to having to do it in the first place. Thus, as you might imagine, being the lecturer to whom the task of teaching logic has fallen is not a much envied position.<sup>2</sup>

The project that will be described here sprouted from an evaluation study, into the use made by philosophy students of learning resources. In that study we were primarily concerned with three things: (i) finding out which resources offered the best support for good teaching and learning; (ii) carrying out an evaluation of traditional versus non-traditional methods of teaching; and (iii) assessing the relative values of alternative learning resources for teaching formal logic and the acquisition of abstract concepts to non-mathematically oriented students.

Our evaluation of the resources chosen by students followed the model of Integrative Evaluation (Draper et al. 1996), but used as our main instrument 'Resource Questionnaires' (Brown et al. 1996). With this tool we were able to measure, using student self-report, which resources students used at all, how much use they made of them, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Students at the University of Glasgow enter a Faculty rather than a specific Department; they have to do three subjects in their first and second (pre-Honours) years, and thus may be doing Philosophy as a minor class before they go on to Honours in a different subject or taking Philosophy as a necessary component of a three year non-Honours degree. Only 50% of the second year class will intend taking Philosophy to Honours level.

<sup>2</sup> I volunteered; too many students were disillusioned by their experience and I was sure that I could make the comprehension of logic less of an ordeal for them.

how much they valued each one. The resources that we considered included lectures, the recommended course text (Tomassi 1999), student-led and non-student-led tutorial discussion, the use of the Personal Response System (PRS) or handsets (Draper et al. 2002) in lectures, electronic texts and electronic course materials, web resources, access to the lecturer, handouts, the Library, and workshops—though there was a category for ‘Other’ for those students who were ingenious enough to discover a resource we had been unable to discover. The evaluator also observed the lectures on occasions when handsets were being used and on the odd occasion when they were not, and we used the handsets to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of handset use in lectures. Finally, the lecturer provided written and verbal feedback after using the handsets in her lectures.

In this paper we focus only on the use of handsets as a way of creating a more dynamic learning and teaching environment in which students are encouraged to engage with their difficulties and seek to resolve them. Results from the rest of the evaluation are discussed in another paper (Stuart and Brown 2003).

## The Scene

There are about 140 students taking the second year philosophy class, and philosophical logic takes up approximately one third of the total lectures for the course. There are four topics in total in the course and students must answer on three of them in the examination, so logic is not compulsory, though taking it is strongly advised for those students who intend to continue into Honours in Philosophy. The class attendance varies in size from about 70 to 100 students. Some of whom will be, very wisely, hedging their bets and coming along to see if they can get the hang of it and, if they can, have another option in the examination.

The handsets were used in nine out of the twelve lectures. They had not been available in previous years, and on this occasion they were only incorporated into the class at the last minute when the lecturer was encouraged to use them by a colleague who was already successfully employing them in a number of other disciplines (Draper & Brown 2003). With a great deal of previous experience of asking questions about how well they were understanding what was being taught and gleaning responses from the usual few conscientious and vocal students who tend to sit towards the front, the lecturer thought that this kind of device would enable her to provoke an entire class into responding to her



questions. However, the lecturer did worry that the students might think of them as a novelty and become quickly bored with their intrusive use in the class; as we shall see, her anxiety was unfounded.

The handsets are like television remote control devices and are distributed randomly to every student before the lecture begins. The randomness is important since each handset is numbered and if the same student used the same handset each time, it would be possible to trace the individual responses made by that student and the element of anonymity would be lost. Students are asked multiple choice questions, with up to ten possible answers, that they must think about briefly and respond to fairly quickly, and each student transmits the number corresponding to their chosen answer. The answers are then collected via receivers to a laptop which displays, via the room's projection system, a bar chart representing the distribution of the responses. In any one lecture it was possible to ask between two and twelve questions, though it should be added that on top of those questions for which the handsets were used the lecturer also asked quick questions that required a 'hands up' or verbal response. This was especially important since the class was also being (2-way) video-linked to six students at a remote campus<sup>3</sup> and the lecturer did not want those students to feel that this slight difference in provision would make a big difference to their learning. When we used handsets the lecturer asked the students in Crichton to hold up the number of fingers that corresponded to the answer they thought was correct. So their fingers became the equivalent of the numbers 1 to 10 on the handset. When the lecturer asked questions without the use of handsets the lecturer made sure to watch the monitor as well as the people in the lecture room to hear the first correct answer.

The kinds of questions that can be asked vary quite considerably, but typical examples had only two or three possible answers. These were easier to respond to, and more importantly, quicker to ask. Examples included:

- "If the options for the next stage in this proof are MPP or MTT<sup>4</sup>, which one would you choose? Press 1 for MPP. Press 2 for MTT".

---

<sup>3</sup> Crichton Campus, a remote campus of the University of Glasgow at Dumfries.

<sup>4</sup> MPP is an abbreviation for *Modus Ponendo Ponens* and means to affirm the antecedent; thus if you have two propositions: 'If A then B', and A, then you can conclude B. MTT is an abbreviation for *Modus Tollendo Tollens* and means to deny the consequent; thus if you have two propositions: 'If A then B', and you have the denial of B, you can then conclude the denial of A.

- “Do you understand this proof?: Press 1 for ‘Yes’. Press 2 for ‘No’.”
- “How would you categorise this statement? Press 1 for ‘Tautology’. Press 2 for ‘Contingency’. Press 3 for ‘Inconsistency’.”

The lecturer did also occasionally ask questions that required a “verbal answer” and then asked the rest of class if they agreed or disagreed, using the handsets to record their response. This had the benefit of being interactive in two ways and worked well once the class had become comfortable with one another and with the handsets. This style of questioning also gave them slightly longer to think about their own answer and the chance to revise their initial response in the light of the answer that had already been given.<sup>5</sup>

Once in a while the lecturer asked more complex questions about how well the class felt they were understanding material and, although these sorts of questions were time-consuming and the responses subjective, they were informative enough to provoke her to redirect her teaching. The most interesting of these questions was one in which the lecturer asked them to give her their responses to each one of the ten rules of logic<sup>6</sup> they had been taught. They had three possible choices:

- Press 1. for “Dead easy”
- Press 2. for “Difficult but I’m getting there”
- Press 3. for “Dastardly”

The general results were that over a third of the class (39%) found none of them “Dastardly”; that only two students found none of them “Dead Easy”; and only one student found 9 of them “Dastardly”—the exception here was the Double Negation rule which he found “Difficult, but I’m getting there”. However, the most astonishing thing that the lecturer’s question revealed was that many of the students found Disjunctive Syllogism (DS) more difficult to

---

<sup>5</sup> We discovered that quite quickly the students were in a position to identify the usual people giving the verbal responses and gauge their own follow-up responses on the consistency of their responses. So this method became one that could be used only when the conscientious responders were not present, which was very rare, or when they had been asked not to be the first to answer, something I did not like to do because it might stifle their enthusiasm.

<sup>6</sup> We had by this stage covered the rules of Assumption, Double Negation, MPP, MTT, &-introduction, &-elimination, v-introduction, Disjunctive Syllogism, v-elimination, and Conditional Proof.

comprehend than V-Elimination (VE). 21.4% of the 56 students who recorded all ten votes found DS more difficult than VE. This was completely unexpected. Disjunctive Syllogism is by far the simpler of the two rules—even, possibly, to the untrained eye, as you might try below. DS states that if you have P or Q and you don't have P, then you have to have Q, and vice versa.

