

Discourse

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

Discourse:

Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies

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Discourse:

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The journal of the *Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies* of the *Higher Education Academy*

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Editorial: A Pluralism of Methods

Welcome to the twelfth issue of this journal in which we have again included a mixture of reports and scholarly articles that we hope will interest you and stimulate reflection on learning and teaching.

For this issue we interviewed Dr Deirdre Burke, Senior Lecturer in religious studies at the University of Wolverhampton and National Teaching Fellow. She has been involved in many projects and events with the Subject Centre over the last six years and her insights deserve wide dissemination and implementation.

The disciplines supported by the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies are diverse, even occasionally in conflict; so it should not come as a surprise that we cover education for sustainable development, reusable learning objects in RS, medical ethics teaching, an application of the concept of critical being to philosophy teaching and an analysis of the effectiveness of distance learning, amongst other things, in this issue. What is, perhaps, more unexpected is the diversity of *methods* to be found in the articles published here. No single methodological framework captures expert practitioners' interpretation of precisely what learning and teaching are and how they should therefore be

described, analysed and developed. It is a core virtue that the humanities, and the PRS disciplines in particular, continually reflect on their own nature, a virtue that prevents there ever being any consensus on what could be 'pure' and 'objective' evidence of the most efficient ways of studying or understanding learning and teaching. And yet it is also at the heart of our subjects that we constantly strive to understand, express and share the on-going creative dialogue about ourselves and the world. Consequently, we find the richness of our subjects clearly apparent in our *thinking about teaching* in our subjects. I believe that this plurality of methods demonstrates the thriving health of pedagogical reflection in PRS, even more so than the range of topics themselves. And we shall continue to support and nurture this pluralism in a context where pressures to conform to inappropriate methodological approaches continue to grow.

Survey

During this spring you should have received a survey from the Subject Centre with a reply-paid envelope. Returns have been good so far, but we would urge you to complete the survey as soon as

possible, if you have not already done so. It covers questions about *Discourse*, as well as more general questions about the Subject Centre. It is an opportunity for you to help us develop services and materials that can better support your teaching. If you have not received a survey and would like one, please contact the Subject Centre, or complete the on-line version at:

<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/surveys/prs>.

A snapshot of results will be taken at the end of June, but the survey will remain active and continue to inform our publication planning after that date.

Website

Later this summer we will be launching a new look to our website, which in due course will feature much greater on-line access to previously published papers from *Discourse*.

As always, all feedback is welcome and I hope there is something of value for you in this issue. I wish you a happy and fruitful summer.

David J. Mossley, Editor

Erratum

In Volume 6 No. 1 the final line of Wayne Morris' paper 'Learning, Teaching and Assessment with Deaf Students: The Development of a Programme in Christian Ministry' was missed off due to a typesetting error. We apologise for this—the final paragraph should have read:

This programme is important because its success or otherwise has the potential for ramifications and positive benefits for all of HE as it works towards widening access and participation for a greater number of people. The programme is also important because BSL is now recognised as a full language and it has the capacity for the full range of expression of ideas that is equal to English. That in turn provides Deaf people with new and exciting opportunities to learn and develop using their own language on a par with their hearing peers. That is a reality that has never before been available to Deaf people but that will, with care and in time, become more of a possibility.

News and Information

The Higher Education Academy

The Higher Education Academy's mission is to help institutions, discipline groups and all staff to provide the best possible learning experience for their students.

Its aims and objectives are:

1. To be an authoritative and independent voice on policies that influence student learning experiences;
2. To support institutions in their strategies for improving the student learning experience;
3. To lead, support and inform the professional development and recognition of staff in higher education;
4. To promote good practice in all aspects of support for the student learning experience;
5. To lead the development of research and evaluation to improve the quality of the student learning experience;
6. To be a responsive, efficient and accountable organisation.

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk>

The Subject Network

The Subject 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.

The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies

The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies 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.

Mission statement

To support and promote Philosophical, Theological and Religious Studies higher education in the UK, and to build on its culture of dialogue and reflection.

Strategic Aims

- To work in collaboration with PRS colleagues and students in order to be effective advocates for our disciplines in the development of national and regional policies.
- To fund and take part in projects and events that support the development and recognition of good teaching practice in PRS.
- To participate in relevant research developments.
- To provide a repository of relevant knowledge and expertise within our subject communities.
- To maintain a well managed, flexible and properly structured subject centre staffed by appropriately qualified people with academic and creative strengths.

Visit the website for the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies (formerly the PRS-LTSN) of the Higher Education Academy:

<http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk>

Departmental Visits, Workshops and Contacts

Departmental Visits

We have now visited almost all of the departments in our subject communities. We have contacted all the departments (either via your departmental Subject Centre 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.

Departmental Workshops

We also offer a full programme of workshops. These are designed to help us 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 you 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 us at:

Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

University of Leeds

Leeds LS2 9JT

Tel: 0113 343 4184

enquiries@prs.heacademy.ac.uk

Reports

Best of the Web:

Internet Resources for Philosophy and TRS

Meriel Patrick

Intute: Arts and Humanities

Oxford University Computing Services

The web offers a wealth of material to both educational professionals and their students. However, tutors and lecturers often have legitimate concerns about allowing or encouraging their students to use websites as sources for essays and assignments. One of the web's greatest strengths—the sheer quantity of information freely available to anyone with access to a computer with an Internet connection—can also prove a substantial drawback: without the quality controls that apply to printed books and journal articles, there is a significant risk that students will fail to discriminate between good material and bad, and that more of the dross than the quality will find its way into their work. Nevertheless, the Internet has too much to offer

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to be ignored, or sidelined, as a tool for learning and research, and in practice, students will frequently consult the web anyway, regardless of what their tutors say: as a rapid way of gaining information on a topic (without the need for a trek to the library), it is too attractive to be resisted. The emphasis therefore needs to be on shepherding students towards trustworthy material of a sufficient quality.

One possible solution is for teachers to include carefully chosen online resources on reading lists alongside traditional printed material, or to circulate separate lists of approved websites. While effective, producing such lists can be time consuming. Another option is steering students towards a reputable subject gateway. Gateways are guides to online resources, sometimes annotated with notes or comments, and usually compiled by those with an interest in a particular field—either professionals or enthusiastic amateurs. They vary widely in scope and quality, but the best provide a straightforward route to a range of pre-appraised web resources. When choosing a gateway, the most important considerations are how selective the site is (look for a statement of criteria websites must meet to be listed, or a rating system), the credentials of the compiler or compilers, and how regularly the site is updated—in addition to missing new resources, gateways which are not well maintained often include a significant proportion of broken links.

For philosophers, one of the best known and respected gateways is the EpistemeLinks site, <http://www.epistemelinks.com/>, which features over 19,000 categorised links. Two key sites for theology and religious studies are the Virtual Religion Index, <http://virtualreligion.net/vri/>, and the Wabash Center Internet Guide to Religion, http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/guide_headings.aspx.

In addition to providing a way of guiding students to suitable sites, these gateways list a range of resources useful to those involved in teaching. Those seeking inspiration when planning courses may appreciate the considerable number of links to syllabuses which both Episteme and the Wabash Center Guide include. On a similar note, the Teaching and Learning Resources section of the American Academy of Religion's website, <http://www.aarweb.org/teaching/>, includes the AAR's syllabus project, a collection of course outlines contributed by academics. The American Philosophical Association Committee on the Teaching of Philosophy's Online Resource Center, <http://www.apa>.

udel.edu/apa/governance/committees/teaching/orcl/, also includes a small collection of syllabuses. (See also <http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/governance/committees/diversitysyllabiproject/>.)

The Wabash Center also offers a separate Teaching and Learning Resources gateway, http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/teach_web.aspx. Most of the material listed here is non-subject specific, so will be of use to teachers of philosophy and theology alike.

More selective still is Intute: Arts and Humanities, <http://www.intute.ac.uk/artsandhumanities/>. Funded by the JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/>, and the AHRC, <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/>, Intute employs a network of subject specialists to locate and describe online resources suitable for use in higher and further education. Instead of the brief annotations that gateways typically provide, each Intute record offers a full review (typically one to two hundred words long) of the website, plus further information including the resource creator, the type of resource, and the audience at which it is aimed. This both facilitates effective searching and enables users to see if a particular site will meet their purposes. One of four subject groups that make up the Intute service, the Arts and Humanities division offers a database of over 18,000 records, with substantial sections devoted to religion and theology, philosophy, and history and philosophy of science.

Additional features offered by Intute include Limelight articles, <http://www.intute.ac.uk/artsandhumanities/limelight/>, which bring together information about a selection of online resources related to a particular topic. A number of recent titles relate to religious studies and philosophy, including ‘Sixty years of the Dead Sea Scrolls’, and ‘Dawn of the Dead’, about the philosophical concept of zombies. The MyIntute service, <http://www.intute.ac.uk/myintute/index.php>, allows you to save searches and receive email notification when new resources are added in a particular area, and provides an easy way of creating and exporting lists of links to your own website.

Even when sites are chosen via a gateway or database, discrimination is still necessary: not all sites will be suitable for all purposes (for example, a site giving an insider’s perspective of a particular religious tradition may not be an ideal source for an objective overview of the faith). To help students develop the necessary critical skills, Intute offers a range of other resources to help maximise good use of the web,

such as Internet Detective, <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective/>, an interactive tutorial designed to encourage careful evaluation of online resources. Aimed at FE students and undergraduates, the tutorial also includes a section on plagiarism—what it is and how to avoid it.

Internet Detective is part of the Intute Virtual Training Suite, <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/>, a collection of over sixty free online tutorials intended to help students (and others) improve their web research skills. The bulk of the suite is made up of tutorials covering Internet resources for specific disciplines, including Religious Studies, <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/he/tutorial/religion>, Philosophy, <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/he/tutorial/philosophy>, and History and Philosophy of Science, <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/tutorial/hps>. Each provides a tour of key online resources in that field, plus advice on finding and evaluating further websites. The Religious Studies and Philosophy tutorials also include a section for teachers, suggesting how the tutorials might be used in a classroom setting.

Intute also offers a subject booklet entitled *Internet Resources for Religion and Theology*. A PDF of this can be downloaded from the support section of the Intute: Arts and Humanities website, <http://www.intute.ac.uk/artsandhumanities/support.html>; details are also given there of how to request the printed version. While stocks last, you can ask for multiple copies for your students or for your library.

One of the most valuable things the Internet has to offer is an increasing number of electronic texts. Many key philosophical and theological works are long out of copyright, and hence can be made available free of charge. Digital libraries of interest to the theologian include the Internet Sacred Text Archive, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/>, and the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/>. Philosophers will find a number of useful texts at Columbia University's Institute for Learning Technologies Digital Text Projects page, <http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/publications/digitext.html>, which also provides a useful list of links to other collections of texts online. Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/>, the oldest producer of free ebooks on the web, is also well worth a look (although as the site is targeted at the general reader rather than the scholar many texts lack full bibliographical information about their source).

No guide to online resources for theology and philosophy would

be complete without a mention of the ATLA Religion Database, http://www.atla.com/products/catalogs/catalogs_rdb.html, and the Philosopher's Index, <http://www.philinfo.org/>. Between them, these two catalogues index the contents of over a thousand scholarly journals, plus essays from multi-author anthologies. Both can be searched by author, title, and descriptor (keyword). These resources require an institutional subscription, but are an invaluable tool for researchers, university and college level teachers, and students alike. The interfaces used to access the databases vary from institution to institution, meaning it is impossible to give specific URLs via which the content is available, but librarians or ICT specialists will be able to provide further details of how to use the catalogues. Sales information can be obtained from ATLA and the Philosopher's Information Center.

Many of the journals indexed in these databases also now have an online presence. These frequently require subscription (though the Directory of Open Access Journals, <http://www.doaj.org/>, lists a good number which are freely accessible), but tables of contents, abstracts, and perhaps a sample issue will often be available to non-subscribers. Institutions may make use of an electronic journals management system such as TDNet, <http://www.tdnet.com/>—consult a librarian for more details. Some online collections of journals such as JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/>, or Taylor and Francis Journals, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/>, are accessible to members of subscribing institutions via an Athens username and password; again, ask a librarian or ICT specialist how to obtain one. The Athens home page, <http://www.athensams.net/>, provides a full list of all resources controlled by the Athens Access Management System. This includes much besides journals: for example, some book publishers are starting to release new (and sometimes older) works in electronic format as well as in print. Oxford Scholarship Online, <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/>, is Oxford University Press's offering: a collection of over twelve hundred full length books, which includes over three hundred religion titles, and over four hundred and fifty in philosophy.

Some scholars have taken advantage of the Internet to make substantial selections of their own works available. Two examples include the home page of philosopher of mind David Chalmers, <http://consc.net/chalmers/>, (which also includes an extensive annotated bibliography), and in the field of philosophical theology, the

Virtual Office of William Lane Craig, <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/>.

A number of valuable reference works are available online. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/>, and the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online, <http://www.rep.routledge.com/>, are two excellent philosophy resources. The latter is more comprehensive than the former, but does require subscription, while the Stanford Encyclopedia is freely available. For theologians, the online edition of the 1913 Catholic Encyclopedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/>, is an enduring classic, whereas those with more esoteric interests may wish to consult the Encyclopedia Mythica, <http://www.pantheon.org/>. For statistical information about religions, <http://www.adherents.com/> is the place to go.

Finally, the academic blogosphere has much to offer both career academics and their students. First, it provides an easily-digestible way of reading and interacting with the work of contemporary thinkers—accessible for students, and a boon for the time-pressured academic wishing to keep abreast of current debate. Secondly, blogs boast a considerable advantage over traditional print mediaspeed of reaction. In the past, the publication of scholarly analyses of issues related to a particular news event—be it the ethics of adoption by gay couples or the claim to have discovered the tomb of Jesus near Jerusalem—might have taken months, by which time the subject would be old news. Today, any academic with a blog can share his or her thoughts with the world within hours.

Two of the longest-running and most venerable theological blogs are Mark Goodacre's NT Gateway Weblog, <http://www.ntgateway.com/weblog/>, which deals, like the gateway it is attached to, with material relevant to New Testament studies, and PaleoJudaica, <http://paleojudaica.blogspot.com/>, the work of James Davila, which focuses on ancient Judaism and its historical and literary context.

Philosophical gems include Garden of Forking Paths, <http://gfp.typepad.com/>, which covers agency theory, including freedom of the will and related topics, and Certain Doubts, http://fleetwood.baylor.edu/certain_doubts/, devoted to matters epistemic. Both of these are group blogs, with a number of eminent philosophers among their contributors. For an extensive list of weblogs in these and

other subject areas, see the Academic Blogs Wiki, <http://www.academicmicblogs.org/>.

Online services are also using blogs to communicate with their users: for example, Intute: Arts and Humanities has a blog, <http://www.intute.ac.uk/artsandhumanities/blog/>, which is regularly updated with relevant news items.

The above is, of course, only a tiny sample of what's available on the web. For further information on online resources, and for detailed reviews of most of the sites mentioned in this article, see Intute: Arts and Humanities: <http://www.intute.ac.uk/artsandhumanities/>.

The Faith Guides Project

Simon Smith and Julie Closs

Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies
Higher Education Academy

The Faith Guides for Higher Education, published in 2006, aim to give information to staff in the higher education sector on how best to support students with a variety of religious beliefs.

Currently covering Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism; and written by respected academics with many years' research and teaching experience in their fields of expertise—in consultation with religious communities—this series covers key religious and cultural sensitivities that may arise within a higher education environment.

The guides offer a concise reference to the religions in question and the belief structures that underpin them, combined with tips for recruiting and retaining students and providing an inclusive and welcoming environment.

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Their development was very much demand led by the higher education sector. In 2003 and 2004 the Subject Centre for PRS began receiving an increased level of enquiries, in particular from other subject centres, asking for good sources of advice for their academics about teaching students of various faiths.

After some research, we discovered that there appeared to be a lacuna in provision here—whilst people seemed often to have the impression that such advice must be available, in fact it had never been brought together in a coherent and user-friendly way.

The Subject Centre for PRS was the obvious choice to provide this tailored support. If, in developing this guidance, we provided a service to the wider higher education sector, we would also be raising the profile of religious studies as a discipline, and demonstrating its relevance to contemporary society.

Cultural and religious diversity project

In parallel with the Faith Guides development project, the Cultural and Religious Diversity project also grew out of this need. It began with a survey of academics, asking about particular issues of curriculum support and development as regards religion. This led to feedback and offers of case studies, which have been collected as a resource for the sector and are freely available at <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/themes/diversity/index.html>.