### Disjunctive Syllogism (DS)

The rule of Disjunctive Syllogism states that

given a disjunction:

$$P \vee Q$$

and the negation of one of the disjuncts:

$$\frac{\neg Q}{P}$$

we can conclude the other disjunct:

$$P$$

VE states that if Q or P follows from a disjunction of, for example, P or Q, then, because you cannot tell which of P or Q separately or P and Q together it is derived from you must take P by itself and prove Q or P and then take Q by itself and prove Q or P. That way you cannot derive Q or P invalidly.

### V-Elimination (VE)

The rule of Disjunction or V-Elimination states that

given a disjunction:

$$P \vee Q$$

and a conclusion:

$$Q \vee P$$

we must derive the conclusion from each of the disjuncts separately.

Thus our proof becomes:

1	(1)	$P \vee Q$	Assumption
2	(2)	P	Assumption
2	(3)	$Q \vee P$	2 VI (V-introduction)
4	(4)	Q	Assumption
4	(5)	$Q \vee P$	4 VI
1	(6)	$Q \vee P$	1, 2, 3, 4, 5 VE

(The assumptions at lines 2 & 4 are discharged leaving the conclusion  $Q \vee P$  dependent only on the premise  $P \vee Q$  at line 1.)

The students' reversal of the difficulty of the two rules was not something the lecturer would have anticipated—perhaps it appeared just deceptively simple and they were reluctant to believe that it could be so easy—but by using the handsets, to enable them to answer questions

without the fear of looking ridiculous, the lecturer had the opportunity to go back and adapt her teaching to address a topic that she would not have expected needed to be addressed, at the time that the students needed it. Any other year the lecturer would have had to spend time analysing their examination performance and, on condition that each class of students has exactly the same problems, which in fact we know they do not, act the following year with the benefit of hindsight.

## The Benefits of Handsets

One of the essential features of the use of this equipment is that both the students and the lecturer get to know the distribution of responses and, in confidence, how their own response relates to that distribution. The element of anonymity encourages everyone to contribute and, unlike in face to face discussion, each individual can express the choice they incline to rather than the choice they would feel able to explain and justify to others. In other words they provide the student with the ideal circumstances under which they can try out their responses to questions without any fear of embarrassment if their answer turns out not to be right. This selection of student comments confirms this:

- The anonymity allows the student to show they're unsure of the subject without embarrassing themselves.
- It's anonymous—tend to be more honest! Also can compare answer to other people's which can be very reassuring!
- Compensates for lack of confidence, provides anonymity.
- Encourages us to participate; more likely we will listen this way.
- People answer more willingly.
- Students see how well they understand the material and compare their progress with others.
- Easier to hold attention. Fun!

When students were asked their opinion of the usefulness of handsets in their lectures, 77% rated them useful / very useful / extremely useful.

What we have, then, is a new resource that changes the form of a very old resource, the lecture. Traditionally lectures have been a period of time in which the student is a passive auditor and is being provided with knowledge from the person addressing them at the front. During the lecture students can drift in and out of awareness of what is being

said, and a reflection of this drift can be seen in the recurrent patchiness of most student lecture notes. However, even in an apparently excellent interactive lecture, where the lecturer is attempting to engage the attention of the students by asking questions, there will be just a few students who actually speak with the rest keeping quiet, and consequently, the state of understanding of most of the class remains, at least, reasonably opaque until the examination has come and gone. But, where handsets are being used effectively—engaging the best students along with those who might be struggling—they facilitate an interaction between students and lecturer that keeps the students thinking and concentrating on the material throughout the lecture.<sup>7</sup>

In informal interviews several students had said that they were more likely to try and work out the answer to a question if handsets were being used. So, towards the end of the course we asked all students in the class if looking back over the course when they were given a problem to work out in a lecture, were they more likely to work out the answer if they were asked to answer verbally, “hands up” or using handsets. The result of this question which was asked using handsets is shown in Fig. 1.

Question number	Option	% of students who voted for each option
1	the class was asked for a verbal response	0%
2	the class was asked to vote on one or more answers by putting their hand up	2%
3	the class was asked to vote on one or more answers using the handsets	32%
4	none of the above (i.e. I never try to work out an answer)	6%

<sup>7</sup> To encourage student-student interaction students were occasionally asked to answer a question without thinking about it for too long; they were then were asked to discuss it with their neighbour and answer it again. The shift towards a greater number giving the right answer on the second attempt was sometimes quite extraordinary, and it seems that the students who had a better grasp of the subject were able to convince their neighbour to change their mind and vote differently the second time. This is certainly one way to promote discussion of a subject like logic that most students would prefer to avoid.

Susan Stuart and Margaret Brown—**An Electronically Enhanced Philosophical Learning Environment: Who Wants to be Good at Logic**

5	all of the above (i.e. I always try to work an answer out)	28%
6	1 and 2 (i.e. verbal and hands up but not handsets)	2%
7	1 and 3 (i.e. verbal and handsets, but not hands up)	4%
8	2 and 3 (i.e. hands up and handsets, but not verbal)	26%

Fig. 1 Preferred method of answering questions in a lecture

Such results can only be interpreted as the students enjoying the interactive nature of the lectures, with their responses providing us with an overwhelming endorsement of the use of handsets to engage students and keep their attention. And, if they are more likely to work out the answer when they are using handsets, then this can only benefit their learning.

One of the most interesting things to come out of this study was that if the students were to answer the questions in ways that would be beneficial to them, that is, if they are not just to guess, then they have to reflect more on what they have learnt and how they are learning. A number of students reported that this was indeed the case when handsets were used, but also that when they could see how well they were doing they felt much more confident about what, up to then, they had only thought they knew. It was also clear that the opportunity for students to think about their answers and discuss them with their neighbour also made a difference to their understanding. It seems likely that this was the result of having to generate arguments for and against alternative answers. There is no doubt that having to do this is a powerful promoter of learning, and unquestionably beneficial to the development of critical thinking skills. The conclusion here can only be that this is an excellent way in which to carry out formative assessment. And, of course, if this formative assessment is working well, the students will be in a strong position to let the lecturer know about the gaps in their knowledge, enabling the lecturer to turn their attention to what the students say they need, rather than what they think they need. Which, in turn, means that the lecturer is much less likely to try to second-guess or make unwarranted assumptions about the students' progress. However, none of this is valuable unless the lecturer is flexible enough to respond to the changing requirements of the class; an adaptability described rather aptly, since it is so far from the traditional idea of delivering a

lecture and leaving the room, by Draper & Brown 2003 as 'contingent teaching'.

## A Contrasting Case

But, before we finish with only positive conclusions, we should mention the one or two problems that we encountered. The handsets, along with their infra-red receivers (and we needed three for the size of the lecture room), the visualiser or OHP, two screens (one to show the numbers of the handsets of those students who had successfully transmitted and recorded their vote<sup>8</sup> and one to show the question), and the PRS software on the lecture theatre computer, were all necessary and, unless you have a lecture theatre that is already fully equipped for PRS use, setting up can be a time-consuming job at the beginning of a lecture, or even in the ten minute break between lectures. The only complaint we had from students in the Logic lectures was that the time to set the system up and running did occasionally eat into the lecture time and, if the lecturer started even though things were not quite ready, they found the setting-up that was going on around her disruptive. However, on the one occasion that there were significant difficulties setting up the equipment they were local to the design of the particular lecture theatre and not PRS. The ideal situation would be one in which lecture theatres had the system built in to its functioning, so they could be used at very short notice by anyone taking a class in the room.

The only other problem that the lecturer experienced in the use of handsets was when she decided to try them out in a first year Philosophy of Mind lecture. The experience was not positive. The lecturer had too much material to get through with the class on that day and reported having felt herself becoming tense when there was a hold up getting the PRS system to work. Even more unfortunately the lecturer had not taken the handsets into account properly and had not realised that the sorts of questions she would be able to ask would be very different from the rather clear-cut questions that can be asked in a logic class. As a result she asked enormously subjective questions like "Do you feel that you have understood Behaviourism?", and found herself in the position of not being able to offer more clarity because of the limited amount of time available. This time limit also meant that she failed to

---

<sup>8</sup> Students had only to check the number on the back of the particular handset they had picked from the box that day and look at the screen to see if their vote had been transmitted and recorded.

discuss the voting with the students or even leave the charts up for long enough for them to look at. But when the students were asked if they had enjoyed using the handsets they looked rather non-plussed but gallantly replied ‘Yes’.

## Conclusions

Students report that lectures are an important resource in logic and this is borne out by the examination results where we compared attenders with non-attenders. The lowest score for attenders was 30% and the highest score was 100%; the lowest score for non-attenders was 5% and the highest score was 95%, with a cluster of lower scores also being from the non-attenders. From the lecturer’s perspective handsets are an important new tool, especially in larger classes where it can be impossible to get everyone to respond. The lecturer can obtain immediate feedback about what the students think they know and understand and, subsequently, they can redirect their teaching based on what the students feel weak on rather than on what they predict the students will find difficult. The students in the logic class did not regard the handsets as a novelty, become bored with them and find them intrusive. The students in the Philosophy of Mind class did not have the opportunity to become bored with them and, if the lecturer had thought more carefully about the sorts of information she had wanted from them, they would not have had the opportunity to think of them as intrusive. The lecturer has no doubt that if she had taken time and planned ahead on that occasion, she would have learnt a great deal which would have helped her pitch her lectures and address or re-address aspects of the course that, by now, she had begun to take for granted.

Even with the problems we have mentioned it is possible to conclude that using handsets competently in lectures does engage students and encourages a much more dynamic form of student-lecturer and student-student interaction. Handsets enable all students, weak and strong, to think, to answer (anonymously) and get immediate feedback on their knowledge and understanding. They can see how well they are doing in relation to others and they report feeling more confident about what, up to then, they only thought they knew. If this tool is to be really helpful to the students they must reflect more on what they have learnt and how they are learning. We have found that they do. Using handsets has made it possible to provide an interesting and exciting way for students to gain some insight into their progress and, in this particular



case, to develop the critical thinking skills that are fundamental to thinking philosophically.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the LTSN Philosophy and Religious Studies Subject Centre, University of Leeds, for the mini-project funding with which we have carried out this work. We would also like to thank Dr Steve Draper<sup>9</sup> from the Department of Psychology, University of Glasgow, for his ideas, assistance and encouragement. In addition we would also like to acknowledge the GRUMPS<sup>10</sup> project for giving us permission to use their handsets.

## Bibliography

- Brown, M.I., Doughty, G.F., Draper, S.W., Henderson, F.P., & McAteer, E., 'Measuring Learning Resource Use', *Computers and Education* **27**, pp103–113, 1996
- Draper, S.W., Brown, M.I., Henderson, F.P., McAteer E., 'Integrative evaluation: An emerging role for classroom studies of CAL', *Computers and Education* **26**, no1-3, pp17-32, 1996
- Draper, S.W., Cargill, J., & Cutts, Q., 'Electronically enhanced classroom interaction' *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, **18**, no. 1, pp13-23, 2002. Also available at <http://staff.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/ilig/handsets.html>
- Draper, S.W. & Brown, M.I., 'Increasing Interactivity in Lectures Using an Electronic Voting System', 2003, (Under Review)
- Stuart, S.A.J. & Brown, M.I., 'An Evaluation of Learning Resources in the Teaching of Formal Philosophical Methods', 2003 (Under Review)
- Tomassi, P., *Logic*, (Routledge Kegan Paul, 1999)

---

<sup>9</sup> For a fine array of other handset use see: <http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/ilig/>

<sup>10</sup> GRUMPS is an acronym for Generic Remote User Measurement Production System. GRUMPS is a EPSRC-DIM funded project in GU developing techniques and software to collect, manage and analyse large collections of user action data.

Documents: <http://grumps.dcs.gla.ac.uk/>

Discussion

## **The Finished Product: Four Skills to Help You Graduate Your PhD Student on Time**

---

**Judith R. Wester**

*University of Wolverhampton*

---

### Introduction

**H**aving recently completed my PhD studies and received my award within the target period set by my funding body and my university, I was asked to give feedback on what I thought were traits a good supervisor should have by the Associate Dean of Postgraduate Studies at my university. I was not asked for feedback because I had an easy well-formed research project or trouble-free supervisory relationship. On the contrary, not only was my initial supervision strained and frustrating, I also chose an extremely complex, ambitious and at times unyielding research project fraught with ethical issues. So how did 'we' end up with the finished product on time? I say 'we' because at the end of the day I could not have finished on schedule without the aid of a most patient and gracious supervisor.

Since I had two supervisors over the course of my research, one I perceived as having 'good' skills and one I perceived as having 'bad' skills, I will contrast and compare a 'good' supervisory experience with a 'bad' one. This is not to say that one supervisor is a 'good' person and the other is a 'bad' person. There may have been a variety of reasons for these perceptions to develop. In fact, the supervisor I perceived as being 'bad' was perceived by another supervisee as being 'good'. So how could this happen? How could the same supervisor be perceived as having both 'good' and 'bad' supervisory skills? In order to untangle this conundrum I will begin by explaining four skills or qualities of good supervision and give examples of 'good' and 'bad' supervisory feedback. These skills are:

- 1) The ability to *educe* rather than dictate knowledge
- 2) The ability to give positive and specific feedback that is useful

Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies

**Volume 3, No. 2, Spring 2004, pp. 161-172**

© Copyright PRS-LTSN, 2004

- 3) Having a positive vision of the future and pacing the student to that end
- 4) Knowing when to admit that you are the wrong supervisor for a particular student and helping the student to make the transition to a new supervisor in a positive way

## 1. First is the basic ability to elicit or educe rather than dictate knowledge.

This is part of an ancient technique utilised by Socrates known as the ‘Socratic Method’. It was essentially a way of ‘educing’ knowledge that the individual student already possessed without knowing that s/he did so. Socrates attempted to demonstrate that the most important ideas (such as truth, beauty, justice) are already in our minds. The task of education, on this view, is to *educ*—to draw out our intrinsic knowledge so we can apply it more adequately to our lives and our research. His method also includes a probing and incisive cross-examination style. Additionally, an important corollary for Socrates was the injunction, ‘Know Thyself’. There is nothing more essential for a person to know than his or her own mind or soul. For these and other reasons, Socrates has remained an inspiration for those who would include the human mind as the primary challenge to be conquered by intellectual activity, which is often reflected in one’s choice of research and research methods.