This resource has two main aims:

1. To provide people working within higher education with a resource that will enable them to answer specific questions relating to cultural and religious diversity issues (for example dates of religious festivals, reasons for types of cultural dress, the basics of different religious beliefs);
2. To enable people working within higher education to develop the skills and knowledge, through ‘religious and cultural literacy’, to avoid cultural stereotyping.

Development of the Faith Guides

The aims and findings of the cultural and religious diversity project fed into the content and approach of the Faith Guides, which give a concise and clear factual resource on the religions in question, and provide staff with the confidence to address issues in an informed way.

The most important factor in providing an inclusive environment is communication. Staff should make clear to students that they can be approached about these issues. It is vital that people working with students become aware of possible cultural sensitivities so that they have the confidence to address difficulties as they arise, but at the same time to treat all students as individuals and avoid stereotyping.

The Faith Guides were written by academics, many of whom were from the faiths concerned, and if not, had strong, long-standing links to the faith communities in question, with whom they consulted closely. The overwhelmingly positive response to the guides is testimony to the inclusive and well-informed nature of the development process.

Indeed, by the time they were published, they were recognised as such a valuable resource that the Higher Education Academy offered to fund the distribution of the first edition to every higher education institution in the UK.

To date, more than 2,000 faith guides have been distributed, with interest from not only the higher education sector, but also further education, schools and other public bodies.

A reprint is planned and the Subject Centre will continue to supply printed copies at a cost of £3.00 each, available on request from Julie Closs at jules@prs.heacademy.ac.uk, and to make them freely available in electronic format on our website, at <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/publications>.

The Higher Education Academy ESD Project

Stephen Sterling

Centre for Sustainable Futures
University of Plymouth

The Higher Education Academy's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Project was initiated in January 2005 as a special theme within the Academy's overall programme. The first task was to examine the state of sustainable development related education in the HE curriculum. An audit of subject communities was carried out by a small research team working with 18 of the 24 Subject Centres, and this culminated in the 'Dawe Report' which was launched in November 2005. Entitled 'Sustainable Development in Higher Education', the report—available at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/esd>—provided a platform for taking the project's work further.

The Academy's ESD Project is widely regarded as a key agent as regards realising this vision, particularly with regard to curriculum

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change and development. The key question is how this can best be achieved, given the barriers to curriculum change that were identified in the Dawe report, and which are echoed in international experience. In the period since the report, the main project has initiated a wide range of projects to develop resources, fund new curriculum initiatives, build capacity and strengthen networks. This work is framed as follows: the purpose is, ‘to help institutions and subject communities develop curricula and pedagogy that will give students the skills and knowledge to live and work sustainably.’ This gives rise to three aims, to:

- research and support the development of ESD in the HE sector, particularly within subject communities
- build capacity amongst individuals, subject communities and institutions to embed ESD in curricula and pedagogy
- assist the coordination and dissemination of policy, research and practice relating to ESD in institutions, the Higher Education Academy and the wider field.

A description of some of this work follows.

Subject Centres’ activity

Sixteen Subject Centres are currently actively working on ESD issues. In addition there are two funded ESD small grants in the area of Physical Sciences and Law. Examples of recent work by Subject Centres include:

- Bioscience: survey of subject community on ESD issues, and ethics/sustainability curriculum audit tool
- Engineering: working with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on the development of ESD resources
- ESCALATE (Education): developing a subject-specific pedagogical strategy for ESD
- Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences: survey of employability skills for environmental scientists, and Skills for Sustainable Futures event
- UK Centre for Legal Education: Project entitled

- ‘Developing global citizens through legal education’
- UK Centre for Materials Education: ESD-themed annual conference
 - Philosophical and Religious Studies: workshop on religion and the environment

Networking

The Project is convening informal link meetings between key institutions and agencies in the field, in order to avoid duplication of effort and promote cooperation. It has organised a major national conference, ‘Sustainability and the Curriculum: Progress and Potential’, which took place on July 10th-11th 2007, at the University of Bradford. The conference was an interactive event designed to explore and disseminate the work of the Project and its associated initiatives, Subject Centres and networks.

Solo HEI events

An experimental discussion day was facilitated at the University of East Anglia in 2006 to encourage a ‘whole institution’ discussion of the past, current and future presence of ESD within the institution, and to encourage consideration of the various manifestations and understandings of ESD. There are plans to hold more events at selected other institutions in the future.

Interdisciplinarity seminar series

Three meetings have been held examining the challenges posed by the coincidence of ESD and interdisciplinarity, at three different universities in the past six months. Some fifteen disciplines were represented. This approach will now be extended to other selected universities.

Small grant funding

Twelve projects from eight different HEIs and/or Subject Centres, representing thirteen disciplines, are being funded to develop innovation in the curriculum. The work ranges from ‘Cultural Sounds and Conservation Texts: Soundscapes of a lost Montserrat (British West Indies)’ to the ‘Development of a Problem-Based Learning Tool to Design Micro-Generation Systems for an Eco-House’. Outcomes from the projects will be available in the summer, 2007. A small grant scheme has recently been initiated for similar projects in Scotland.

Research into UK policy contexts

The Project commissioned Forum for the Future to carry out research that will enable the Project to maximise its activities in each of the four countries by understanding the policy landscape and using a ‘roadmap’ that will help to negotiate barriers, take advantage of policy openings, and identify supportive individuals.

Problem-based community project

The Project is piloting a community project whereby university students are matched with local sustainability initiatives. The focus of this work is on Thornbury, a market town just north of Bristol. Activities include stakeholder events with local residents, and presentations by students to the town.

Resources

In addition, working with the Centre for Sustainable Futures at the University of Plymouth, the Project is developing generic curriculum and strategy / policy materials on ESD to encourage engagement by academics and senior management.

From such bases, the Project now wishes to extend its influence,

and involve and support more academics and HEIs in ESD work. To assist this end, the Project is developing its web presence and aims to become one of the principal sources of information for those in the HE sector wishing to embed ESD. The Project is very much a participative endeavour, led by a small management team to help direct and energise the Project from the centre in collaboration with Subject Centre support, advice and action.

For further information, please go to our website: **<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/esd>**, or e-mail the Project Coordinator, Heather Witham, at **sustainability@heacademy.ac.uk**

Dr Stephen Sterling, Senior Advisor for ESD to the Academy ESD Project, Centre for Sustainable Futures, University of Plymouth.
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What do our Students *Really* Think about their Degree Studies?

Report from a student focus group meeting

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Introduction

There is much talk in the higher education sector about ‘the student learning experience’; but it can be difficult to obtain a true picture of the nature of these ‘experiences’. Departmental staff-student committees do their best in this regard, but the insights they provide—although often useful—are inevitably partial (being dependent upon the representativeness of its membership, limitations of remit or agenda, etc.); and the National Student Survey also often cannot provide the

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specific information that would be truly useful in our teaching.

In response to these considerations, the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies organised a two-day student workshop, which took place in autumn 2006, to gather more detailed feedback on students' perceptions of their degree studies. The intention was to create an opportunity for students to reflect on and share their experiences in a neutral environment (away from their home departments), and in more depth than might otherwise be feasible during the course of their studies. It was also hoped that additional insights might be gained from comparing experiences with students from other degree courses and institutions.

Eleven students attended the event, from a range of backgrounds:

- Level of study: undergraduate levels two and three
- Subject(s) of study: philosophy, theology, religious studies; single and joint honours
- Institution: nine different institutions represented; from older collegiate universities to newer HE colleges; and various regions of the UK

The group also included mature students and those with 'specific learning difficulties' (for example dyslexia).

During the course of the two-day event, students participated in a range of structured workshops and discussions to encourage feedback on different aspects of their experience of studying philosophy, theology and/or religious studies at degree level. The outcomes of these discussions were recorded, so that we could gain more insight into our students' 'learning experiences' and share this with other departments, and so that this information could in turn be used to inform and enhance future curriculum developments.

Activities and outcomes: day one

The discussion on the first day centred on the ways in which students felt A-levels prepared them for study at university, any changes they would like to make to secondary education, the specific benefits they believe they receive from studying their subjects, and how they think

their degree is preparing them for working life.

In what ways did your A levels (or equivalent) prepare or not prepare you for your first year at university?

Students discussed this in pairs, writing up their thoughts on flipchart paper. The majority of students had come through the English system, and so had studied A-levels. One student had taken Highers in the Scottish system, and one student had entered HE via an Access course.

Positives

All the students, no matter which route they had followed into HE, felt that studying an 'essay subject' such as English or history was very important preparation for their degrees. In particular, the extended essays at A2 level had helped to prepare them for the kind of independent work required at degree level, and this thought was echoed by the student who took Highers. Extended essays, personal research projects, supervised essays and so on, were all thought to provide valuable experience for university, no matter which entry route they were used in.

In terms of specific courses, it was felt that the English A-level fed directly into what some students learnt in their first year of New and Old Testament studies, and that parts of the RS A-level fed into the RS degree quite well. English was also noted as being a useful introduction to the kind of textual analysis required at degree level. Some students had taken philosophy A-level, or taken modules in philosophy of religion as part of their RS A-level, and they felt that these courses provided a very good introduction to the subjects. The Access course, although very intense, meant that good time management skills were developed, which proved very useful at university.

In general, the students were positive about the commitment and expertise of their teachers, feeling that they were usually working within their specialised areas, and so were supportive and inspiring. They were also positive about the responsibility they felt in making their A-level, Higher or Access choices, and how this prepared them for the kinds of module choices they were offered in their first year at university.

Negatives

Several students noted that neither the RS nor philosophy of religion and ethics A-levels fed in well to their theology degree. In particular there was the expectation that having studied these topics at A-level the students would be well prepared for the topics covered at university, but this was not the case. It was also felt that those studying theology who are not Christian, or have not had a Christian upbringing, were at a distinct disadvantage.

The student who took the Access course felt that she had to do extensive reading of extra texts in order to catch up with students who had taken A-levels. She also struggled with the kind of essay structure required at degree level, as well as getting used to compiling bibliographies in the necessary format.

Some students who took philosophy A-level felt that there was a large overlap between that course and their first year at university, and this caused obvious frustration. There were also some complaints that the A2 level philosophy course lacked structure. Several students voiced concern that their schools did not have specialist teachers, and so English or history teachers were drafted in to teach philosophy classes, which were not really within their area of expertise.

In general, while A-levels were considered good introductions, they were thought to prepare you more for answering the exam paper than developing excellence in the subject. Several students noted that much of their enjoyment and success had been reliant on the teacher they had, and that some teachers used the same teaching methods at A-level as for younger students, which was not appropriate, especially in terms of preparing them for university. The difference in essay-writing style at A-level and university was mentioned, and the fact that A-levels can give you a misleading over-confidence regarding your competence in the subject. The amount of spoon feeding on the Access course (for example being able to hand in multiple drafts of essays for corrections) was not good preparation for university, where students are expected to be a lot more self-sufficient.

Imagine that you are the Education Minister. What changes would you make to secondary education in order to improve transition from secondary to tertiary education?

Students worked in four groups and wrote their answers on flipchart paper.

Group 1

This group thought that there should be greater choice at secondary level, including the restoration of the classics (Latin, ancient Greek, ancient History, philosophy). They thought there should be no overlap between secondary and tertiary education, and a blurring of the gap between the teaching styles of the two. There should be more communication between schools, exam boards and HE Institutions, which should lead to a more consistent experience for students. They believed there should be no 'box-ticking' at A-level, and that students should be taught the subject, not just how to pass the exam. In regards to exams, there should be more continuous assessment, and less emphasis on final exams.

Group 2

The students in the second group focussed specifically on philosophy, and decided that as good debating skills are essential to both tertiary level philosophy and to life, these should be taught at secondary level. They thought that at least 10% of Highers/A-levels and first year university assessment should be discussion based (in addition to exams and essays) to recognise the dialectic nature of philosophy. As part of this, secondary teachers should promote the spirit of philosophy by encouraging debate rather than simply presenting information about a subject.

Group 3

This group believed there should be an emphasis on languages, including grammar and spelling, a greater effort made in identifying dyslexia, and that a GCSE in a foreign language should be compulsory. They thought there should be more consistency throughout the secondary

education system in terms of course structure, core subjects taught up to GCSE level, and the requirements of different exam boards. In a similar vein, the group wanted to eliminate the repetition of certain subjects, such as studying World War 2 at three different points in secondary education. They also thought that more secondary level students should be given the opportunity to experience university so that they could decide whether it was for them or not.

Group 4

This group thought that philosophy should be more widely available at A-level, and that there should be free choice modules in English and History so that students could read philosophy elsewhere as well. They thought that weekly textual analysis classes would benefit students of all subjects, and that there should be blind-marking of essays. Subject specific staff were thought to be essential, or the subject should not be offered, and teachers should be jointly responsible for courses in order to minimise any potential problems arising from personality clashes. There should be an emphasis on communication skills, and more formal teaching of spelling, punctuation, and grammar, as well as time spent on essay construction and how to use footnotes and bibliographies.

In general, all the students thought that there should be more consistency between what they were taught in different years of secondary education, and between what they were taught at secondary and tertiary levels. They thought there should be better communication between secondary education and higher education, and between different universities, so a degree in Philosophy/TRS from one institution would be comparable to that of another institution. They also agreed that secondary level students should all be given a ‘taste’ of university. They all questioned the need for multiple exam boards, and were sceptical about whether there should be faith schools at all.

Imagine that you have been hired by your university to recruit new students in your discipline. Make a poster or leaflet that would advertise the benefits of doing a degree in your subject.

Students worked in groups of two or three and produced posters.

Group 1

This group thought that the personal benefit of studying philosophy could be used to recruit students, such as the way philosophy strengthens beliefs, tests beliefs and improves ones intuitions. They also thought that studying philosophy strengthens critical thinking skills, opens ones mind to wider world issues, and gives an opportunity to meet like-minded people. The final selling point they came up with was that studying philosophy will help one to win most arguments.

Group 2

The second group stressed the skills one acquires by studying philosophy, such as debating, strong problem solving skills, textual analysis, reasoning, independent thought, argument evaluation, writing skills and how to research and use sources. They linked these skills to potential careers such as law and politics, emphasising how philosophy can provide a strong skill base. They also gave examples of the kinds of questions philosophy students might look at.

Group 3

This group highlighted the different areas of philosophy students might study, and examples of the sorts of questions discussed. For example, in philosophy of mind and epistemology, ‘am I in the Matrix?’ and ‘what is knowledge?’, under the heading of values, ‘what is beauty?’ and ‘am I a bad person?’, and in logic and language, ‘can I P and not-P at the same time?’. They also gave examples of former philosophy students, such as Ricky Gervais and Matt Groening.

Group 4

This group contained all the TRS students, and they also emphasised the kinds of transferable skills gained, for example people skills, analysis, writing, awareness of others’ cultures etc. They pointed out that TRS incorporates many other disciplines, for example, history, art, languages, which means there is an opportunity for change in second / third year. They suggested a TRS degree is an opportunity to develop one’s

own religious beliefs and opinions, and can give a theoretical background to one's faith. Another selling point they listed was that rather than just classroom based learning, and writing essays, TRS gives students an opportunity to get out into the community, look at how religions work in everyday life, and meet a diverse range of people. Finally, as TRS is usually a smaller course than other humanities subjects, they pointed out that there may be more access to resources and smaller class sizes.

In general, nearly all the students commented on the kinds of skills their degrees were developing in them, and how these would be beneficial in getting a job after university. Which leads nicely on to the final question they discussed on the first day...

What kind of skills do you think your degree is developing in you?

Students discussed this question in small groups, writing their answers on flipchart paper. When they had shared their thoughts with the group they were shown a draft version of the PRS Subject Centre's employability guide for philosophy students (now published at <http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/publications>, hard copy available upon request), and looked at how closely their skill lists matched up with the kinds of skills employers say they require.