When I first began my PhD research I was overwhelmed with the vast amount of material I had to wade through in order to make any sense of my research question. In fact, I was not totally clear on the very question or topic I was attempting to explore. Nevertheless, I found this to be very typical for many researchers in their first year of study. Although attempting to be helpful, my ‘bad’ supervisor began to dictate what I should be doing in my research, how I should be doing it, and when I should be doing it in order to stay on ‘target’. She even began to give me references that she believed would be helpful to me, even though I was not ready to engage with them. Nevertheless, we both found our supervisions frustrating and unproductive. She complained that she did not feel that I was listening to her, while I felt that she was not at all interested in my project. On the other hand, my ‘good’ supervisor (whom I met in my second year) asked me questions designed to draw out my reasons for choosing my research project; and would often cross-examine my modes of inquiry. What was my interest in this project? Why did I want to look at it in a particular way? Did I feel that

by doing things in a particular way that I was achieving what I wanted? Did I feel that I was being productive with my time? What type of problems was I having that I believed she could help me with? What did I want to gain from my supervision time with her? I felt that she put me in the driver's seat of my own research and then held me accountable for my work. As a result, I always felt my time in supervision was highly worthwhile. I often came away with useful references and a feeling of empowerment that I could overcome whatever obstacles I was encountering.

## **2. The second trait of a good supervisor is the ability to give positive and specific feedback that is useful**

This type of feedback is particularly important with regard to written material. Academic writing is a skill that must be developed over time. The more one writes, edits, and reviews, the better one can get. Nevertheless, the first stages of writing a PhD thesis can be very painful, especially to those for whom English is a second language. Almost every postgraduate starts off feeling insecure about their ability to write sufficiently at this level. I once came across a student sitting at his desk in a complete slump. When I enquired as to his solemnity he pulled a book from his shelf and handed it to me. 'I can't write like this', he moaned, 'I'll never get a PhD'. I examined the book carefully and handed it back to him. The man who had written the book was a Professor Emeritus in his early 60s who had already published over 25 books and numerous articles. He was well-known in his field, yet the student felt he had to produce writing and research that was of the same quality. I suggested to the student that if he had the opportunity to do so he may want to take a look at the Professor's PhD thesis in its original form before he passed so strong a judgement on his own postgraduate level writing.

We all seek models, guides, teachers, who will show us the 'correct' way to do things. Going back to the Socratic Method, however, Socrates would argue that we are our own worst critics and best teachers. My written work in my first year was admittedly tenuous and even haphazard. I often dreaded turning it in and worse, feared the feedback. My 'bad' supervisor once wrote on my written work "*this is so unscholarly it is hard to take seriously*". I was crushed—it was worse than I thought. However, my initial reaction was one of self-defence. I wanted to know, specifically, what was so 'unscholarly' about it? Was she saying I was a

rubbish researcher? I took the words very personally and it was two months before I let her see anything else I had written.

On the other hand my 'good' supervisor never wrote a single negative thing on anything of mine she read. Nor did she write anything positive either. Instead she would guide me through the written work with ticks placed by specific paragraphs. The tick meant we were to discuss the paragraph, nothing more. She would then ask me questions about anything she did not understand. Why had I discussed this concept in this particular way? What did I mean by that? Which scholar's work was I referring to? If I gave a verbal explanation that she thought sounded better than what I had written she would suggest I rewrite the paragraph using my new description. If I had written something well, she might say: 'This paragraph is a perfect example of summarisation, it is very well written and you may want to use it as a model for your other concluding paragraphs'. In this way, I was able to use my own work for self-correction, improvement, and as a 'perfect' model for future writing. Additionally, she would give me questions to ask myself as I wrote, which I posted on my computer to help me improve my academic writing. I always left her office feeling good about my writing and my ability to self-improve. One day she handed me back my written work with the words, 'Well done, this chapter is perfect as it is'. It was the last chapter of my thesis.

### **3. The third trait of a good supervisor is to have a positive vision of the future and pace the student to that end**

It was Goethe who said 'Treat people as if they are what they ought to be and help them to become what they are capable of being'. A good supervisor knows that his/her real work lays in helping to establish a positive future for their students, which in turn leads to a better educational institution, community, nation, and world. At the PhD level, the dissemination of knowledge produced within an institution has the potential to be vast and the influence great. Politicians, policy-makers and world leaders often rely on knowledge produced by their nation's academics. Individual research may affect only one other individual or it could affect many. To this end, the supervisor should have a vision of what is to come and prepare the student for what s/he is *becoming*. What is to come by a particular deadline is the production of a completed thesis and a viva voce exam, both of which require a student to be diligent and prepared. What the student is *becoming* is a valued academic with important skills and knowledge to contribute to his/her society.

Therefore, this individual should be treated with respect for the accomplishments s/he has achieved at each level of research and study.

Going back to the first two instances of good supervision, I gave the example of educating knowledge from the student about their basic intentions or reasons for doing their proposed research. Through negotiation and good communication the supervisor and student can determine if the goal of the research is achievable within the timeframe that is set. Nevertheless the supervisor, as well as the student, may be required to take a ‘leap of faith’ with research carried out in ‘uncharted waters’. The vision I had of my own research was somewhat innovative. The ‘bad’ supervisor determined it was ‘over-ambitious’ and ‘too risky’, but she had failed to grasp my underlying intentions for doing the research. In other words, she did not know what motivated me. By using her own basic supervisory standards, she simply determined that what I wanted to do could not be done in the required amount of time. Furthermore, half-way into my third year our supervisory relationship had become so negative and haphazard we agreed that my second supervisor would replace her as my principal and she would no longer supervise my project. On the other hand, the ‘good’ supervisor had questioned my research intentions at our first meeting and kept doing so throughout the project. She noted that my passion for the project grew rather than dwindled with each new piece of data I analysed. Her faith in my ability to complete never faltered, no matter how ambitious the project seemed to be on the surface, and as a result I finished five months ahead of the deadline set by my funding institution.

So what was the primary difference between the two supervisors and my relationship with each? To put it simply, *trust*. The ‘bad’ supervisor did not attempt to discover my underlying intentions and motivations for doing the research I chose to undertake—reasons I may not have been aware of myself at the time. Nor did she develop any sense of ‘faith’ in my capabilities for completing the project. She constantly tried to direct my work in order to ‘keep me on track’, but failed to give me the respect I deserved for attempting such an ambitious endeavour. I felt as though she was trying to ‘sabotage’ my efforts and ‘hold me back’. The ‘good’ supervisor set out to educate my intentions for doing the research from our first meeting, and periodically checked to see if and when my intentions shifted. I felt respected, empowered, and part of the community she was preparing me to enter. She often treated me as a colleague rather than an insufficient student. Taken together the actions of the ‘good’ supervisor helped to form a bond of trust.

On the surface, the direction and feedback given by the ‘bad’ supervisor might seem to most as being appropriate. For example, our goals were the same—to produce a quality thesis which is finished on time. Furthermore, her intentions toward me and my project were positive. Nevertheless, her approach and the form her supervisory guidance took were counterproductive to my supervisory needs. They were not, however, counterproductive to all of her students’ needs. For example, another postgraduate student responded well to being told what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. This student also finished ‘on time’ and produced an appropriately presented PhD thesis. She felt this supervisor’s techniques were ‘good’, whereas I felt the same techniques used by the same supervisor were ‘bad’.