Philosophy skills

The philosophy students identified the following as skills they felt their degree was developing in them:

- Problem solving / mental dexterity—deducing the best solutions to a variety of problems
- Debating
- Reasoning
- Independent thought
- Evaluation skills
- Self-discipline
- Valid argument identification
- Textual analysis

- Theoretical groundwork for approaching ethical dilemmas
- Research—good research skills; find relevant information, sourcing
- Writing and expression skills
- Practice in viewing N objectively
- Listening skills (from tutorials, etc.)
- Critical thinking—analysing, evaluating, reflecting
- Creativity—thinking ‘out of the box’
- Communication—being able to coherently express yourself, oral and written communication
- Dedication and passion by studying a non-vocational subject—not a means to an end, an end in itself
- Ability to work effectively independently and with others—interact with others
- Concise, rational communication of ideas to employers, to audiences, between peers (leading to) leadership
- Open mindedness
- Keen intuition
- Engagement with very complicated texts and ideas
- Independence of informed opinion
- Autonomy

TRS skills

The TRS students also came up with a long list of skills they thought would be useful in later life:

- Analytical—thought process
- Public speaking—communication
- Time management
- Writing skills
- Reading skills
- IT skills
- Debating skills
- People skills—socialising
- Ability to see issues from another perspective—understanding alternative cultures, lifestyles etc.

- Independence skills / social skills, for example money management, life experience
- Research skills / library skills
- Communication skills—presenting and articulating opinions in spoken and written media
- Self-discipline due to low contact time
- Research ability—being selective, and time management
- Critical thinking
- Comprehension of detailed texts
- Processing information
- Thinking around a problem (outside the box)
- Linguistic and analytical skills
- Broad knowledge base

Activities and outcomes: day two

The second day's discussions focused on students' actual experiences of degree level study, and the degree of fit between this and what they might have expected or hoped for. A concluding roundtable session also gave students the opportunity to debate wider issues regarding the impact of recent government policies on UK higher education.

How has your course met or failed to meet your expectations?

Students discussed this question in discipline-specific groups.

Theology and religious studies

Students were generally very positive about the level of support available from staff; most indicated that this had met, or even exceeded, their expectations. This came with some reservations, however, regarding the perceived approachability of staff, and other support concerns (for example the availability of course materials, and opportunities for structured extracurricular study).

Students also expected, and experienced, a good sense of community within their department. They valued highly the varied nature of their degree studies, exploring a range of perspectives and approach-

es (including the opportunity to study languages).

Failures to live up to students' expectations were largely identified as being due to communication problems. In some cases, it was felt that the university or departmental prospectus had been unclear (or even misleading) about the options available and the course requirements—for example, regarding compulsory modules. (However at least one student said that s/he enjoyed those courses s/he had not expected or intended to take!). Concerns were also raised by joint honours students about the lack of communication between their respective home departments.

Philosophy

Students were positive about their courses overall as meeting their expectations of being interesting and enjoyable. Some particularly appreciated their department's approach to seminars, which gave an opportunity for student presentations. Another highlight was the opportunity to express and explore one's own opinions; however, students' experiences in this regard were more diverse—some found that they had been given a great deal of scope for individual/original thought, whereas others felt that their department's approach placed much heavier emphasis on understanding and interpreting the philosophical canon, and even discouraged exploration of ideas beyond this.

This diversity of opinion/experience was also reflected in the extent to which students felt they were adequately challenged by their first year of study—some concern was expressed that there was excessive repetition of material covered at A-level (for example).

Finally, some students expressed disquiet at the perceived lack of priority given to undergraduate teaching within the department—it was felt that staff attention was focused on their research rather than their students' needs.

What advice would you give to someone who was thinking of doing a degree in your subject area?

This question was also discussed in discipline-specific groups, and gave students an opportunity to draw out some recommendations from

the earlier discussions—for example, ways to ensure that expectations are realistic; and also reasons for studying your subject (from day one). Much of the advice proffered was common to all discipline areas.

Many of the students' recommendations were aimed at equipping potential students to make a well-informed choice:

- Do some preparatory reading in your subject. Do you find it interesting and/or difficult?
- If you're not sure about your subject choice: have you considered studying for a joint honours degree?
- Find out about the department to which you're thinking of applying. What areas of philosophy, theology and/or religious studies do they specialise in? (Look at module descriptions, lecturers' backgrounds and publications.) Are these the kind of topics you want to study?
- Go to open days, and ask questions (you're the customer!) If possible, meet the staff, and the students. Find out whether there's a philosophy, theology and/or religious studies society.
- Think about your career aspirations, and how your degree choice will contribute to this – it's a big commitment (time and money).

Students also emphasised that departments should ensure they provide good information about the subject, as parents and teachers of prospective students may not have a good understanding of what a degree in philosophy / theology / religious studies can offer. It was suggested that it is a good idea to include up-to-date information on departmental activities and a student perspective (for example providing information on undergraduate societies in departments), as the university prospectus can otherwise sound quite bland.

Additional advice focused on enabling future students to know what to expect of their university studies, and how to make the most of their degree:

- Get used to debating, discussing, arguing in seminars (possibly also as part of your assessment).
- Make the most of your first year—read around your

subject (not just the core texts), prepare for your future years of study (and start thinking about careers).

- Make good use of your personal tutor—if you want support, ask for it.
- Ask questions, and get to know your lecturers.
- Use personal development planning.

The ideal and the ‘typical’ lecturer and student

In a more light-hearted exercise, students were challenged to create a portrait of their ideal lecturer, and to compare this with their own experiences. The group was then asked to undertake the same exercise in identifying the characteristics of an ideal / typical student.

Qualities of an ideal lecturer

Students emphasised the importance of staff being knowledgeable, up-to-date, and passionate about their subject. Many other key features centred around the nature of staff-student interactions—students felt it to be important that lecturers were clear, concise, engaging and inspiring in class, using a variety of material; and that staff were generally friendly and approachable.

Students also drew attention to the fact that some of their lecturers fit this description! One described his/her tutor as someone who ‘shows me the world, and guides me to where I’m trying to go with my ideas’. They also emphasised the helpfulness and approachability of many staff. However, it was felt that not all staff were approachable, and not all engaged equally well with their students—some students felt that their tutors ‘don’t really listen’.

Qualities of an ideal student

Discussions focused mostly on the attributes of a successful student—for instance, commitment to one’s studies and subject area, good time management, effective preparation, engaging well with academic staff. However, some students raised broader considerations—for example,

emphasising the value of a diverse student population, which includes a variety of perspectives (gender, faith, ethnicity, age etc.).

Again, it was pointed out that some students do actually mirror the ideal; however, it was also acknowledged that many are distracted by other aspects of university life—the two most common culprits cited being the social life; and money worries.

Policy debate: Do you think the introduction of fees might change higher education or the student experience? Should 50% of 18-30 year olds go to university?

The students in our group were agreed that the introduction of fees would, in the short term, be likely to dissuade many from applying to university; however, many also thought that in the longer term people would come to accept the need to pay fees. They also noted that, if fees prompt many would-be students to ‘think twice’ about studying at university, this could be of benefit—for instance, such students would be likely to take more responsibility for their education.

The students demonstrated a great deal of optimism that the income from fees would improve the quality of higher education, leading to better resources and staff: student ratios; and ultimately helping to make UK higher education more competitive internationally.

However, there was a significant degree of concern about the potential for fees to change the profile of the student population. A number of students suggested that the introduction of fees would undermine efforts to widen participation, as lower income families tend to be more debt-averse. Others noted that students from middle-income families were likely to be affected, as they would be less likely to qualify for financial support. Many of the students also expressed concerns that future applicants would be deterred from applying to read subjects such as philosophy, theology and religious studies, in favour of more vocational courses leading to a clearer career path (and financial return on their investment in higher education). It was further noted that these considerations raise wider (unresolved) questions about the role of higher education, and indeed whether it should be government funded.

The merits of the government’s ambition that 50% of 18-30 year

olds should attend university were also vigorously debated. Students welcomed the aspiration to foster a culture of learning, but were concerned that the effects of this policy might in fact undermine this aim; by making progression to higher education ‘the done thing’, rather than attracting students who are genuinely dedicated and have a clear understanding of how higher education will benefit them. Fears were expressed that increasing participation would devalue degrees, and also the skills of non-graduates: it was suggested that the employment prospects of skilled non-graduates are already being damaged by the increasing number of graduates entering the employment market. Students also argued that it is increasingly unclear what counts as a ‘graduate level’ job; and questioned whether the skills needed by employers are necessarily always those provided by higher education, or whether more diverse education and training routes should be encouraged.

Concluding reflections

In many respects, the perceptions and experiences reported by our sample group of students perhaps do not require us radically to re-think our understanding of ‘the student learning experience’ in philosophy, theology and religious studies. However, it is instructive to obtain a sense of what our students themselves consider to be the key areas of strength—and of concern—in the study of our disciplines.

We have been reminded, for example, that our students often are effective ambassadors for our subjects. They recognise the distinctive value of their degree studies, and are keen to share this with others. Do we always make the best use of their enthusiasm, involving them in, for example, departmental recruitment?

It is also clear from these reflections that students acknowledge—indeed, often welcome—responsibility for their own learning; however, they often feel that their experience of secondary education leaves them ill-equipped to respond adequately to this challenge. Many staff and departments are now working to provide more structured support for first year students to ease this transition to degree level study, (see Deirdre Burke’s article in this edition of *Discourse*, ‘Engaging Students in Personal Development Planning’) and we need

to ensure that these are readily accessible to our students.

Indeed, many of the concerns raised by the students in this group seem to cluster around, and/or arise from, issues of staff-student communication. We aim to foster independence of thought amongst our students, and yet at least some of these students voiced concern about expressing ‘unacceptable’ views, and seemed to be exercising conservative self-censorship in their work. Some students also felt ill-informed about course details and departmental practices, and that they could not approach staff to discuss problems or concerns. Improved communication might also help to avert (or at least to minimise) many of the perceived gaps between students’ expectations and their experiences.

Teaching Practical Theology in Higher Education Conference:

A Report

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This article was written in conjunction with colleagues from partner organisations who co-organised this event, Zoë Bennett (Cambridge Theological Foundation), Mark Cartledge (University of Birmingham) and Alison Le Cornu (Oxford Brookes).

The *Teaching Practical Theology in Higher Education* conference was instigated by the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, and co-organised with the Network of Adult Theological Educators (NoATE) and the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology (BIAPT). It took place at Oxford Brookes on March 1st-2nd 2007, and attracted over 40 participants from a broad

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range of practitioner and academic backgrounds. This generated lively and informed discussion on a broad range of issues associated with practical theology, both within the sessions and during informal discussion. The event benefited from preliminary papers being posted onto the PRS website.

The number of students studying practical theology has grown phenomenally over the last twenty years with the expansion of higher education and the wider distribution of theological education. The proliferation of Masters level programmes in the UK addressing applied, contextual, practical and ministerial concerns are signs of its vitality and relevance. Increasingly the churches are working with universities in order to accredit or validate programmes taught through theological colleges and courses, local churches, diocesan and other structures. This greater interest from the churches has had an impact on higher education with universities beginning to embrace the subject, but in a much broader sense than clergy training. This expansion within the UK context has also meant that higher degrees in practical theology are now more in evidence. This is illustrated by the greater number of research students in the field, the growth of Doctor of Ministry programmes and the launch in 2006 of a collaborative Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology (the development of which is detailed in *With all this energy and expansion, it was considered timely to consider the area of teaching and learning within the field. The event was considered to fit with the Subject Centre's remit to support the development and recognition of good teaching practice in PRS. Its significance was not only to present an opportunity for practical theology practitioners and academics to meet and discuss issues, but to present findings to the wider academic community. The following report is drawn in part from the paper proposals.*

In the evening of March 1st, a keynote paper was provided by Professor Ruard Ganzevoort (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam/Kampen Theological University) on 'Teaching that matters. A course on trauma and theology.' This described experiences in an international MA programme in practical theology and a post academic course, organised around the topic of trauma and theology. In these programmes, pastoral theological and psychological theories are brought together with practical experiences and personal reflection. The paper discussed the theological (and educational) presuppositions and consequences involved

in developing the curriculum. It developed an exploration of the challenges chaplains have to use theology in a practical way, and discussed approaches towards teaching trauma theory, intimate partner violence, and transcultural violence. The programme attracts international students, and connects with central theological themes, such as discussions on evil and guilt, and suffering as punishment. This presentation generated a lively discussion, with questions on the construction of the disciplinary area, the impact of the applications of the term 'victim' and 'survivor', approaches to counselling students on the programme, and methods towards the application of theology as therapy.

There was a variety of workshops and other papers during the conference. For example, Graeme Smith's (St Michael's College, Llandaff) paper, written with Manon Parry, was entitled 'Something that can be learnt but not taught: teaching Theological Reflection through Enquiry Based Learning'. It examined the experience of teaching theological reflection to a group of final year ordinands at a residential summer school. Using Enquiry Based Learning as a pedagogical vehicle, the students were challenged to describe and reconsider their understandings of 'theological reflection'.

Zoe Bennett (Anglia Ruskin University/Cambridge Theological Federation) and Elaine Graham (Manchester) provided a paper on 'The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: an idea whose time has come?'.¹ This paper traced the development of this 'professional doctorate', which was developed under the auspices of the British and Irish Association of Practical Theology, and enrolled its first intake in September 2006. The programme combines sustained reflection on candidates' own professional or voluntary work with a structured, portfolio-based method of assessment. In its emphasis on 'enquiry-based learning'—or practice-based research—and in intentionally modelling patterns of practical theological reflection, the programme is designed to furnish participants with opportunities to deepen their understanding of the theological dimensions of their own practice, thereby enhancing

¹ See Elaine Graham 'The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: an Idea whose Time has Come?' *International Journal of Practical Theology* Vol. 10, Issue 2, March 2007 pp.298-311

² See 'Evaluating the Feasibility of a Cross-Institutional Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: A Report' in this edition of *Discourse*.

their personal and professional understanding and competence. The programme also seeks to nurture a research environment tailor-made to part-time, professionally based candidates, often based in secular rather than ecclesial work contexts. Three universities validated the Professional Doctorate in its first year: Anglia Ruskin University, the University of Manchester, and the University of Wales, Lampeter. This initiative offers the field of Practical Theology new empirical areas of research and a new generation of practice-based researchers; by enabling further sustained exploration of the relationship between theological traditions and the practice of ministry; and by offering new possibilities for adult theological education via the adoption of a range of enquiry-based learning and action-research techniques. The Professional Doctorate is in part a product of a Subject Centre funded project, which explored approaches towards collaboration and delivery of content. Questions emerged in the presentation on the definition and nature of theology as ‘action research’, the approaches towards a viva in the Professional Doctorate, the roles of students in professional contexts, the nature of a ‘contribution to knowledge’ in a practice-based doctorate, and the insider/outsider debate. In terms of the wider academic community, it was noted that aspects of the pedagogy associated with the Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology could be transferred outside of the theology and religious studies sector, for example with interest expressed by performance arts. It was suggested that the doctorate offered institutions improved retention and completion rates, based on new means of reflection and research models.

Angie Pears’ (Oxford Brookes) paper was ‘Claiming the Right to Educate?: Insider/Outsider in Practical and Contextual Theology’. It examined the issues, challenges and possibilities facing a non-Christian, non-faith-based educator teaching Christian practitioners at postgraduate level in practical and contextual theology. It sought to explore and deconstruct the concept of the ‘theologian’ in an educational perspective, scrutinising the place of faith in the academic setting as a pre-requisite to engaging in meaningful theological discourse and reflection with the Christian practitioner. It drew on Pears’ experiences as a tutor and course leader of an MA in Practical and Contextual Theology at Oxford Brookes, designed for Christian practitioners, and taught in distance learning mode. It asked whether an educator could really be an effective part of a community of learners whose faith and

Christian practice is the focal point of their grounded theological studies at Master's level, when the educator herself does not share this faith commitment or practice? Pears noted that this perspective opens up discussion with students, and that the debate on 'theology' has to incorporate insiders and outsiders. It emphasised the potential of theology being applied as a 'resistance tool' by marginalised students, in facilitating a capacity to engage in discourse with 'traditional' theological backgrounds.

Martin Groves (Oxford Brookes) and Phillip Tovey (Diocese of Oxford) explored 'Portfolio, Partnership and Pedagogy in Practical Theology'. This paper offered reflections on the strengths and weakness of portfolio based pedagogy when used in the context of a partnership between a Higher Education institution and a faith community for the purposes of teaching practical theology. It was based on the experience of Oxford Brookes and the Diocese of Oxford in the Church of England in the development of such a project. The paper introduced the theories of the place of portfolio in relation to learning outcomes, assessment, teaching and learning, before exploring whether or not such educational tools meet the needs of secular universities and their faith based partners in the teaching of practical theology. The paper described innovative teaching practice in this area whilst drawing on six years of experience in the delivery and application of partnership and using portfolios for the assessment in the teaching of practical theology. The paper noted that the significance of portfolio based pedagogy in partnership went beyond the assessment of competence to offer a potential resolution of some of the theoretical issues about the location of practical theology in the contemporary educational environment.