#### **4. This brings us to the last of the four qualities of good supervision: knowing when to admit that you are not the right supervisor for a particular student**

More specifically, it is about matching the ‘right’ student with the ‘right’ supervisor without blaming yourself or the student. In most departments students are matched with his/her supervisor(s) according to their subject or research topic, however, this could prove disastrous if the methodological approaches and style of the student and supervisor clash. For example, if the student uses a historical/philosophical approach to the study of death while the supervisor tries to push for a more empirically-based sociological approach, too much time could be spent on theoretical arguments which detract from the production of research data and cause frustrations to arise between the supervisor and supervisee. This is especially true regarding written expectations. Some researchers formulate their ideas via a traditional strategy of writing beginning in the first semester of their research, while others researchers may choose a non-traditional method. For example, some highly visual researchers with large projects find writing in their first year to be very cumbersome and actually produce better work by formulating their arguments through non-traditional mind-mapping techniques that may not produce comprehensible academic writing until the second or third years. Most supervisors, however, might find the mind-mapping strategy maddening. Nevertheless, mind-mapping techniques have also proven successful in the completion of PhD research. Therefore, should a supervisor try to force a non-traditional student to think and work in a traditional fashion, when the non-traditional way might provide faster

results for that particular student? One would hope not, yet if a supervisor feels unable to support a non-traditional strategy it is often more difficult to admit his/her style of supervision isn't working. Therein lays the most difficult challenge of the supervisor—relinquishing the notion of 'blame'. 'Blame', 'failure', 'guilt' are notions best left outside the halls of academia, yet too many supervisors (and students) feel they must 'blame' someone for 'failure' to finish a project on time, when perhaps all that was needed was a change of supervisor/supervisee partnership. Although most academic institutions have formal protocols put in place for changing supervisors, stigmatisation for doing so may exist at the informal level or within departments that prevent such a change from taking place. However, a 'good' supervisor can address these issues by helping the student to make the transition to a new supervisor in a positive way, thus turning around what was once a 'negative' supervisory experience into a positive one. In other words by positively relinquishing the supervisory role, the 'bad' supervisor becomes a 'good' supervisor.

## Conclusion

In summary, a good supervisor will treat each postgraduate as a unique individual with distinctive intentions and motivations regarding the student's research. The supervisor will work to educe these intentions and knowledge from the student, which often empowers the student and gives him/her a sense of control and responsibility/accountability for the research. The good supervisor will give positive feedback which is useful based on the student's own abilities, and pace the student for his/her future role as a successful academic. Additionally, when a supervisor believes s/he is an inappropriate 'match' for the student's style/approach to research, s/he will work to find an appropriate supervisor and assure a positive transition. The establishment of a sense of trust is also important if the supervisory relationship is to succeed in the educational process. If the trust breaks down, then changing supervisors should be made an easier option, with no stigma or blame attached.



Report

**“Religious Studies—What’s the Point?” Conference,  
Lancaster University 15th - 16th December 2003**

---

**Gary R. Bunt**

*PRS-LTSN*

*University of Wales, Lampeter*

---

The *Religious Studies—What’s the Point?* Conference was hosted by Lancaster University, and supported by PRS-LTSN. It attracted over 50 participants, from the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States. The conference started from a consideration of the impact of Ninian Smart on Religious Studies (RS), focusing on issues crucial to the field at the beginning of the 21st century. A central premise was that studying religion in comparative contexts is a worthwhile exercise, which can widen horizons and deepen understandings of the world around us. It continued into an exploration of contemporary arguments of whether ‘religion’ is a viable topic for analysis, and whether ‘Religious Studies’ should exist at all as a field of study. Between these perspectives are a host of questions relating to the ways we study, analyse and teach religion—from ‘universalist’ and ‘comparativist’, to ‘particularist’ positions. Linked to these broader areas of discussion are other basic questions: the language and the terms utilised (or avoided) in the research and teaching of Religious Studies; and especially, how those engaged in the study of religions deal with terms and words that have particularist orientations or value-laden meanings (e.g. fundamentalism, cult, millenarian) specific to certain cultural discourses, which can come to be applied to other cultures and areas.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The following report draws, where possible, on conference abstracts provided by participants. These have been supplemented, where necessary, by the rapporteur’s notes.

**Richard D. Hecht (University of California, Santa Barbara)**  
*Smart Phenomenological Pedagogy: Ninian Smart and the Teaching of Religious Studies*

One of the great debates in the study of religion has been whether it is possible to do comparative work. The two sides are unlikely to find a synthesis and the debate will go on as it should to make our discipline intellectually challenging and ever exciting. But the discussion usually takes place at the level of writing and research and overlooks the lecture hall. This paper seeks to re-introduce the classroom as the critical venue for the phenomenological and comparative study of religions. Most of our students, on both sides of the pond, come to our classes with comparisons already in their heads. Some notion of the ultimate unity of religions or their similarities or their differences has already fascinated and animated our students long before they hear their first lecture from any of us. Ninian Smart was a master-teacher and his comparative phenomenology was as much a research agenda for his colleagues as a pedagogy for students. Here, we discuss how Smart utilized the comparative and phenomenological study of religions throughout his teaching, not only producing a “theory” of religion but a systematic pedagogy for how best to teach our subject matter.

Ian Reader (Lancaster University) read Hecht’s paper in his absence. It discussed Smart’s emphasis on introductory courses, and the wide range of courses he taught at Santa Barbara. Smart believed that introductory courses should *not* be taught by junior academics, but by senior staff. Smart had a complex understanding of (and discomfort with) the nature of introductory courses, which might be taken as part of a wider Humanities-Social Science degree). It was suggested that an introduction to World Religions was appropriate at the *end* of graduate courses. The notion of epoche was introduced in relation to Smart’s vision of the study of religion, and the defence the boundaries of the discipline.

**Ron Geaves (Chester College):**  
*Religion or Religions? The Dilemma of Teaching Religion in a Post-Smart World* discussed the pressures facing RS, with departments closing and undergraduate numbers falling. Geaves notes that many countries do not have RS as a discipline. This raises questions as to the relevancy of the subject, in the face of the vocational emphasis placed on higher education by the government. Questions emerge as to the motivations for studying religion, and whether they are met.

Modularisation is pushing RS away from subject specialists. Vocationalism in RS has few indicators of success, as RS is not a vocational subject. It can be linked to students' personal self-development, and has emancipation potential. Industry may require RS skills, away from conventional system organisation. Smart saw RS as poly-methodic and plural in nature, with religion being a key to cultural understanding: scholars have 'something to say' on significant topics, such as '9-11', ethics and globalisation. RS can contribute to discussions on politics, conflict, equality and minority ethnic struggles within multicultural environments. It can also stress issues of syncretism in association with the study of religion(s). RS can also make interdisciplinary links, for example with media and medical academia.

**John Achterkirchen (University of California, Santa Barbara)**  
**'Our Literature is a Substitute for Religion, and so is our Religion'**

Our literature is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion" T.S. Eliot,  
*A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry*

In address to "the point" of religious studies, to the question of *why*, as in *why religion rather than anything else*, we may find that religion has not yet as such been questioned or addressed—will we ever ask the question of religion? It may be that religion will always be a "yet to come", an "as promised." Perhaps, to let religion speak on its own behalf in the stead of our speaking for it must be, and not without a certain irony, a pedagogical proposition.