Joan Cartledge and Michael Elliott (University of Wales, Lampeter) presented a workshop on 'Action Research as an Educational Tool in a Doctor of Ministry Programme'. It described the module 'Action Research for Ministry' at the University of Wales, Lampeter. The module is grounded in the transformative pedagogy of Paulo Freire and requires participation by the researched, not just the researcher. It utilises a 'double-loop' approach to theological reflection starting with practices and consequences before engaging with values embedded in the practices. The workshop incorporated case studies of projects undertaken by three students: one was a hospice chaplain

studying the spiritual provision for patients; the second was a Free Church minister, who explored the dynamics of the preaching experience; the third student was involved in a church youth project.

Nicola Slee (Queen's Foundation, Birmingham) discussed 'Poetry as a Means of Theological Reflection.' This paper sought to consider how the reading and writing of poetry might offer one avenue towards the development of the art of theological reflection. It drew on a range of poetic texts and considered a range of writing exercises, and Slee suggested that the reading and writing of poetry can contribute to core skills and attitudes desirable for the practice of theological reflection, and offered an approach to how this might be achieved. This was more a workshop than a traditional paper, and participants listened to poems recorded by their authors, and then worked in groups on how this particular poem could enable the skills required in theological reflection. Both the fruitfulness and the difficulties of this method of working became apparent in the doing. Strong feelings were aroused by the poetry, and participants found it interestingly difficult to reflect on skills (for example of close observation, or of the identification of core symbols) rather than on the poems themselves.

John Horder (Moorlands College) presented a workshop on 'Taking church leavers seriously: a worked example of Practical Theology'. This explored the ways in which insights about faith, culture and church could be acquired through studying former members of churches—rather than simply labelling them as people who have 'lost their faith'. The paper concentrated on the context of Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, and on the issues arising for church leaders. Participants were invited to do the theological reflection themselves as part of the demonstration of a model (derived from Mowat and Swinton) and the ensuing discussion was enriched by the wide mix of contexts from which participants came.

Pete Ward's (King's College London) paper 'The Eucharist and the Turn to Culture' took the Eucharist as a test case for developing a practical theology. The paper used methodologies drawn from cultural and media studies to read the Eucharist as Production, Text and Consumption. It argued that doctrine is performed in the Eucharist.

¹ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, 'Practical Theology and Qualitative Research', (London: SCM Press 2006)

The significance of the paper for practical theology and education is that the doctrinal is not bracketed out, rather the lived culture of faith and the theological canon are both recognised as read in relation to one another.

The title of Carla A. Grosch-Miller's (Southern Theological Education and Training Scheme (STETS), Salisbury) paper was 'Bounded by love: equipping a wholesome sexuality in ministry'. This discussed the issues surrounding sex and sexuality in the church, relating these to a perceived absence of knowledge (in some cases) of the science/psychology of sexuality and/or biblical sexual ethics. The paper proposed a role for higher education in helping to alleviate this situation, through development of a detailed curriculum for the training of ordinands and for continuing ministerial education. The curriculum incorporates sex education; the theology of sexuality and gender; sexuality and spirituality; power, vulnerability and boundaries in ministry; pastoral care good practice; the impact of clergy sexual misconduct; strategies for self-care and for promoting healthy congregations; and facilitating faithful conversation in conflict. A good conversation ensued in which suggestions for curriculum development were made.

Christopher Craig Brittain (Aberdeen) explored 'The concept of *habitus* in practical theology'. It summarised the reasons why many theologians emphasised the concept, and what function they understood it to have within theological education. Brittain noted: 'In the context of the modern university, and in the face of denominationalism among churches, over-emphasising the function of practice and habits risks giving insufficient critical attention to the limitations and blind spots that are part of local practice. Furthermore, it might be asked whether the concept of *habitus* offers sufficient resources to enable theology and communities to negotiate between communities of difference? If it is practice, not belief, which is to ground practical theology, then what does one do when practices collide?'. The connections between knowledge and goodness were focussed in the question, which fired participants' imagination—'can a good theology student be an evil genius?' Or what might it mean to establish *habitus* in a university context?

Alison Le Cornu (Oxford Brookes) discussed 'The Practice of Teaching Practical Theology: the Development and Use of Reusable Electronic Learning Objects'. As part of the development of Brookes'

MA in Practical and Contextual Theology, which is studied entirely by distance learning, two new modules have been introduced which will make significant use of Reusable Electronic Learning Objects (RELOs). Brookes' work with RELOs began eighteen months ago, thanks to a grant from the Subject Centre.³ The first grant was followed by a second, and the project has moved from the first stage of defining what a RELO is, to the second stage of how it can be used effectively in an higher education context. Key elements that were introduced included the ways in which electronic learning objects can be adapted for use in different disciplinary contexts, which clearly is an issue with relevance beyond the area of practical theology.

Feedback to the conference was positive. It was described by participants as a 'very stimulating and thought-provoking conference', 'great for networking', and 'very helpful for me to develop my own thinking'. The variety of papers included in the conference was positively received. There were several requests for follow-up events to focus in on specific themes introduced at the conference. It was seen to enhance networking amongst academics and practitioners, who would not necessarily meet in other conference contexts. The mix of subject areas was seen as valuable, with the role of the Subject Centre acting as an important catalyst for exploring these critical themes. Much of the content related to academic discourse, not just in PRS but also in the wider academy. A collection of papers will be edited for a special edition of the *Journal of Adult Theological Education*. Practical theology was described as being at the 'cutting edge' of theology, and it was with this in mind that it is anticipated that a future related event on Teaching Practical Theology will be organised in order to explore some of the themes further, including assessment issues, and gender and sexuality.

³ See 'Reusable Electronic Learning Objects for Theology and Religious Studies' in this edition of *Discourse*.

Evaluating the Feasibility of a Cross-Institutional Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology:

A Report

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This article was written in conjunction with colleagues who took part in this project: Mark Cartledge (then University of Wales, Lampeter), Elaine Graham (University of Manchester), Stephen Pattison (then Cardiff University), Gordon Lynch (then University of Birmingham), James Sweeney (then Heythrop College) and Kevin Ward (University of Leeds).

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Introduction

In October 2006 a significant and long-awaited meeting took place in the University of Manchester. It was the first residential meeting of the first cohort of the new Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology¹: fourteen staff and students from Anglia Ruskin University and the University of Manchester, together with Rev Dr Kenneth Leech, Samuel Ferguson lecturer and residential study leader. This baby had been gestating since April 2003, when at a fringe meeting of the *International Academy of Practical Theology* (IAPT) the British participants first conceived the idea.

This paper is an attempt to tell the history of those three and a half years of work, and in particular to draw out the significance of the inter-institutional collaborative dimension. The significance of the launching of a Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology, as a contribution both to pedagogical practice and to the discipline of practical theology itself, has been explored elsewhere and will inevitably continue to be explored as the project grows². This paper will touch on these issues tangentially, but its main focus is our attempt to forge a collaborative venture within the context and constraints of current UK university practices, protocols and priorities. We were awarded a grant in 2004-5 by the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies in order to ‘evaluate the feasibility of a cross-institutional Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology’.

History

The history of this project falls into three distinct phases. First there was a period of maximally wide consultation among potentially inter-

¹ Throughout this article the terminology of ‘Professional Doctorate’ is used. It is within the family of professional doctorates that this programme finds its ethos. However, an alternative terminology, favoured by the University of Manchester, is DPT—Doctor of Practical Theology.

² See Elaine Graham ‘The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: an Idea whose Time has Come?’ *International Journal of Practical Theology* Vol. 10, Issue 2, March 2007 pp.298-311

ested parties. Then there was a phase of investigative development involving six institutions, during which both draft specifications for the degree and general possibilities for collaboration were hammered out. During this phase some institutions left the project, often in the hope of rejoining within a few years, and others considered joining, one of whom did in fact do so. Finally there was a phase of putting together the precise arrangements for collaboration, and producing validation materials.

Phase I

Meeting of UK practical theologians at IAPT (April 2003, Manchester)

Those who met on this initial occasion included university teachers of practical theology and also those concerned with continuing professional development issues for pastoral practitioners. The root issues which provoked their seminal thinking were:

- the need to increase research and publication in the field of practical theology in Britain
- the small number of university appointments in practical theology as compared to other branches of theology and religious studies
- the reluctance of many able students who complete Masters programmes in this field to go on to PhDs
- the recognition that such students are often also excellent practitioners who would welcome a form of higher degree by research which could be rooted in that practice, by way of reflection and/or action research.

The Professional Doctorate, rooted as it is in reflective practice, professional development, applied research, enquiry-based learning, and specific contexts of practice, seemed to offer an excellent model to explore.

Meeting of interested parties (January 2004, Manchester)

After the IAPT discussion we decided to call a meeting, casting the net as wide as possible, of those working in UK universities who might be interested in this venture. It is important to clarify who ‘we’ denotes. There exists in Britain and Ireland an association which mirrors IAPT, the *British and Irish Association of Practical Theology* (BIAPT). It seemed appropriate that the development of a Professional Doctorate should take place under the auspices of BIAPT, a view which the BIAPT committee endorsed, appointing at a later stage a representative to the Liaison Group of the PrD. The then Chair of BIAPT, Zoë Bennett, was present at the original meeting, and was invited by the ad hoc group to convene a meeting of potentially interested parties. Association with BIAPT in this way would give an open, broad and established professional base for the venture rather than its becoming a brain-child of a self-selecting clique. Furthermore, association with a national professional body would link the academic and the professional at the heart of the enterprise and expose students to the widest possible range of contacts.

Those who came to that first meeting in January 2004 included representatives from the universities of Durham, Manchester, Birmingham, Anglia Ruskin (then APU), Edinburgh, Cardiff, and Heythrop (London). The discussion revealed

- a strong interest in collaboration for reasons of size and resources
- that there were those already advanced in plans towards Doctor of Ministry programmes (DMins), either in collaboration with US universities or building equivalent UK models
- that there were universities who already had professional doctorates well established in other subjects
- that many of us had a regional focus which was often linked to existing collaboration between universities and theological colleges/partnerships.

Already at this first meeting we invited a member of the Learning and Teaching Support Unit in one of our universities to join us, who

sounded notes of both enthusiasm and caution in respect of our collaborative plans. The enthusiasm focused on the benefits for students of peer group support in a structured programme involving group progression, with attendant transferability and immersion in a collaborative research culture. The caution focused on the need to be precise about how the quality control issues and the finances would work out in a collaborative programme. These two issues, especially quality control, would become increasingly significant as we worked towards a feasible model of cooperation. One way of describing this story is to tell it as a group of idealistic academics gradually coming to terms with the realities of validation in the modern university. What was made absolutely clear to us at this meeting was that for a non-traditional doctorate of this kind delivered through collaborative means to have any chance of success what we most needed was to grasp, to elaborate and to articulate a clear alternative philosophy of pedagogy appropriate to our discipline which made it worth while overcoming the obstacles. Primarily, we needed to work out what we wanted to do academically, and make a very good case for it, because such collaborative programmes are always more costly to institutions.

By the end of this meeting we had agreed to work together to develop a national professional doctorate syllabus with a view to this being delivered in individual institutions but also with a view to collaborative arrangements. We agreed that we would need to look at various possible models of collaboration, taking into account those already existing at Masters level, those in operation in a European context, and also importantly the fact that we might want to collaborate with those delivering professional doctorates in other disciplines as well as across the field of practical theology.

Phase 2

Meetings of initially committed parties (March and June 2004, Birmingham)

At this point representatives of six universities opted into serious engagement with the task of creating this professional doctorate—they were Anglia Ruskin, Birmingham, Cardiff, Heythrop (London), Leeds

and Manchester. This in no way was seen as either committing those universities to offering the PrD or excluding others from joining later. It was a crucial part of the process that it was an open process, designed to be as flexible and inclusive as possible.

A further significant feature of the process at this stage was that it was driven by academics, and indeed all the representatives were academics. This had the positive effect that what the Learning and Teaching Unit representative had encouraged us to do came to pass—we concentrated intensively at the first stage on what we wanted this programme to be, academically and pedagogically.

Who would the programme be for?

One of the driving forces behind the development of this PrD was the rapidly increasing number of candidates graduating from MA programmes in pastoral and practical theology and related fields.³ We wanted the PrD to be available to as wide as possible a range of professionals who might be interested in looking at their working context from a theological point of view, and so described our potential recruits as follows:

- The programme is designed to recruit those interested in relating theological, ethical and spiritual insights and methods to their own professional and/or voluntary practice.
- Participants need not necessarily have a faith-commitment but they should be interested in the role of religion, theology and ethics in forging ‘action-directing world-views’.
- The aim of the programme is not to produce competent ministers, counsellors, community workers or managers, but to assist in the continuing personal and professional

³ In 2001 Paul Ballard, Professor of Practical Theology from Cardiff University, conducted a survey of taught postgraduate courses in Practical Theology, published as *Proliferation and Performance* (HOLI 10 Religious and Theological Studies Cardiff:2001) in which he identified 58 MA /MTh courses in Practical Theology in the UK (18-21), all of which would feed a Professional Doctorate programme. Ballard discusses in detail the proliferation of such courses in relation to the growth of the discipline since the 1960s.

development of reflective practitioners across a range of contexts and institutions.

- The programme should help to deepen participants' critical, innovative, managerial, reflective and research skills.

As one of our subsequent validation documents put it

typical profiles of potential candidates for the award would include: an ordained Christian healthcare chaplain; a Jewish social worker; a humanist youth worker wishing to reflect on the intercultural and interfaith nature of her clientele; a nun who directs a retreat centre; a religious studies teacher.

What would differentiate this programme from existing DMin programmes?

While we were clear that this programme differed from existing DMin programmes in two or three ways, it was thought that there would be sufficient commonality that a flexible approach might allow some collaboration with DMin programmes which our colleagues were embarking on. Specifically we differentiated the professional doctorate from what is commonly known as a DMin in the British context on three grounds. First, a large number of DMin programmes operate with significant overlap with M level. The professional doctorate is entirely at doctoral level throughout. Second, the DMin focuses specifically on Christian ministry (often though not exclusively ordained Ministry) as the profession in which it is rooted. The professional doctorate is designed for a much wider range of professions and religious commitments. Third, the PrD, by contrast with the DMin, is a research-only degree, with no subject-based taught components.

What would be the shape of this programme?

We then turned our attention to the design of the programme and the shape of the portfolio of work which would be expected of candidates.

The expected mode of attendance would be part-time: six years maximum and three years minimum (exceptional cases of full-time study). Emphasis would be placed on the value of cohort identity for participants, and collaborative research (such as group work or joint publications) was to form a significant part of the assessment.

- Part I: three units (over three years pt)—to include:
 - Generic research skills
 - Mapping the field, locating critical debate (literature review or equivalent)
 - Research design and methodology
 - Production of publishable article
 - Reflection on practice
 - Generation of original research
 - “Personal & Academic Development Plan”—containing elements of initial skills audit, reflection via journaling, peer review, formative assessment
 - Research proposal for Part II dissertation
- Part II: 50,000-60,000 word dissertation (three yrs pt) — independent research and supervision
- All aspects of the programme would be assessed at ‘D’ level, and so could be envisaged as a ‘portfolio’ of doctoral work.

We were convinced that whatever model of collaboration we eventually opted for we would need to have close adherence from all participating universities to the specifications for the degree (aims, learning outcomes and assessment tasks for each part and unit) which we had devised together.

How would the programme be delivered?

The programme would not be a distance- or distributed-learning programme but delivery would be through seminar and other group work, supervision and independent research. Notes from the 7.6.04 meeting state:

Some initial discussion took place of how this programme might be delivered. A provisional model is for each module to consist of around 60 hours contact time, with these hours made up of 24 hours from a two-day summer school and one-day regional event, and a further 40 hours made up of fortnightly or monthly group seminars and individual tutorials. This structure is clearly suitable primarily for part-time students and it would be anticipated that this would be the normal pattern of delivery—though in certain cases full-time registration may be feasible.