In the encroachment of the current century, for religious studies, that kind of questioning of religion (and therefore, religious studies) may or may not be possible has become irreducibly pertinent. How can we interrogate religion? If we can *regard* religious studies, where in relation to the discipline are we then positioned? What sort of exteriority, what sort of objectivity (that may or may not be acceptable) can we not help but implicate as necessary for religious studies, in the analysis of that which postulates itself as extra-contextual?

It seems then, that we are perhaps always within the study of the study of religion—can we scholars of the infinite then avoid an infinite regression and self-reference? Religious Studies is religious in more ways than one: via *religio*, it is a kind of worship, and, in the sense of *religare*, an iteration, a rereading, a recontextualising. In our more than justified veneration of the work of Ninian Smart, we must also abandon him in our very act of veneration—a true sacrifice. Only in this way, in sacrifice, in substitution, as an effigy, may we engage religion. As exponents of religious studies, we cannot help but use this effigy, this project.

However, as has been suggested by Jacques Derrida, religion cannot be approached it leaves us without recourse at an “absence of horizon. Paradoxically, the absence of horizon conditions the future itself.” (Derrida, *Acts of Religion*). What might be beyond the asymptote remains to be witnessed. The question is then, of course, is it our asymptote, or theirs?

**James Cox (University of Edinburgh)**

***Methodological Agnosticism and the Future of Religious Studies***

The paper asserts that mainstream thinking in Religious Studies over the past thirty years has followed the position that the scholar of religion makes no comment on the truth or falsehood of the beliefs of any religious community. This position, as it was developed by Ninian Smart, has been labelled ‘methodological agnosticism’. A biting criticism of this view has been formulated by Timothy Fitzgerald, who argues that despite its claim to agnosticism, such a method inevitably focuses on the transcendent, since what one remains agnostic about precisely is determined by ‘the transcendental referent’. This is confirmed by Smart’s distinction between religion and world-views, the latter failing to qualify as religion due to a lack of any belief in transcendent realities. Fitzgerald’s criticism is accepted in this paper, but not his conclusion that Religious Studies must be eliminated as a distinct subject in favour of theology or cultural studies. By analysing, the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger, the author of this paper separates religion from the ‘sacred’ or transcendent by defining religion as the transmission of an authoritative tradition, or what Hervieu-Léger calls ‘a chain of memory’. Although experiences of postulated ‘sacredness’ abound in contemporary society, these can be included under the category ‘religion’ only when they form part of socially identifiable communities, which have been legitimated by authoritative traditions. In this sense, the field called Religious Studies does not define itself with respect to the ‘sacred’, but instead employs scientific principles to study socio-historical manifestations of authoritative traditions.

**John Shepherd (University College of St. Martin’s)**

***Phenomenological Perspectivalism: From Empathy to Criticism***

The point of Religious Studies is to help people to become religiate. Religiate involves a combination of informed understanding of religions, and the exercise of critical skills in their evaluation.

Ninian Smart's influential advocacy of the phenomenological approach to Religious Studies has been widely taken to imply that Religious Studies should be non-evaluative. This is a misunderstanding. For Smart, phenomenological skills are only part of a wider 'science of religion', and the science of religion in turn is only part of Religious Studies. Religious Studies in this broader sense should include evaluating claims about the truth and value of religion. Phenomenological skills enhance understanding of religion; once understood, critical evaluation is appropriate.

This conclusion is to be supported on more general grounds. Promoting skills of critical questioning and argument is integral to our conception of education, and it would be to compromise both academic integrity and intellectual honesty to allow Religious Studies (or, of course, Religious Education) to function as a no-go area for their exercise.

Yet evaluations are not free-floating. They are rooted in particular perspectives. Making these explicit, as part of exploring the judgments they generate, is an important part of the evaluation process. The label 'phenomenological perspectivalism' thus signals the requirement that empathetic understanding be conjoined with critical evaluation—as Smart always intended.”

**Evan Berry (University of California, Santa Barbara)**

***Dimension of Religion and Nature: Ninian Smart on Religion and Ecology***

In his *Dimensions of the Sacred*, Ninian Smart argues that “aspects of our environment can be picked out as divine: a river, a mountain, the sea, the wind ... nature and its parts are portions of the material dimension of religions (276).” Though Smart here discusses nature within the material dimensions of religion, he environment is bound to religion along the moral, political, ritual and experiential dimensions as well. The interactions between religions and environments will be one of the most rich and provocative areas of study for religionists in the years to come. Ninian Smart's prolific work suggests at least two directions for continuing scholarship of/on religion and nature. First, just as Smart uncovers the relationship between 'the land', and religious nationalism, contemporary scholars of religion need to investigate the naturalistic and environmental foundations of modern political systems and social movements. Second, Smart points out the increasing importance of the experiential dimension of religion. We live in a world where ecstatic experiences of nature help shape the contemporary religious landscape, just as the experience of city life influences urban spirituality. Smart's

closing words to *Dimensions of the Sacred* speak perfectly to the importance of the changing relationship of religion and nature: “while we do not sacrifice to Poseidon and are not so afraid of the ocean, there remains the poetry of waves and the bitter taste of salt.” (298).

### ***Debate and Discussion: Gavin Hyman and Robert Segal (Lancaster University)***

Robert A. Segal: *In Defense of the Comparative Method*

In the field of religious studies, the rejection of the comparative method, at least as traditionally practiced, long antedates postmodernism, but postmodernism, with its focus on the particular, carries this anti-comparativist stance to an extreme. I identify the six main objections commonly lodged against the method and attempt to refute them all—as mischaracterizations either of the method or of the quest for knowledge itself. I then take the case of the most egregious practitioner of the method, J. G. Frazer, and argue that not even he turns out to be guilty of any of the objections lodged against the method. I maintain that the method is not merely permissible but outright indispensable to all scholars of religion—to those seeking the particularities of individual religions no less than to those seeking the universals of religion.

Gavin Hyman: *Response*

In response to Robert Segal’s defence of the comparative method, my aim in this paper was to express some reservations on the comparative method as it has traditionally been employed within the field of religious studies. While recognising that some form of comparativism is unavoidable in any scholarly field, my concern was to draw attention to the difficulties inherent to comparative endeavours, difficulties that have been exacerbated by the loss of confidence in a universal reason which had previously served as an a priori grid through which religious traditions were interpreted and compared. In addition, although comparativism is often portrayed as a ‘neutral’ or ‘innocent’ tool, in practice, it is inevitably accompanied by attempts at ‘explanation’ which are far from innocent and frequently lead to distortions. If the comparative method is to have a future, therefore, it must take account of these challenges and, if it does so, it may well find that it will take a very different form from the one it has taken hitherto.

**L. Philip Barnes (University of Ulster)**

*Does the Academic Study of Religion rest on a Mistake?*

Dr Barnes considers the arguments recently adduced by Timothy Fitzgerald in *The Ideology of Religious Studies* to the effect that the concept of “religion” is not a genuine analytical category in that it fails to denote any distinctive kind of experience or social institution. A comparison is drawn between Karl Barth’s “positivism of revelation” and Fitzgerald’s opposite and equal “positivism of naturalism”. A number of arguments are drawn from the philosophy of language to show that Fitzgerald operates with a cluster of mistaken notions about the nature of linguistic usage and what it is for a term to have a meaning and an application. The paper concludes with some positive observations on the appropriate ways in which the concept of religion and its cognates might be employed in the study of human beliefs and practices.