This leaves a certain amount of flexibility for different institutions to operate in different ways, and that is in practice what has happened. The crucial points of collaborative national delivery are currently:

- A 48 hour summer school scheduled to follow immediately after the BIAPT conference in July, which encourages candidates to join the wider professional body represented by BIAPT, and also gives them opportunities to discover supervision possibilities within that body. Conversely it encourages the wider body of practical theologians to be informed about the PrD.
- A 48 hour residential in Manchester in October scheduled around the annual Samuel Ferguson Lecture and the delivery of ‘master classes’ by the Samuel Ferguson lecturer to PrD students.

What were the perceived benefits of collaboration?

It was felt at this stage that ‘development of a national framework would seem to require two things: (a) devising a programme which allowed for diversity of provision within a common framework of credit transfer, [credits were later dropped as inappropriate to doctoral level, though the discussion about this nationally in Higher Education has since been revived] shared learning outcomes, etc. (b) developing a set of (financial) agreements between HE institutions which would enable course participants to transfer between institutions, some degree of collaborative provision, e.g. summer schools etc.’

The benefits of collaboration were seen to be manifold. These became increasingly clear as the working group continued its explorations. They are:

- that university teachers and researchers in practical theology are thinly spread nationally across our universities, making it unlikely that any one university alone could mount a Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology but that when working together we make a substantial and rich teaching and research contribution to the discipline. Resourcing and delivery would be much stronger with a consortium, adding value to the degree,

- that candidates for such a degree would benefit substantially from collaborative and collegial working together as a cohort in a congenial research culture through the proposed summer schools and day conferences/seminars,
- that candidates would also benefit from taking advantage of the different specialisms offered both by different universities at Part I and by supervisors drawn from a large pool at Part II. This would maximize the range of research interests and expertise available to candidates on the programme,
- that candidates would thus benefit from an enhanced research environment (strong peer group, range of staff contacts across a wide spectrum of research interests),
- that candidates who move to a different part of the country at any stage would benefit from the involvement of universities in different locations,
- that a networked programme would be marketed as such, for example through a website with links to practical theology sites, and would be highly attractive not only to UK candidates but to international candidates,
- that design and review would be done with the widest possible range of expertise,
- that there would be staff development possibilities through mentoring of new supervisors, and shared resources for staff development,
- that collaboration had the intrinsic merit of being in line with national policy,
- that commonality of standards would be ensured as the new venture of a Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology was initiated. This is part of the development of the discipline in both teaching and research.

Birmingham 6.9.04—reality begins to bite

This meeting was marked by two new features. First, we were joined by representatives from Oxford Brookes and from Lampeter, who were interested in finding out more about this venture; Lampeter subsequently became one of the three initial validating universities. Second,

we had begun the process of consulting our universities' Registries and QA organs and committees, and most of the meeting was taken up in reflecting soberly on what they had said to us. The meeting itself was still comprised entirely of academics.

It is important to note that at this stage the model we were working on was that we should come up with a degree, whose specifications and regulations all participating universities would agree at a jointly held validation event. We were quite clear that each university would have to enroll and be responsible for its own students, and award them their degrees, but we thought it desirable for parity of student experience and for working relationships between staff to have a single degree validated by a multiplicity of universities.

At this meeting the following issues raised the spectre of serious differences between universities:

- fees
- costs of collaboration and financial remuneration between institutions
- fall-back or exit award
- word lengths for papers, and for dissertation
- full/part time, and recruitment of international students

It was agreed that our development group needed to expand to include representatives from the Registries (or equivalent) of seriously interested institutions. On reflection, that we did the first half of the work with academics only meant we had later to do some retrenchment and some of us had to do some hard persuasive work. But this was outweighed by the benefit we had of dreaming dreams and of putting that crucial question about our academic and pedagogical philosophy at the heart of the development of the professional doctorate.

Meeting moving towards a consortium? (January 2005, Birmingham)

For the first time at this meeting we were joined by members of our universities responsible for administration and/or quality assurance procedures. In advance we produced a comprehensive paper outlining our proposals, and in particular addressing the sorts of QA issues nec-

essary for validation of the degree, and the suggested model for collaboration.

The QAA Code for Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education, section 1 Postgraduate Research Students (September 2004), with the ‘Joint Statement’ of the Research Councils/AHRB of skills training requirements for research students as its appendix 3, was the yardstick by which we commonly agreed to work. It should be noted that throughout our deliberations it was immensely helpful to have this common set of standards to which all our universities were committed to adhere. Likewise the Quality Assurance Qualifications Framework (November 2000) helped us to formulate our understanding of the nature of the research degree we wanted to offer, and also the aims we had for it and the outcomes we expected.

These shared values and protocols were helpful, both constructively in providing genuinely well thought-through and challenging content for our intended products and processes, and also pragmatically in providing shortcuts to commonly agreed procedures and standards which all our universities trusted.

At this stage in the development of the project we envisaged the collaborative consortium as having a ‘Management and Progressions Board’ which would:

- advise on admissions cases, although applications and admissions would be the responsibility of the enrolling university
- oversee the monitoring and review of candidates according to common processes and forms
- check that proper ethics procedures had been covered, although the responsibility for this would lie with the enrolling university
- develop and manage appropriate systems for feedback and quality enhancement.
- nominate a common External Examiner for Part 1, to be approved by each participating university
- be responsible for making arrangements for marking, cross/double marking of Part 1 work
- manage the logistics of the programme, including common research training.

One issue which constantly threatened the possibility of close collaboration was finance, and the complexities of delivering a programme through a consortium. The budget considerations for costing this programme involved the determination of:

- The fees required by the university with which the student is registered. We wanted all universities to charge the same fee.
- The generic elements—in particular the Summer School and the Management and Progressions Board costs. If this was located in a single institution would that institution become the budget holder or draw from a fund?
- Collaborative elements including financial reconciliation between participating universities as follows:
 - Summer School teaching will involve teachers from different universities, not necessarily the same ones each year;
 - Supervisors for Part II will be selected according to specialisms from across the collaborating universities;
 - At Part I it may be possible for students occasionally to join classes in universities which are not the one at which they are registered.

All these required that either we had a simple pro rata system for reconciling costs, or that we worked on a quid pro quo basis. The latter would be simpler and could be reviewed after a set time to see whether it was working fairly.

It is clear from the preparatory paper in which we set all of this out that we were at this stage hoping for a common set of regulations, a commonly administered programme and a common validation.

Common set of regulations

This award will need a common set of regulations which guard its legal status and act as final arbiter in matters of dispute. These will need to be drawn up when all matters in this document are agreed and in such a way as is compatible with the current regulations for comparable degrees in the participating universities.

Validation

It is proposed that the most efficient way forward is to constitute a Panel to validate this degree comprising members of all the initial participating universities at the highest level. Each university would then clearly have to confirm this validation, but difficulties should have been already dealt with at the joint validation panel level. The Team proposing the new award would effectively be the practical Theology teachers involved in running it. There should be at least one if not two external subject experts on the Panel.

Responses to this paper revolved around practical issues of cost and delivery, and pushed us to be clearer about the nature of the collaboration we were seeking. Was this a common programme delivered in several places with common regulations, a common Board etc, or a more harmonized, confederal relationship between individual institutions? The possibility was briefly canvassed that BIAPT corporately should see itself as the customer for the programme, buying services from the different universities. The degree would then be owned by the academic community. Academics could be hired in to teach the courses. The major problem in principle to this solution was that it did not really help develop local research communities in the different universities. Colleagues were clear that this local base was essential.

From this point on, both in our communal and in our individual institutional discussions it became clear that a confederal/harmonization pattern would be better—simplifying administration and saving on administration costs, meeting the stringent QA concerns of our universities which centred on the issue of retaining control absolutely of all QA matters, and still delivering what we wanted academically and pedagogically of the programme.

Harmonisation mean[t] having the same programme but validated separately in each institution. A common external assessor could be appointed. There could be cross-representation on each institutional board. Co-operative arrangements would be set up to support the programmes together in a steering group. Students would belong to the institution which they enrol at, but services would then be purchased from 'recognised lecturers' in confederate institutions, possibly with joint supervision from home institution.

It is interesting to note how even this degree of harmonisation was modified later in the process; the common external assessor is nowhere enshrined in any agreement, there is not cross representation on institutional boards, the 'steering' group has become a 'liaison' group, and it is now proposed that joint supervision is by the normal external supervisory arrangements of institutions. The real meat of collaboration is in the working relationships of the academic/ teaching staff and in the way the residential meetings allow the students to form a national cohort, but that is to anticipate a later stage of the story.

We agreed at this stage that a confederal/harmonisation model was the one we want to pursue and that validation would be within individual institutions guided by a steering group.

Moving towards validation (June and November 2005, Birmingham)

We reconvened with fresh paperwork. Three universities were moving towards validation for a 2006/7 start: Anglia Ruskin University, the University of Manchester, and the University of Wales, Lampeter, although the latter would delay intake for at least a year because of staff changes. Those who felt that they would not go forward at this stage did so for a variety of staffing and timing reasons, but most remained seriously interested in the possibility of joining at a later stage.

With much discussion still centering on the nature of the collaboration, a certain 'neurosis' was manifest over where control would lie. One representative asked to what extent 'fiddling with commonly agreed regulations' was legitimate; another suggested the consortium should be 'on a loose model to make our lives easier'. Although we had agreed to locate ourselves in relation to the QAA Code of Practice on Collaborative Provision it became clear that our circumstances did not fit this model of collaboration.

Our eventual model of collaboration is focused in the 'Liaison Group'. This is the group which started out as the 'Management and Progressions Board' and its progression from this, to 'Steering Group' to 'Advisory Group' then to the final 'Liaison Group' tells a story in its own right. It is all a question of who has control and, crucially, who is seen to have control. This is ultimately a question of finance —and of QA, insofar as QA is indeed separable from finance. This is not neces-

sarily unfortunate. It has left the academics/teachers of the degree in a position to expend their collaborative energies on actual delivery of good quality training and supervision, joint staff development, serious consideration of the research and professional issues raised by this innovative programme, and dissemination through publications and other means. Collaboration at the grass roots level has not been hampered, as will be shown below.

The composition and terms of the Liaison Group are currently:

Composition

- An academic member of each of the participating institutions, normally the academic programme leader. Also a person appointed by the Committee of the *British and Irish Association of Practical Theology*.

Terms of Reference

The Liaison Group has three key areas of work: to agree membership of the consortium, a liaison role in respect of the participating universities, and a management role in respect of activities jointly undertaken by the consortium.

In respect of the consortium it will:

- create and administer criteria for membership of the consortium
- admit or exclude members,
- confirm membership annually,
- produce a Consortium Handbook

In respect of liaison between participating universities:

the Liaison Group recognises the academic autonomy of the participating universities in the conduct of the various parallel programmes. However, it will endeavour to facilitate the exchange of information and good practice between the participating universities in order to enhance the quality of the student experience in each university. To this end it will:

- exchange perspectives on appropriate fee levels and market demand
- exchange views on the nature of the student intake in relation to the specified entry requirements of each institution, and the effectiveness of student mobility recognition and AP(E)L processes
- maintain a collective expertise register of specialists in the field which universities may draw upon for examiners and supervisors as appropriate
- exchange perspectives on the way in which the programme(s) is/are evolving, and identify trajectories of future development and evolution on which the participating universities are free to draw as appropriate in particular cases
- provide a rigorous forum for the exploration of common issues and concerns, and their resolution in ways appropriate to particular universities.

In respect of the management of collaborative activities it will:

- manage the annual summer school, which includes induction and subject specific research training
- manage any further programmes of seminars/lectures organised for all participating students, of which there should be at least one per annum,
- consider and promote marketing of the whole programme, in liaison with participating institutions.

It can be seen that the sort of control envisaged in the Management and Progressions Board has disappeared; the feel is much more about liaison in good practice, and about management of communal aspects of delivery. Furthermore, the composition envisaged even at the 7.6.05 meeting which included QA administrators from every institution and a student representative, has been changed to reflect less power and more staff liaison.

A crucial addition, however, has been the BIAPT representative. This represents the intention that this professional doctorate should be situated in association with the major national professional body which

covers the professions from which candidates are likely to come, and the academic communities which address practical theology. It is recognized that BIAPT does not have a monopoly of interest either in these professions or these academic communities, but it is widely representative and it is the constituency in which the idea was conceived and the programme born.

Furthermore, as we stated that the Liaison Group would have the key role in defining membership of the consortium we were concerned not to perpetuate a self-serving clique. Who would regulate the consortium? Who would recognise a course as legitimately belonging—whether in terms of the nature of the course or of the weight pulled by its academics in the delivery of communal aspects of the programme? The presence on the Liaison Group of a representative appointed by the BIAPT committee would bring an external perspective and some sense of accountability.

There were two further documents that we proposed at this stage would enshrine our collaboration. One was a Consortium Handbook. This has not yet been done but is a clear duty of the Liaison Group and is still very much intended. The other was a Memorandum of Agreement to be signed by each participating university—a ‘service level agreement’ to give the Liaison Group ‘some teeth’. At the point at which this was suggested the projected group was an ‘Advisory Group’. Interestingly this dropped off the agenda during the various validations, and this may well have been in line with the move to a ‘Liaison Group’. Whether or not it will be revived remains to be seen. The actual outworking of the Liaison Group has not hitherto required it, but it remains a possible route to follow for the future.

Comment

As this narrative has proceeded history has merged into evaluative comment. The process of designing and implementing a cross-institutional professional doctorate inevitably involved a continual assessment of its feasibility, and the factors affecting this have emerged as the story has progressed. It remains to select, highlight and comment on a number of issues which can be identified as particularly significant in such a venture, and which should be taken into account by anyone

looking at a similar project. As was stated earlier, many interesting and important issues surrounding the design of a professional doctorate in practical theology are treated elsewhere; this paper is concerned specifically with the issue of collaboration between universities on such a project.

A 'Virtual Faculty'?

Networking, personal relationships and a spirit of co-operation have characterized this project from the start. The project arose from a face to face conversation, in which common needs and concerns were voiced: concerns for our discipline, for students and practitioners, and for our own isolation as practical theologians in university contexts where theology is often marginalized and subsumed under wider umbrellas, and where practical theology can be the 'Cinderella' subject within the theological disciplines. Those whose work was more at the interface of professional practice shared these concerns. We had strong motivation to work together.

At first we had a vision which was akin to that of a 'virtual faculty'. Marketing, curriculum design, teaching/supervision resources, administration, and vision for this programme would all be held in common for the benefit of the discipline and of its associated professions. This vision we found, or thought we had found, was incompatible with the financial concerns and the QA concerns of our different universities. For a while it seemed that the vision of the academics was to be sabotaged by the concerns of the bureaucrats. But in retrospect that is too pessimistic a view. The bureaucratic underpinning has in practice enabled those of us who have validated the degree to work in beneficially collaborative ways. The question remains, and is a serious one, whether others who dropped out of the project, at least *pro tem*, did so for bureaucratic rather than academic reasons.

Fluidity, flexibility and partnerships

A closely allied characteristic of the project has been its fluidity and flexibility, its openness to new developments and associations. Within the aims of offering a fully doctoral degree entirely by research (as opposed to a taught doctorate or equivalent), and of enhancing the dis-

cipline of practical theology, we have been open to whatever might help us in this. Thus, one partner who also offers a DMin proposes some synergy with this, and in this spirit we are open to collaborating, for example, in seminars with other DMin programmes, and also including in our seminars practical theology students doing PhDs by the traditional route. In another direction, the university of a different partner has already a strong commitment to PrD programmes, and here opportunities are taken to enhance staff development and good practice through interdisciplinary routes. A further partner is deeply involved in the developing Enquiry-based Learning programme within their university, to the benefit of the whole consortium.

We have started with three universities validating a PrD (Practical Theology) as members of the consortium. There are several others seriously interested in joining. The final form of the agreed collaboration was designed to make it relatively simple for new members to come on board, and includes:

- validation set up according to the regulations of each participating university, and adhering to agreed specifications for the degree
- collaborative residentials
- accreditation of prior learning and use of external supervision according to each university's regulations
- membership of a liaison group

We would be glad to hear from interested parties.

Parity of student experience

An issue of key importance is that students on this programme get comparable experiences. We did not achieve our original aims of running a single programme offered by a variety of universities, so what is left of parity? Taking a snapshot through a typical student's projected career on the programme it would look like this:

- at admission—criteria for admission for participating universities for PrD programmes are similar though not necessarily identical; fees are comparable but again not

absolutely identical with residentials being paid for at cost price separately; some universities offer full-time and part-time and other part-time only, but the normal expectation is part-time and the requirement to relate ones research to ones working context virtually implies this.

- Identical aims and expected outcomes are specified for the three units at Stage 1, and the dissertation at Stage 2.
- Cohort training experience – the students who enroll in any given year work within two cohort groups, the smaller group of their own institution and the larger national cohort group. The national group has two 48 hour residentials annually; the two existing institutional groups currently have two further 48 hour residentials or four day conferences. Experience thus far has suggested both modes are deeply appreciated. There is therefore parity in the time spent in cohort groups on joint training and seminar work.
- Resources of participating universities, for example library facilities, staff development opportunities and specific resources such as the Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-based Learning at Manchester, are open to the whole consortium to the benefit of students.
- The assessment is almost identical, with the one difference that word lengths and exact content for particular parts for the overall portfolio may differ according to different university regulations. There is parity in what is expected in total.
- The process of external examination is for all students at Stage 2 the standard one expected for doctoral work. At Stage 1 some universities require an overall external moderator to be appointed, others include Stage 1 work in the final examination.
- Universities do not have an identical policy on exit points at a level below PrD. This may change in line with national policy changes, as the topic of exit points for PrDs is currently under discussion.

‘An alternative philosophy of pedagogy’

At our very first meeting the challenge was thrown out that if we wanted to make this idea work we must offer ‘a clear alternative philosophy of pedagogy appropriate to our discipline’. One of the benefits of this cross institutional project, which has involved considerably more people than strictly the representatives of the currently validating institutions, has been that we have had the opportunity to examine our discipline and the pedagogy appropriate to it. Practical theology has long claimed an association with disciplines such as sociology and psychology, as well as the traditional close allies of theology such as languages, history and philosophy. But this project has enabled us to connect with the professional disciplines, with healthcare, social work, education, business, built environment and so on. We have been able to learn from them, but also to challenge them, for example with our more fluid notions of practice and less ‘effectiveness oriented’ temper.⁴

Furthermore we have begun to explore the potential which practical theology has as a practice-oriented discipline⁵ for the work of the ‘researching professional’ as opposed to the ‘professional researcher’.⁶ Various forms of postgraduate work (MAs and DMins) in practical theology have emphasised the reflective practice element inherent in the discipline. Our hope is that this further turn towards the researching professional will be a movement of importance for our discipline, and the fact that it has begun in this nationally collaborative way will increase its influence and significance. There are already signs of international interest.

⁴ See a paper given by Zoë Bennett and Elaine Graham at the HEA Conference *Teaching Practical Theology in Higher Education*, at Oxford Brookes University, March 1st-2nd 2007, to be published in JATE forthcoming.

⁵ See for example John Swinton and Harriet Mowat *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (SCM: London 2006) pp.4-10

⁶ See 4 above and further T. Bourner, R. Bowden and S. Laing (‘Professional Doctorates: The Development of Researching Professionals’, in T. Bourner, T. Katz and D. Watson, eds. *New Directions in Professional Higher Education*, (Buckingham: Open University Press 2000), pp. 214-225.

HEA Subject Centre

Finally we would like to record our thanks to the HEA Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies for their interest and encouragement in this project. This has been through an initial grant to do the feasibility study, and also through the presence of a staff member at the first ‘taster’ summer school for the PrD in 2006. We hope what we have done will be of help and encouragement to practical theologians and also to anyone in any discipline who is thinking of working collaboratively across institutions.

Further information

For further information see

<http://www.theofed.cam.ac.uk/professionaldoctorate.html>

<http://www.lamp.ac.uk/trs/Postgraduate/Degrees/dpt.html>

<http://www.arts.manchester.ac.uk/subjectareas/religionstheology/postgraduatestudy/practicaltheology/whatisthedpt/>

**Articles, discussion and practical
teaching**

The *Discourse* Interview

4. Dr Deirdre Burke

University of Wolverhampton

Interviewed by: Simon Smith

Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies
Higher Education Academy

Continuing our series of interviews with noted academics, Simon Smith, Associate Director of the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, talked to Deirdre Burke about her teaching career across the education sectors, her work on the Holocaust and genocide and becoming a National Teaching Fellow. The interview was conducted in Wolverhampton on 12th March 2007.

Good afternoon, I'd like to begin by asking you to speak a bit about your career to date. How did you come to work in religious studies?

You've heard of the accidental tourist? Well I'm the accidental religious studies lecturer!

I didn't even study RE at school until A-level. I played the

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Catholic opt out card up to O-Level, and I only took it up then as there was far too much homework for French, and I had extensive sporting commitments and a horse to look after.

I actually applied to do PE at college, but due to a serious sporting injury to my knee I was rejected by all my choices, so I went to university as a second option. I went to Lancaster to do a degree in history and religious studies. Again, the choice of religious studies rather than theology was accidental, based more on the geographical location of Lancaster than an appreciation of this new way of studying religions. I wasn't a very engaged student as an undergraduate. I think I learnt more about popular music in my time at Lancaster than I did about religion and history. I probably went to more concerts than lectures! The only thing I got fired up on was my special subject, Henry VII. I did a study on the Lambert Simnel rebellion, and that was great fun, and I was able to use my grandmother's links at Trinity College Dublin to access archives.

I started teaching as a secondary history teacher, as history had been my major subject for my BA and for my PGCE. My switch from history to religious education happened when I was appointed as Teacher in Charge of RE to cover maternity leave. I found that I really enjoyed the freedom to teach aspects of religion that we (myself and the pupils) thought were interesting. My first RE post was in Southampton, which as a port city had a very diverse intake, and it was great fun to explore all the religions present in the city. Hampshire was using an 'Agreed Syllabus' that was ground breaking at that time, based around a phenomenological study of religions, so we had free rein to explore lots of varieties of religion.

Are there people that you came into contact with early on in your career that you think inspired you?

In Service support was very good in Hampshire, and inspirational people like Janet Trotter gave new teachers a vision of what religious education could be like. We were also encouraged to attend the annual South Coast Shap¹ conferences, where Alan Brown and other lecturers

¹ The Shap Working Party for World Religions was influential in developing a phenomenological approach to religion in the classroom. It was named 'Shap' from the location of the meetings in Shap in the Lake District.

encouraged new developments in RE. Vida Barnett, who had been my main RE lecturer at Ethel Wormold College for my PGCE, was also very active in practical approaches to RE in such conferences.

So how did the move into religious studies as the focus of your career come about?

After a couple of years I realised I wanted to undertake more study and returned to Lancaster for the MA in Religious Education, based at St. Martin's College with links to the university. Looking back, this really was the seminal year for my career. I developed a sound base in the subject—the St. Martin's / Bailrigg mix enabled us to benefit from the best in RE and RS.

I had been rather a reluctant student up to that point, and my starting point was so much lower than the rest of the cohort that I think they all must have made a pact to help me through the year. I always say to new students that you should follow the advice of the Talmud that having found yourself a teacher you must now find yourself someone to study with. During that year at Lancaster I lived that advice. I learnt so much from experienced RE teacher / lecturer colleagues from the UK and overseas. I was just reading Gilliat-Ray's article in *Discourse*² on 'Breaking down the classroom walls', and it struck me that even in 1981 and 82 we were exploring a similarly wide range of creative approaches to RE, apart from the Internet of course. In fact one of my assignments explored how pop music could be used to explore spirituality and youth culture.

After my MA, I spent four years in Rotherham at Thomas Rotherham Sixth Form College. I enjoyed having the opportunity to move away from biblical A level options into studying different religions, and philosophical aspects of religion. The philosophical side went down so well with students that I introduced A Level Philosophy, and I managed to persuade a number of RS students to take the course as there was a substantial overlap between JMB RS and AEB Philosophy. Sixth form teaching was a very good grounding for higher education as we had five hours a week so that gave us opportunities for

² Gilliat-Ray, Sophie, 'Breaking down the classroom walls: Innovative teaching and learning in Religious Studies and Theology', in *Discourse*, Vol.2, No.2, Winter 2003.

in-depth study.

I moved to Initial Teacher Education largely due to the frustration of facing small student groups. Working at a sixth form college, it was harder to recruit as you couldn't attract pupils from their earlier study in RE with you. The new post I applied for was in Walsall, which was close to where I had grown up. I didn't expect to get the job as the ITT focus was primary, and I didn't have any experience of primary teaching. Again I was fortunate as West Midlands College was prepared to let me learn on the job, and I spent one day a week in a primary school to familiarise myself with the sector before starting to supervise students on teaching practices.

I've now been here for 20 years, with name changes for the institution following mergers to Wolverhampton Polytechnic to the University of Wolverhampton. My base has also moved from Walsall through Dudley to Wolverhampton. We joked about this move as our short sojourn in Dudley being like a period in the wilderness before entering the promised land of Wolverhampton! Although I was very happy in Walsall, and lived close to the campus, the move to Wolverhampton really has opened up so many new possibilities for studying local religious communities.

Wolverhampton is just the best place for the study of religion. All the major religions are present here, and there are more than 150 places of worship. There is a rich variety of Christian denominations including Black-led churches, and also variety in other religions, including a Shi'a mosque. The city has a strong history of inter-faith relations, at least partly as a response to Enoch Powell's inflammatory comments about Commonwealth immigration in the 1960s. Because of this, there's a strong commitment among local communities to providing opportunities for students to visit places of worship. But the main factor is that there are so many places of worship within walking distance, so we can go on as many field visits as we like without any financial implications. I've been actively involved in many city-wide activities, developing contacts through the Inter Faith group, representing the university on the Community Cohesion Forum, and the Jewish community on the Faith Network.

In my 20 years at the university I've undertaken a wide range of roles, with involvement in religious education and religious studies, Holocaust and genocide studies, and more recently learning and

teaching in higher education. My profile isn't particularly strong in the area of publications, but I have been very active in grassroots developments and conference papers.

In the 90s I was involved in innovative religious education curriculum projects at the universities of Birmingham and Warwick. Both projects were based around pedagogy, developing distinctive teaching methods in order to encourage active engagement with religion. My MA dissertation, on the way Islam was presented in textbooks, also led to an invitation to join the European project on *Islam in textbooks*, which was disseminated at an international conference and led to the publication of guidelines for educational publishers.

During this period I was an executive member of the Professional Council for Religious Education (PCfRE), and the PCfRE representative on the Religious Education Council of England and Wales. Since the restructuring in the School of Education in the late 90s I have not had a role in initial teacher education, but I've maintained contact with the sector through external examining and I still receive invitations from professional RE bodies to produce resources for teachers.

I still have input into religious education in Wolverhampton as a co-opted member of the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education. The website I developed at the Wolverhampton Centre for Learning and Teaching technology retreat in 2003 is available as a resource for local teachers. I've been working closely with English Heritage for the past two years to develop activities and resources with local religious communities for Heritage Open Days. English Heritage employed one of the graduates involved in the *Entrepreneurship in Religious Studies*³ project to act as a Faith Development Worker for the Heritage Our Faith Buildings DVD project in Wolverhampton. This local focus has been strengthened through involvement in the Community Cohesion forum, as a university representative, and more recently as a Jewish representative on the Wolverhampton Faith Network.

I've also benefited from involvement in religious studies sector developments. I was a member of Executive Committee of the

³ Entrepreneurial Consultancies in Religious Studies, *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies*, Volume 4. No. 2, pp.151-172, Spring 2005.

NATfHE Religious Studies Section, with a responsibility for the West Midlands region and involvement on the annual national conference sub-committee. My understanding of the sector was enhanced by my appointment as a QAA subject reviewer for theology and religious studies.

I think I'm likely to see my career out at Wolverhampton. I'd like to engage in serious research on local religious communities and I've got the contacts here to carry this out. I'm also in a position to balance my commitments between religious studies and learning and teaching.

For the next two years I am spending half of my time on my National Teaching Fellowship project. I'd originally intended to explore issues in teaching about atrocity, and I went on a study visit to Rwanda in 2006, but I need hip and knee replacement surgery so my mobility problems led to a rethink and the specification of a project that I could do in-house. My NTF project is 'Getting more out of feedback'. The project methodology builds on my research with undergraduates in a Personal Development Planning module, detailed more in the paper, 'Engaging students in personal development planning: profiles, skills development and acting on feedback'.

The project aims to benefit the leaning and teaching community through the development of practical activities to support student engagement with feedback. Whilst there is a lot of activity in the area of feedback it's mostly focused on staff and the feedback they provide. This project shifts attention to the students receiving the feedback, providing empirically based research on ways that students can use feedback to enhance their learning.

To date I have run a number of conference workshops on *Getting more out of feedback*, and am currently involved in a Delphi study with students on their experiences of feedback. I'd like to develop resources linked to subject disciplines, so if colleagues in religious studies and theology have an interest in this area, please get in touch.

You have taught in schools as well as higher education. Could you say something about the similarities and differences of each sector?

The main similarity I see is that the principles underpinning teaching and learning are essentially the same. I see myself as a teacher, I've taught in schools, sixth form and HE, and observed students on

teaching practice and acted as mentor for our learning and teaching programme, and I think the way you present learning experiences is as important for twenty year old students as for five year old pupils. Learning experiences for all ages need to be well prepared, stimulating, and linked to learner readiness. We quite often think that because students are more mature, they don't have the learning needs that we'd assume pupils would have in school, and I think this means that students don't get as much out of their experience.

In an induction questionnaire for new students here in the school of Humanities, we ask students about their anxieties about higher education, and so many of them are lacking in confidence. We've got all this support available for students: you can go and see someone to help you with your written English; you can go and see librarians for information retrieval; you can see your tutors if you've got a problem with your assignment; but a lot of students haven't got the confidence to go and ask anybody for any help. They're worried about being in lectures and asking a question, they're worried about talking to students who are older than themselves, or if they're mature, talking to students who are younger than themselves, and so I think the concept of an adult learner is one that we've invested with far more confidence and maturity than students actually have.

Thinking about the similarities between sectors, when you set up learning experiences, pupils, students, will follow your approach, so if you go in confident, and set up tasks that students can do, then they'll engage with them, and I think if you go in open ended and say, 'OK, I asked you to read an article, have any of you got any questions about it?', very few students are likely to have the confidence to put their hand up, and I don't think there's that much difference.

I remember a New Testament lecturer I had at Lancaster, his lectures were really good, but in his seminars he expected you to have done an awful lot of work, and in the first seminar he ripped somebody to shreds because they hadn't done the reading. For the rest of that semester the rest of us were like, 'Oh no, he's going to ask us a question', and so I think in terms of interaction, the age doesn't make much difference, certainly between secondary and higher education. Students can be as nervous as school pupils, and are as in just as much need of supportive learning activities.

I think the main difference between secondary and higher educa-

tion is the opportunities students have for independent learning, within a setting of mass education, which can be impersonal and threatening. In biblical terms this could be seen as the blessing and the curse!

At induction I do the study skills for the whole of the school, so I emphasise the ‘blessing’, the opportunity for independence, and to take charge of your own time, and all the resources here to help you, but then the curse is the impersonal *stuff*. We’ve been lucky I think here in that we’ve had small student groups, and we’re used to interacting with students on a first name basis, but across the school that’s not the case. I have a history module I teach on the Holocaust where we have a hundred students, so you only get to know a few, but I do wonder what it’s like for students when they’re constantly in that situation, nobody really knows them, doesn’t know their name and doesn’t interact with them.

So you think that the student experience itself isn’t that different, in terms of the learning expectation, it’s just a bigger experience with more uncertainties, which makes it more problematic? Or do you feel that there is a kind of step change in expectation there? Does more need to be done to ensure better student progression, especially from schools to HE? And if so, what?

Progression is certainly something we’re trying to address at Wolverhampton.

We have study skills advisors, who are mostly graduate students, who operate a rota in the learning centre, and students can book two 20 minute sessions a week. It’s an opportunity to take an essay that they’ve had feedback on, or something that they’re working on, and say, ‘last time I had some feedback saying that I didn’t introduce the essay very well, I’m not sure what they mean by that, can you give me some guidance on what I should do with an introduction?’, or to go back to a study skills advisor and say, ‘I’ve had a go at an introduction’, they don’t give them any subject advice, it’s just on writing skills, and what most students want when they go along is proofreading.