**Philip Goodchild (University of Nottingham)**

*On ‘Religion’: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers*

The concept of ‘religion’, always notoriously difficult to define, has come under attack in recent years. The charge is that the notion of ‘religion’ as a transcultural category bears little resemblance to cultural formations in non-Western societies. Implicit within the very notion of ‘religion’ is a liberal, ecumenical theology which, when imposed upon other cultures, functions to promote imperialism and neo-imperialism.

This paper seeks to defend our usage of ‘religion’ by launching a counter-offensive: the common framework that unites detractors of ‘religion’ from both Asian studies (such as Richard King and Tim Fitzgerald) and theology (such as Nicholas Lash and Graham Ward) is a broader turn towards ‘culture’ as a category of analysis in the humanities and social sciences. Following the lead of Terry Eagleton, this paper will suggest that ‘culture’ is just as problematic a concept and field of analysis as ‘religion’, and that it participates in the same dynamics as those imputed to religion.

The study of ‘religion’ is part of the internal conversation of the modern West where it successfully names those practices of thought and devotion that address the limits of human experience, whether these are universal such as suffering, disease, madness and death, or culturally-postulated universals, such as creation, law, liberation and enlightenment. Since an ongoing conversation on responses to such limits remains of immense significance, the study of religion remains a unique discipline where the modern West can encounter, critique and be modified by other

cultural traditions, as well as continuing to discuss and develop its own response to the most significant limits of experience.

**Graham Harvey (Open University)**

***Tribalism or Globalism? The Challenge of Indigenous Religious Traditions to the Study of Religions***

In reviewing my *Shamanism: A Reader* (Routledge, 2003) in the THES (9 May 2003), Ronald Hutton wrote,

‘[t]his work poses, in its starkest form, the biggest question that hangs over modern Western scholarship: whether it is, in fact, the work of a particular tribal culture, committed to its own, subjectively effective, views of the cosmos, or whether it has the responsibility for creating some kind of universal explanatory structure for all humanity. The historic problem is that it is actually designed to be the former, and is struggling to be the latter.’

This demands my more deliberate reflection of the nature of the Study of Religions and its processes, positions and possibilities.

Indigenous religious traditions have been used by many scholars in their theorising about the evolution and contemporary state of religions. With the reassertion of indigenous sovereignty and intellectual (and other) property rights, empowered by post- and anti- colonial assessments of modern and Western tribalism, it is possible that more reciprocal engagements between scholars of religion and indigenous peoples (perhaps as hosts and guests) might contribute to some decisions about what academia, and Religious Studies within it, could be about. Importantly, this is not simply another call to reflexivity but to relationality. Whether tribalism or globalism or something else beckons, Religious Studies and indigenous traditions will play a role in future dialogues.

**Tim Jensen (Southern University of Denmark)**

***From History of Religions to The Study of Religions to...?—A Critical Survey of the State of Affairs in Denmark***

During the last 30 years the number of religious studies students and scholars has increased from 20 to 1000 and from 4 to 30. Though most scholars and all of the teaching programs, now as then, stress the comparative perspective as well as the philological competence, the study of religion(s), the research done and the programmes taught, most certainly has changed considerably. Most certainly, however, a host of



problems, challenges and even a crisis of identity, follow close behind the successful career of the study of religions.

Under the rubrics “From history of religions to the study of religions”, “From ‘religions in the past and out there’ to contemporary religions right here”, “From texts to informants”, “From philology to fieldwork”, “From the ivory-tower to the cultural wars”, and “From too little interest in religion and the study of religion to too much interest”, the paper tracks and discusses some of the major lines of the development, some of the most important reasons for the changes, and future challenged to the study of teaching of religion(s) in Denmark.

**David Smith (Lancaster University):**

***The Place of Hinduism within Religious Studies: Past, Present and Future***

This paper looks at the place of Hinduism within religious studies by looking at the work of three Indologists who have played a major role in the development of the study of religion: Max Müller, Mircea Eliade and Wendy Doniger. With all three, getting to grips with polytheism is shown to be crucial to their methodologies. Particular attention is paid to the work of Doniger and her pupils, and they are placed in the context of contemporary Hindu fundamentalism. In conclusion, Doniger’s notion of the toolbox approach to the study of religion is especially commended; and it is argued that the variety of approaches called for by the very varied nature of Hinduism would justify a more central place within religious studies for the study of Hinduism than that study has yet achieved.

**Steve Sutcliffe (University of Edinburgh)**

***Putting ‘Religion’ to Work***

This paper treats RS as a case study in comparative disciplinary formation, including a critique of the existing ‘world religions’ typology, and a modest proposal for a new, nominalistic model of category formation combined with anthropological reflexivity.

I start from the observation that RS is an unusually beleaguered field in comparison with other subject disciplines, which I suggest is a multifaceted ‘beleaguerment’ driven in part by the impact on scholars’ stamina of multiple, often incommensurable, public discourses on ‘religion’, in part from persistent essentialist mystifications about what ‘religion’ is and does, and in part from ‘internal’ bureaucratic-economic pressures on the field. The sum—in comparative disciplinary context - is

that, when cuts are in the air, in a choice between RS or some other humanities subject it may be easier to finger the RS department insofar as that department cannot mount a sufficiently compelling comparative theoretical case for its persistence (even expansion!).

In this fundamentally political process, our common category can be either stumbling block or stepping stone. ‘Religion’ as a category differs in degree from other ‘master tropes’ organising neighbouring academic fields, not primarily due to the range of discourses and practices it signifies (although these are formidable), but because of the intensity of affect it triggers, the attendant political contestation of data and interpretations, and - crucially - the extent to which these reflexes are disguised and/or denied, by both practitioners and scholars. In this sense ‘religion’ is a (perhaps uniquely) overloaded semantic category.

Nevertheless, our competence in negotiating these dynamics is *precisely* what marks us out as specialists in ‘religion’. And as JZ Smith suggested in 1991, the paradigmatically unsettled and unsettling nature of the category—including the data of its institutional histories and scholarly associations—is precisely what makes ‘religion’ potentially a leading subject in the human sciences, in that its contestations conform perfectly to the critical humanities premise of ‘training in argument about interpretation”’

## Closing Discussion

There was a broad-ranging discussion at the conclusion of the conference. Some of the themes are summarised below. Comments have not been attributed.

- The competitive element of universities was not represented at the conference.
- The title of the conference was not intended to be implicitly negative in nature, rather to challenge ourselves (RS academics) and the field.
- Some were surprised that 9-11 did not come up more in the conference.
- In dealing with contemporary issues, there is a danger of the loss of the historical and the linguistic issues. Language(s) in religion are neglected, and this can lead to category mistakes and misrepresentation. Language studies have been driven out of religion.