My role as Student Support Co-ordinator for the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences included the key area of retention of students. We aimed to induct students into the higher education learning environment through an initial session and then weekly

workshops. The *Being a Student* school induction programme was developed with two colleagues in the school, one a philosopher and one a writing tutor. Together we put together a three part induction session. This started with Rob's philosophical reflection on what it meant to be a student, aiming to encourage students to think about why they had come and what the purpose of higher education was. This situating of higher education within the framework of critical thinking led to practical sessions on the higher education learning environment, and developing skills to fulfil one's potential. This programme led into a weekly *Develop your Study Skills* drop in session, supported by materials on our on-line learning framework. This was extended into a new level module *Personal, Academic and Career Enhancement* (PACE) for level one students to facilitate their adjustment to the demands of higher education. This new school initiative is taking our work in student support forward by developing a cohesive cross university support team. These links led to the development of a collaborative research proposal with academic librarians to develop an information skills programme. This work was the subject of a PRS mini-project *Supporting Diverse Students*, and there's a report on this in this issue of *Discourse*.

I know quite a lot of your students aren't what you might call typical entrants in terms of coming straight from A-levels at 18, but of those who are, do you detect any changes in terms of the level of knowledge and level of skills that they have?

I was looking at Ursula King's interview, where she was asked about how students have changed over the years, and I don't think they have that much, we've had some cohorts that have been wonderful, where you've had a group of students who get fired up by the subject, and interact with each other, and support each other. When we had students on teacher education programmes, perhaps they needed to do that because teaching practice was so stressful, and they needed more support networks, but they talked to each other, they'd share ideas about their work, they'd talk about assignments, and they'd want to do things related to religious studies, more field visits. We'd say, 'There's a lecture on in Birmingham', and a lot of them would want to go, and they do seem less inclined now, but more students have to work, and I

don't think they have the time.

I wouldn't call the present situation a dumbing down, but for example I've just been marking some learning logs, which were for 30% of the module, and I was very disappointed with the way many students had engaged with the tasks. Some of them have just done a couple of sides on the book they've used, and given detail like, 'I used these keywords', but haven't explained the decisions they made, so maybe there is more surface learning for some tasks. Maybe 10 years ago, students would've been more disciplined, in terms of doing the work gradually, week by week, whereas a number of students, perhaps because of pressures of work, family and other commitments, now find that they leave it to the last minute, and don't do a good job.

I think we've always had a written communication problem, and this goes back to when religious studies was within the primary B. Ed., I remember one year there was a test that they did on students' use of English, and there were concerns for most of the cohort, across all subjects, and of course for a B. Ed. course we could build in support, and students would be more inclined to take it. I think weaker students are a lot weaker now than they were 10 years ago, and less inclined to seek support, and where they are rushing their work, they're making errors that are just inconceivable, both in terms of accuracy and the general communications skills that you'd expect them to have, and this cuts across students whose mother tongue is English, and whose mother tongue is different. We don't tend to have overseas students as such, most of our students tend to be born here, perhaps second or third generation migrants, but the percentage who are prepared to develop their skills is decreasing, and they seem to expect to be able to make a quick fix, but some of them have deeper seated problems, which would require long term fixing.

Recently I moderated some first year essays, where the task was quite complex, and a lot of them just didn't make any sense. You do wonder how a student could present something that's nonsense, but it seems that if they haven't been successful, they don't want to admit that they don't understand, or that they're struggling, so they just carry on without any kind of intervention which helps them get to where they need to be, so I think there's a particular challenge in communication.

I think there are real issues over understanding of academic writing, and it has probably always been the case, but in the past,

somehow, from the reading we did we were able to gain an understanding of what an academic essay was, and I think for a lot of students now, it doesn't seem to work, in terms of gathering their thoughts together, and engaging with a question—there's a gap. But then again, I almost did my PhD on 'Why don't students answer the question that's been set?', because I found so often in marking that you could see this student had read around the topic, and understood it, but they were writing generally rather than answering specific questions, and that was 12 years ago, when I was following that track, so it's obviously not changed that much.

So what do you think are the key abilities and skills that religious studies students either need, or should have by the end of their studies?

Our students now are combining religious studies with another subject, and when we look at their results across the board, particularly in the first year, they seem to do less well in religious studies than in their other subject, whatever that subject is, even philosophy. It seems to be that we're asking for a greater level of complexity, both in understanding and expression, than may be the case in other subjects. The understanding we require in religious studies is more abstract, and if what they're studying doesn't link to their experiences, I think that makes it more difficult for them to understand.

I suppose one of the things that makes religious studies more difficult than other subjects is that we don't really have the text book step by step approach that I think most other subjects have. I remember when I used to teach A-level philosophy, what we were asking students to do was very complex. Then when I started in higher education, some colleagues who hadn't taught in school said, "What do students do at A-level? It's spoon feeding, they don't learn to think for themselves", and yet students had to develop their critical thinking for A-level philosophy. However, because there was an expectation that students would come in with nothing, students fulfilled it.

When you're talking about this transition from school to higher education, it does seem that students go backwards. I was looking at some research about learning trajectories, this was more primary to secondary, and there's a notion that students learn within a context, and

that if they go to secondary school with peers from primary, they know that their peers are used to them acting in a particular way, and so they'll carry on with learning behaviours that they had from before.

I was involved in a pilot study with a local school on the PACE induction module based on the idea of learning trajectories, that if we could work with a group of students and bring them into university together, because they've got the confidence of knowing each other, they will learn to learn and have the experience of learning in the university context, which may then help them carry on those positive behaviours when they're here.

I think when you're talking about graduate skills, we need to recognise that in order to get to the end, they need to be developing skills throughout their course, and for both students and staff, there seems to be the assumption that you don't need to build into courses opportunities to develop skills. There's just the assumption that students know how to learn, know how to write, and that doesn't really get challenged, even when students struggle.

In terms of skills, apart from the QCA fixed skills, we refer to empathy in particular. When we validated a new programme in 1998 we included 'empathy' as a key skill as we felt it was central to our approach..Study in the humanities and social sciences enables students to gain an understanding of aspects of human experience. With the transition to a more secular society the place of religious beliefs and values in ordinary people's lives tends to be overlooked. Recognising religion's role as a motivator for action, or a source of value, is important.

What difficulties are there in teaching that are particular to religious studies?

Generally difficulties arise due to the baggage students, colleagues and others bring to religious studies. I often wonder what academic life would have been like if I had stayed with history. I wouldn't face colleagues' confusion about the nature of religious studies, and wouldn't have to make up another occupation for when I flew in the US—I always seem to be sat next to an evangelical Christian who assumes I share their faith when I tell them what I do.

I came close to resigning a few years ago due to a management

decision that the University chaplains should become part of the Religious Studies Unit. The chaplains taught *Applied Theology* within Combined Awards, and the proposal was that we would merge the two subjects for a new joint form of RS. I took out grievances against almost everyone: my line manager, the Dean of our school, and the Head of Personnel, and finally brought the matter to the attention of the Vice-Chancellor. At this stage my line manager said that there was no intention to use the chaplains for teaching in RS, so I withdrew the grievance and the issue has not arisen again. But I was surprised at how little support we got, particularly from colleagues in the School of Humanities, where everybody's very keen to jump on high horses and follow ideologies, but because this involved religion, it was almost, 'well, you're all engaged with religion, so what's the problem with the chaplain coming from a confessional background?' because many colleagues don't really understand what we do in the first place.

Many colleagues don't seem to think that the study of religion's important. Having moved into the School of Humanities, I don't feel that so many of my colleagues in this school see religious studies as being that important. Even those who touch on religion in some way, like politics, sociology, even philosophy, maybe their RE at school was limited, and their view of what religious studies is hasn't really changed.

But things have come a long way, and religious studies is seen as more of an academic subject. When I first started teaching, I can remember going for interviews for RE jobs, and the assumption then was that you would be a Christian. I remember being asked about my beliefs at one interview, and I took the local advisor to task afterwards, because that should not have happened. Fortunately things have changed in terms of RE in schools, and even in my first year here, in 1986, the first cohort was a mixed cohort, so I think that's changing the shape of RE in schools, and religious studies at university. Students from a range of religious traditions go into teaching and so that's been a change from the bottom upwards.

I can remember when I was teaching in Southampton, and we used to meet for CSE moderation. What happened was, in the local area, everybody would go to the same school, and you'd then divide into subject groups for moderation, and when we got together as an RE group, we used to start with a prayer, and I'd go back to school, and

everybody would be ribbing me, saying, ‘Everybody else does it objectively, but the RE teachers say a prayer and ask for divine assistance in moderation’. So the next year, two of us plucked up the courage, and as we were about to start, and somebody suggested a prayer, we said, ‘Why is it we have to say a prayer, before we’re moderating? Do you realise what others think about us? If we were doing history, you might want to say a private prayer, but you wouldn’t do it publicly, and we’d like to be seen as teachers. For the perceptions of our subject, we ought to change this practice’, and so we did.

In terms of specific issues in the classroom, there is the issue of commitment, which is a particular problem. Many students do take religious studies because they are very religious, and they enjoy exploring religious things, but their commitment, instead of being a positive, can become a negative in an academic context, where your requirement is to study religion in a critical way, and some find it difficult to be objective about their own faith. We do get students who come to us in Wolverhampton because we’re the only option, so they may be doing religious studies when really what they wanted to do is to study their own religion, and so they might not see the value of studying other religions.

I remember going through a phase where I was doing my MA in Lancaster, and I was really enjoying learning about other religions. I wasn’t a Christian any more but I wasn’t really anything else, and I was worried that if I was committed to a religion, would I then lose the openness—if I believed a religion held the truth, would I then be as open to truth in other religions? I wonder whether we ought to be doing more for students in taking them through that journey. Because it’s not easy, if we look at religious leaders, they find it very difficult to find the right words to talk about each other’s religions. John Hick’s work on the Copernican revolution and theology,⁴ that really helped me to develop a personal theological foundation. I wonder whether we ought to be doing more on introductory courses, in helping students to develop their own understanding of the relationship of their faith to other faiths. We get such mixed groups, we have Muslim students, Hindus, Sikhs, a few Buddhists, a few Jewish, and a great variety of Christian students, there is a plural situation, but we don’t really give

⁴ Hick, J. (1993) *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Oxford: Oneworld.

students that much opportunity to talk about their faith position, and how that may impact upon their attitude towards study.

I was going to ask, Wolverhampton is obviously a very multicultural area, and I know that you draw in a lot of the students from this area, what would you say were the positives and negatives that that brings about, particularly in the classroom situation?

I think it's almost wholly positive, that in studying religions, the presence of students from a broad variety of religions makes a rich learning experience for all students, but I think we fall into the trap of assuming that students from particular religious backgrounds will know a lot about their particular religion, and yet in the past when we were teaching Christianity, and we had students who were nominally Christian, we wouldn't have made that same assumption about them. For example, I've just marked some essays on Islam, and the students who struggled have mostly been Muslim students, who know a lot about the peripheral issues and Muslim lifestyles on a certain level, but not the underpinnings that we've been studying in the module, and maybe this is an area that still needs to be tackled. When it comes to Muslim lifestyles, in debating issues with students, there are still aspects of Islam in Britain that haven't been subject to research, to do with multiple identities and so on, and so students know a lot on a practical level, which doesn't fit with the picture from scholarship. I think these are issues that we still haven't got to grips with.

Do you think recent events such as 9/11 and 7/7 have made the study of religion more vital?

I think it has always been vital—I can remember a lecture by Ninian Smart in 1982 on *Alexander Haig and worldview analysis*⁵. Smart's thesis was that if Haig had known more about Islam in general and Shi'ite Islam in particular, then American foreign policy would not miscalculated reactions so badly in Iran. I suppose the links I made between religion and history in Northern Ireland, in the Middle East and studies on antisemitism, meant that I came to RS in the first place because it offered a way of understanding the world. I think 9/11 and

⁵ University of Lancaster, Religious Studies Lecture, 1982-2.

7/7 have presented a strong case for researching and understanding the importance of religious motivation. Alongside this we need to study the development of indigenous forms of Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Sikhism, as immersion in a plural society which has a strong Christian foundation is likely to shape experiences for followers of all faiths.

What do you think are the most pressing factors driving change in religious studies?

I think one area that is going to have increasing impact is a view of higher education which is almost wholly professional and vocational, and this presents us in the humanities with particular challenges. In religious studies, the majority of our graduates have had a clear career destination with teaching, primary or secondary, and other subjects haven't and they're going to face greater challenges than we do, but we need to be exploring career options for those students who don't want to go into teaching. Graduate destinations for religious studies look good on the surface (at Wolverhampton over 80% use their degree) but these figures mask the fact that the majority of graduates either go into teaching or research, and they actually find other avenues for graduate employment difficult to access. Perhaps more than any other humanities or social science subject, applications from religious studies graduates may be pre-judged and discarded by employers due to their pre-conceptions of religious studies.

I think religious studies graduates have a great contribution to make to contemporary society. The *Faith Literacy* entrepreneurship project, funded by the Subject Centre, demonstrated the relevance of religious studies to business. This initiative, in collaboration with alumni who set up a consultancy business, supported recent graduates in their production of consultancy reports for local employers. Students were really positive about getting the opportunity to apply their knowledge and understanding of religion in real life situations.⁶

This project demonstrated that graduates could take an active role in diversity training, and perhaps do a better job than many of the

⁶ Entrepreneurial Consultancies in Religious Studies, *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies*, Volume 4. No. 2, pp.151-172, Spring 2005.

organisations currently running courses.

A lot of your research has been about teaching the Holocaust, so would you like to say a bit about that? Perhaps you could say what led you into it as well?

I first started teaching the Holocaust as part of Jewish theology, at sixth form level. This was before I really got into feminist theology, and it seemed, looking at Holocaust theology, you could see theology as an ongoing process. In my studies up to that point theology was seen as something that other people have done in the past, and more or less fixed, whereas Holocaust theology was asking questions that authoritative answers hadn't been given to, so it led to an understanding of theology, if you link it to Smart's doctrinal dimension,⁷ as a way of making sense of the world.

With colleagues in education, we came up with the idea of a minor route, we called it religion and topical issues, and we identified a number of topics where we could bring together English, history, and religious studies—the Holocaust was one, the Black experience in Britain was another, literature and liberation was looking at South America and liberation theology, and I think Victorian Britain was another one, so that was a really nice way of working with colleagues and sharing expertise. The Holocaust module started there, it was called 'Perspectives on the Holocaust', and the aim was to bring together different perspectives, the historical, the religious, the creative, literature, film, and then as a result of that, students started doing projects on the Holocaust, a lot of it related to Holocaust theology or survivor perspectives.

I spent time at Yad Vashem, and I met Stephen Smith, who was setting up the Holocaust Centre Beth Shalom. He came to work at Wolverhampton as a visiting lecturer, and we took students on a field visit to Poland, which was a career changing experience for me. If you're teaching the same thing year after year, you can kind of feel that you're going through the motions, but students' reactions and questions to genocide seemed to make it, not quite more meaningful, but different. We hosted the Anne Frank exhibition, and a number of students got

⁷ Smart, N. (1995) *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

involved as guides, and they wanted to do more after that, so we went on a study visit to Holland and Germany. Paul and Rudi Oppenheimer came with us to share their first hand experiences.

So the work developed relating to students who were doing the B. Ed, studying the Holocaust, and then thinking about how they would teach the Holocaust in school. For some of them, it would be teaching in primary school, so they were asking questions about how you would teach the Holocaust to young children. There was an issue, in terms of how you comprehend what happened, and how it impacts on young learners, and I was interested in that because I hadn't learned about the Holocaust in school, I was an adult really when I came to the Holocaust, and I had a greater range of resources to draw on, and I was struck by a few things the teachers said, like, 'I take my pupils to Beth Shalom, they listen to a survivor, and then there's an opportunity to ask questions, and they don't ask questions'.

When we were hosting the Anne Frank exhibition, we noticed that younger pupils, aged 10 or 11, had lots of questions, but older students didn't, and this seemed to raise questions about how particularly boys cope with emotions in such a study, so this was the area I did my PhD on, really looking at the impact on learners, the questions they have, and how they cope. One of the ways they seemed to cope was by talking, talking to their friends, talking to their parents, and this really seemed to raise the importance of discussion. Which I suppose goes back to what we saw as good practice in RE, and thinking about relationships between school and university learning, do we allow enough room for discussion for students in higher education? , So my work on the Holocaust is linked to my own reactions as a learner, and my students' reactions to their learning.

This led on to thinking about the impact on secondary school pupils when the Holocaust became an optional part of the national curriculum for history, so was going to be taught more widely, and also the Holocaust was featuring in a lot of RE programmes, I think at Beth Shalom they have as many groups going from RE as from history, so there were questions about the impact on learners when there were going to be a lot more 14 year olds learning about the Holocaust. More recently, I've been interested in how our students here can be supported in their learning of the Holocaust, and how you structure a programme, particularly now as I find I've got more than 100 students on

that first year module, and first years from many different subjects, who don't necessarily have friends to learn with, so I'm looking at how we can build in support. Next academic year we'll be working on learning tutorials which draw on the Newsfilm archive, as part of a project for the Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology.