- Teaching issues have frequently been neglected, or forgotten because of other pressures (i.e. Research Assessment Exercises). The profile of classroom agendas should be raised.
- Responses to 9-11 should be kept in perspective.
- There is a lack of historical and comparative analysis of religions in the media.
- RS academics should be better equipped to respond to the media.
- The question emerged of whether an academic should ‘care’ about a religion in order to teach it; the ‘commitment’ issue in RS needs to be addressed further. Do you need pre-existing beliefs to give a critique of religion(s)?
- There is also a place for those without ‘commitment’. Cynicism can provide more insight than empathy (!).
- Regarding Smart’s comments that senior members of staff should be teaching introductory courses: seniority doesn’t necessarily translate as competency.
- There is a need to distinguish between bad categorization and categorization per se.
- Marketing and recruitment: can we translate (elements of) these discussions to students, potential students, funding bodies, and institutions? Where do we go to from here?
- The ‘system’ assumes pre-determined ‘marketable’ students. How does this fit into the RS model? Does conformity to this model suppress educational aspirations (and results). To what extent does this influence the discipline, and its structure?
- The government and funding councils are “on holiday from reality”.

- In the UK system, many students do a cross-section of subjects, of which RS is a small component of a wider degree. What skills can be passed on in this exposure? How does it influence the teaching of RS? RS skills can also be passed through to other disciplinary areas: for example, psychodrama exercises applied in business studies contexts. RS can challenge the pre-programmed skills of some subject areas. There are opportunities for cross-disciplinary discussions and developments (for example, relating to pedagogy and training). The multicultural angle of RS can be significant in relation to employability and (specific) career development.
- External pressures, and the constant need to ‘justify’ activities, result in economic and intellectual crisis.
- At future events (for example, BASR 2004) these issues can be further explored.

# Notes for Authors

---

## Introduction

These notes apply to free submissions to the journal and to submitted project reports from funded projects.

**All documents submitted to the PRS-LTSN Subject Centre should be of a high, publishable quality.** Please ensure you have proof-read and corrected your documents before submitting them. The editor reserves the right to correct documents for spelling, grammar, layout, consistency and style.

From August 2003, the content of reports and articles will be stored electronically in a database of resources. The format used for storage is XML (eXtensible Mark-up Language), which means that for submissions to this journal it does not matter how documents look, but it is important that they are structured logically and that the same tag or style is applied to the same type of text (headings, blocks of basic text, quotations, endnotes or footnotes, etc.). The following guidelines should therefore be used in preparation of documents to ensure that they can be formatted correctly for this journal and stored appropriately in the database/website.

## Word Count

Freely submitted articles for peer-review should be no longer than 8,000 words. Project reports should not exceed 12,000 words, or should be submitted in independently publishable parts. Shorter discussion pieces or event reports should be limited to under 2,000 words.

## Applying Styles

The following notes are designed for use with MS Word (but can be adapted for other applications as required—please contact the Editor, [david@prs-ltsn.ac.uk](mailto:david@prs-ltsn.ac.uk)). In MS Word the types of text within a document are determined by what are called ‘styles’. These are available in a drop-down menu on the formatting tool bar. Make sure that you apply the style you want to all the text intended, including paragraph returns.

## Allowed Styles

Use **ONLY** the following styles within a document:

- Heading 1
- Heading 2
- Heading 3
- Heading 4
- Body Text

## Notes for Authors

---

- Block Quotation/Block Quote
- Endnote ref
- Endnote text
- List Bullet
- List Number
- (see below for tables, diagrams and pictures)

### For further formatting use only:

- Superscript
- Subscript
- Italic
- Bold

Paragraphs should be separated by a double carriage return only—no indent (tab).

### DO NOT:

- Use Normal as a style
- Make headings by adjusting the font, font size or layout of text
- Use section breaks within a document
- Use white spaces or tabs to layout text or data

### DO remember to:

- Nest headings and lists logically
- Only use the styles allowed
- Use endnotes instead of footnotes

## Tables, diagrams and pictures

All data that needs to be presented in a fixed form must be within a table. Authors must not use spaces or tabs to try to achieve the desired layout. Tables should be kept as simple as possible.

Pictures and diagrams should be saved as .tif, .jpg or .gif format and sent separately. The intended location of the item within the final text should be indicated in square brackets.

## Referencing

**Additionally, please follow these conventions for referencing from within the body of the document:**

## 1. Books

Surname of author followed by forenames (if known) or initials, comma; title in italics; if applicable, additional information, such as translator, number of edition, or number of volume, separated by commas; place, colon, publisher, comma, date in brackets; number of pages. e.g.:

Smith, John Edward, *Religious Studies in Higher Education* (London & New York: Goodfellow, 1999), xi+389pp.

Brown, F.A. and Green, G.B., *Teaching Philosophy of Science to Science Students*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Educational Press, 2000), xx+210pp.

Teufelsdröckh, Diogenes, *What to Wear when Teaching Philosophy*, translated by Carlyle, Thomas, 5th edition (Ecclefechan: Heritage Books, 1912), 79pp.

## 2. Contributions

As above, but with the title of the contribution in double quotes, followed by 'in' and the names of the editors, and with the pages of the contribution specified. e.g.:

Jones, David Simon, "Reading the Bible", in Lector, H. & Anagnostopoulos, P., *Teaching Students to Read Primary Texts* (London: Generic Wisdom Educational, 2001), pp.210-241.

## 3. Articles

Author, title of article in double quotes, title of journal in italics, volume/issue number, year, pages.

As above, but without the 'in', the names of the editors, or the place and publisher, and with the volume and issue number (if appropriate). e.g.:

Livingstone, David, "Professor Galileo I Presume? Introducing Students to 17th-Century Scientists in the Post-Modern Context", *Teaching History of Science*, 7/2, 1999, 40-62.

## 4. Web pages

As above, where appropriate, but with the full URL, the date last modified (if stated), and the date accessed by the reviewer.

## Submission

Please contact the Editor at the address over for details of how to submit your paper.

## About *Discourse*

---

**Subscriptions:** *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies* is freely available to all individuals working in higher education in the UK and is freely distributed to all those registered as interested parties in our subject areas. You may register at

<http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/registration/index.html>

For institutions and overseas individuals the rates are as listed below:

- UK individuals in HE—no charge
- Individual subscribers outside the UK—£20 p.a.
- Library subscriptions—£35 p.a.

**Submissions** to the journal can be sent via our website (<http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/>) or by post or email to the address below. We reserve the right to publish articles submitted for publication in both printed and digital forms unless a prior agreement is made otherwise. Articles should be no more than 8000 words and should comply with the *Notes for Authors* guidelines, above.

**Advertising** rates are:

- Full page—£250
- Half page—£150
- Other rates negotiable, contact the editor

**Copyright** All published articles, discussion pieces and reviews are the copyright of the PRS-LTSN, unless otherwise indicated. It is a condition of publication either in the printed *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies* or in digital form on the PRS-LTSN website that authors assign copyright to the PRS-LTSN. Despite assigning copyright, authors retain their moral right to be identified as the author(s) of any published materials, and are free to republish elsewhere provided that the PRS-LTSN copyright and original publication details are acknowledged.

### **Discourse**

PRS-LTSN

School of Theology and Religious Studies

University of Leeds

Leeds LS2 9JT

United Kingdom

Tel: +44(0)113 343 1166

[david@prs-ltsn.ac.uk](mailto:david@prs-ltsn.ac.uk)

**Published by the PRS-LTSN** (The Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network), Leeds

Printed in Wales by Cambrian Printers, Aberystwyth

© Copyright PRS-LTSN, 2004