One of the main areas of support has been work with survivors, of genocide. Early last year I visited Rwanda. We went down to a place called Murambi, which was a vision of hell. Imagine a new school building, a Catholic school that was being built, just outside of town on this hill, and 40 to 50 thousand local Tutsis were told to move into the school premises, and then they were attacked and just slaughtered there. Many of the bodies were just put into mass graves, and survivors dug up many of these graves, and tried to preserve the bodies in lime, and you now have these skeletons set out in the classrooms. Here is a school that should be educating children, and it's now a mausoleum. As we were going round, Aegis Trust workers, many of whom were survivors, were filming and asking us questions, and asking us how we could cope, what our reactions were to this, and when you were being asked these questions by a survivor, who may have lost family, and who had lived from that, it kind of puts your emotional reaction and the emotional challenge into perspective, and I think learning about the Holocaust, the presence of survivors is almost like someone holding your hand and saying, 'I lived through this, and I coped, so you can'.

I did a paper at a conference last year⁸, which looked at pupil writing, either feedback on the visit to Beth Shalom, or letters that they'd written to survivors, seeing the kind of role that survivor testimony plays in their learning.

In terms of survivors, do you feel that helps you to help the students to cope with the material as well? There's going to be necessarily an emotional element, and do you feel as if that is something that, as a teacher, you've learnt from the survivors?

⁸ 'I didn't believe it had happened until I met Paul': The role of Holocaust survivors in Holocaust education.' *Beyond Camps and Forced Labour: Current International Research on Survivors of Nazi Persecution—60 Years On*. Second International Multidisciplinary Conference 2006. Conference proceedings to be published by Secolo Verlag (Osnabrueck, Germany) in a combined book/CD(2007).

Yes, I suppose in the area of genocide study, you learn so it doesn't happen again. Most of learning is learning that you seek to replicate, and this is of a different nature, and I think the personal impact is important. In higher education at all levels, we don't make enough of personal interaction, whether it be peer to peer or lecturer to student. In terms of what students can get out of studying religion, they learn about the world, they have a chance to explore ultimate questions, and perhaps as for other subject areas, it can potentially change them as people.

I do think there should be significant learning experiences in a course that poses challenges. I remember when I started teaching about gender issues, that this really was a big challenge for a lot of students, particularly because at that time we had a lot of mature students. Studying got them to think about their home relationships and they began taking exception to ways that in particular their husbands had got used to treating them, 'oh yes, you want to go somewhere, I'll take you'—'take me? I'm not a child!', you know, so there should be significance in learning, and as a lecturer you have to be prepared to help your students handle the emotional aspects that this can bring about.

The work with survivors links in well to the importance of faith informants in RE. If your teacher is the objective guide through your study of religion, it is important that students have the opportunity to meet with people who are unashamedly Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jew, and can answer from that perspective. That personal interaction is important.

Thinking about where religious studies is going, we're doing some work with Wolverhampton Inter Faith group. They organise visits to places of worship, and we are exploring getting students to act as volunteers to be faith informants, so if they belong to a particular religious tradition, they can act as a faith informant for that tradition. We've talked about putting in a bid to explore religious study leading to being a faith informant, and a model that I think could work would be if we were to take a number of individuals from a number of religious communities in the city, who'd come and take modules on individual religions, and also have a strand alongside that which is kind of religious education, looking at child development, how you present ideas to children, what the nature of their religious learning's like, so that these faith informants would be able to present material to school

groups that was appropriate to their level of learning, and also they'd have a role for their own community, for learning about other religions in the city. I think in the new climate for understanding religions and the place of religion in society, this might be a way forward, and it could open up religious study to a greater range of people. We often have problems when we take students out on field visits, that no matter how well you prepare in advance, and try to give an indication of the background of the students, it always depends who's talking to the group, as to how much information they can give you, and whether it's geared towards the appropriate level. I think that this is a way of professionalising that role. If you think of the challenge that religious communities have, so many school groups want to go, but if the people who are telling them don't know what they're learning about religion in school, then there's quite often a mismatch.

Another new method of teaching and assessment that we're thinking of developing for this semester is something we originally did on a field visit. We went to Israel, I think it was in 2000, and had a group of 15 students, of various religions, and on other field visits we've really just gone as tourists and looked round, but this time we wanted them to be doing some work. It was an accredited course, they worked in three groups, and the task was to research Jewish, Christian or Muslim holy places and organise a tour for the rest of the party. We were there for 10 days, and the last three days were going to be these tours, so we had some general input, and then they worked as groups following up their particular sites. They'd done some research before they got there, so they put together a tour that we then went round on and took videos of, and it was such a good experience, because they weren't just there passively soaking things up, they had to be active, and they had to think about a timespan, what would be said where, what kind of handouts they'd produce. So for this semester, for the Religions in the West Midlands module, in the past students have gone in small groups to different places of worship and then have written reports which others can then look at on the website, but this time, students are going to prepare visits, so that there will be part lecture and then part field visit, and that field visit will be set up by the students and will give them an opportunity of developing a link with a religious community, and facilitating a visit. I think it'll be quite interesting to see how it goes.

That sounds really interesting.

Yes, and in addition I think because they're acting in that role, it will empower them. What I like about presentations is that there's an onus on you to know more than you say, whereas I think it's easy to write without really understanding, but if you know you're going to present to a group, and they're going to ask questions, then you're likely to prepare around it, so I'm hoping that students will take that opportunity. And sharing is important. I suppose one of the things we've always done in religious studies is look for opportunities to share. If students are doing good work, then it should have a larger audience than just the person who's marking it. On the website, where we've got pages on each place of worship, where students have been on a visit to that place, and have written a report as part of their assessment, that's there for students to look at. And thinking about the link between school and higher education, it provides a way of allowing school pupils, in thinking about higher education, to have a look at work that students have done, and see, maybe that's something I'd like to do. I think these exemplars are an important part of making decisions, and we don't allow this enough. And it'd be nice if there were opportunities for students to access work that students were doing in other places, so that they could share experiences. For example, here we've got a small Shi'ite mosque, and there may be other places in Britain where they've got a larger Shi'ite community, which has a higher profile, and it'd be good to get students in different places doing fieldwork and comparing their findings.

Yes, absolutely.

Last year, you became a National Teaching Fellow, the first one in religious studies or theology, or philosophy for that matter. How important was it to you to become a National Teaching Fellow?

Personally, it was very important, because I think if you're involved in a small subject that doesn't really have a high profile in your institution, then there aren't really opportunities for progression, and although in one way the job you're doing itself is enough feedback, when others in your institution have career routes, and move to positions where

they're able to make decisions about what you do, it can become frustrating that there aren't opportunities. I think the whole area of learning and teaching is opening up a new route, and I think for staff who are in my position, coming into religious studies through religious education, and in working within that kind of school based RE, and school linked religious education, our approach has been fairly eclectic mixture of education and religion, but we lack the specialism that colleagues in education studies, or colleagues in larger religious studies departments have. It's the norm here that we would cover three or four broad areas, we would lecture in several religions, and different aspects of religions, so when it comes to RAE work, it's not clear whether our work would go into education, learning and teaching or religious studies. Whilst we can make a contribution, we can't always compete with people who specialise maybe in a specific aspect of one religion, so I think this is opening up recognition that we're making a contribution that is equally important to that of scholars in other areas. It has given me the opportunity, which I haven't had in 20 years, of a part sabbatical, and the opportunity to be working around my subject, and looking at teaching and learning issues that impact on my experience, and the experience of students, so I think that's important. It's a recognition that the application of subject research in pedagogically appropriate ways is valuable as it improves the student learning experience

My research has always been linked to teaching, in either developing my own subject base or considering how to present knowledge in the classroom. In teaching philosophy of education I always remember the question: 'Has a teacher taught if the students have not learned?' which brings home the fact that teaching is a relational activity and we need to monitor the effectiveness of our teaching approaches for student learning. I think also as I get older, that although I will be teaching topics I have taught every year for over twenty years, that each iteration unique. Through the questions they ask, the aspects of the topics they are interested in and their responses to questions, each cohort of students helps me to understand my subject in a different way.

Over the years since the Subject Centre started, you've done various things for us, and I wondered how the presence of the Subject Centre and the work you've done for it has helped your

work.

I think, since we've started to discuss learning and teaching in higher education, there've been opportunities to do research around our subjects, on a practical level, providing a resource. You've been able to buy time to do that research, and I suppose it helps you to enter debate with colleagues. Those of us who came from an education background were already used to discussing pedagogy, but for those who came into religious studies without any kind of educational background, it's perhaps more important, and for the past ten years, any new staff that we've had here have had an opportunity to do part of our MA in learning and teaching, and have been keen to do that, so I think questions about how we teach are very important. The Subject Centre provides a port of call, so if you've got questions about work going on in a particular area you're able to make links. It also provides a way to draw attention to new areas of development, like the entrepreneurship project, where the Subject Centre basically said, 'You're doing some work in this area, why not take it a bit further?' Applying for bids can be a frustrating experience, and when it is a new area, as I think learning and teaching in higher education is, for most staff, you're not sure whether where you're coming from is going to be an appropriate position, and whether you're wasting your time, so that I think that link is important.

From the beginning of the Institute for Learning and Teaching, I was doing some work on key skills, and so I went to the first conference, and I don't think anyone was there from religious studies or theology. There may even be an expectation within religious studies that what's happening is at a far higher level than it is. People think of applied educational research, which is very specific and quite often a bit abstract, but what we're doing in higher education is a lot more practical. A lot of it seeks to be evidence based, but it's essentially disseminating good practice.

I've learned a lot through involvement with ILTHE, and then the HEA and the Subject Centre. I've been to most of the annual conferences and have made a lot of links with colleagues in other subjects, and I've benefited from doing that. And I think what's happened with debates about learning and teaching is, for those of us who've been around a long time, it kind of recharges your batteries. Sometimes we

might return to the same kind of projects that we've gone through before, but with new technology, for example. We have a chance now with peer observation to go in and see somebody doing something, whether it be the e-portfolio, WebQuests, seeing the way students engage with those creative learning experiences, and then having seen it in action, you can see how you can apply it within your own area, so I think it's important in having these insights into new learning methods.

My recent research on *PowerPoint and Pedagogy* was a collaborative CeLT project with school colleagues that we presented at the HEA conference. Napier University invited me to present two workshops for staff, which were evaluated very positively not only in terms of content but also in my 'excellent role modelling of good practice.' I have run two workshops for colleagues across the university in CELT learning and teaching professional development and been invited to run the session for two schools.

I'm actively contributing to current university-led learning and teaching initiatives through involvement in the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching. I piloted use of the ePortfolio last academic year and am completing a paper for the Subject Centre for PRS on supporting student skills. Work in these areas has brought me into close contact with colleagues in other parts of the university and my response to the need to share work in supporting students was to put on a conference *Developing Skills for Study in Higher Education*. This took place in June 2006, with a keynote speaker from the USA sharing experiences from running web-based study skill support for students. The call for papers has been successful and the programme will allow for a sharing of internal initiatives together with interesting work from Britain and Europe.

I had the opportunity to go on a technology retreat which introduced us to a range of electronic ways to present material interactively. I went with the idea of developing a website to support students in their study of local religions, and came back with a template for the website *Religions in Wolverhampton*. Within the website there are a range of learning objects, treasure hunts and WebQuests, which encourage student engagement. New students find this opens up new ways of understanding religion in society, and they are stimulated by the opportunity to contribute to the website by developing webquests

from their research on local religious communities.

Are there any other mentors in your work and study that you would like to mention?

I have been fortunate to meet exceptional people who have acted as both role models and sources of inspiration. In religious studies I had an eccentric tutor who introduced us to the fascinating opportunities of opening up new worldviews for pupils. She also set down a basic principle in presentation, to imagine that a pupil who belonged to the faith under consideration was sitting in the front row of our class. Whilst today it is common practice to treat all faiths with consideration and respect, this has not always been the case, particularly in relation to New Religious Movements. I recall one session early in my career when exploring Jehovah's Witness beliefs, using materials from a mainstream Christian perspective which were very biased and subjected Witness beliefs to ridicule. At the end of the session one of the pupils asked, "Did I know that Christine was a Witness?" I clearly didn't and I could hear Vida's advice in my head. I certainly had not taught the session imagining that a Jehovah's Witness pupil was sitting in the front row, and that experience has stayed with me to ensure that I maintain the integrity of the faith under consideration and the integrity of believers who hold that faith at all times.

In Holocaust and Genocide Studies my mentors have been survivors, from whom I have learnt so much. Perhaps the most important lesson being a reminder that teaching is a humanistic activity, and the importance of a human link in the encounter with an event. Reflecting on the willingness of survivors to face up to the horrors they experienced in order to help others learn about what happened poses a challenge. If they can do that to assist my learning journey, then I can surely accommodate some distress in exploring atrocity with students.

I can't finish this section without mentioning the Smith family, founders of the Holocaust Centre Beth Shalom, and The Aegis Genocide Prevention Trust. Whilst visiting a student who was on work experience at Yad Vashem, I met a young man from England who was setting up a Holocaust Education Centre. When I say young, I mean in his twenties, and he had no institutional support. Yet Stephen, his brother James and their family, set about setting up the first Centre for

Holocaust Education in the UK. From Stephen, James and Marina I learnt to think big, and if you believe that an educational experience can benefit students, then pursue your vision. Check out their work at: <http://www.bethshalom.com/> and <http://www.aegistrust.org/>

Thank you very much, it's been a very interesting afternoon.

If you would like more information about anything mentioned in the interview, particularly if you are interested in the current project on student use of tutor feedback, or if you would like copies of the 2007 Calendar of Religious Festivals produced by Wolverhampton Council or the Heritage DVD Our Faith Buildings, please contact Deirdre Burke:

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Religions in Wolverhampton website: <http://asp2.wlv.ac.uk/hlss/Religion%20in%20Wolverhampton/index.html>.

Engaging Students in Personal Development Planning:

Profiles, Skills Development and Acting on Feedback

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How far do the prior learning experiences of students prepare them for higher education? In a previous edition of this journal King noted that she moved from teaching undergraduates as she was disillusioned with student ‘indifference and apathy’. (King, 2006) Have students changed? Are they more instrumental in their learning? Or could it be that current students face a more complex learning situation and struggle to meet academic conventions? (Lillis & Turner, 2001).

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The academy that we are initiating new students into is far different than the one I entered thirty years ago. I didn't need to use technology to access books and journals, essays were handwritten, and I was assessed by essays and exams. My teaching over the past twenty years has drawn on technological developments to enrich student learning experiences. This means that current students have to develop a wide range of skills to access information and present their knowledge and understanding. This article explores an initiative 'to welcome students into the academy' through a consideration of learning experiences which support student transition to higher education. Students explore what it means to be a student, and develop skills to support their current study.

The context

My home institution appears at the top of only one league table, showing our success in widening participation from low participation households within Shropshire and the West Midlands. The University is now challenged to achieve the mission statement to 'enable and encourage individuals to realise their full potential and to achieve academic excellence.'

Staff in higher education are becoming more aware of the cost of 'failure' for those students who drop out or fail to pass the first year of a degree course. Research findings show that students face social and psychological burdens as well as the financial implications of failure. The Institute of Fiscal Studies estimated that male students who failed to complete their studies earned 9% less than workers who had not been to university, which shows that by entering higher education some students may actually reduce their life chances. Thus, as institutions, we need to take seriously our responsibility in accepting 'widening participation' students, and research ways to be better able to help them to succeed.

The initiative explored here, a pilot of a module called Personal, Academic and Career Enhancement (PACE), is a part of our Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) work—to focus on our response to the first year experience, and in particular to explore strategies to close the gap between the skills that many students possess on

entry and the requirements of their course of study. At Wolverhampton we need to respond to the university's success in widening participation by addressing the needs of an increasingly diverse student intake, in this instance through linking subjects to wider support service areas. This approach is proactive rather than reactive, in recognising that all students need to align their skills to those required in higher education. In this module the aim is to identify where and when individual students are likely to need support, and then to provide this support in the midst of their learning.

Religious studies students were involved in the pilot as I had school responsibilities for Student Support and had developed the module to provide students with a formal opportunity for personal development planning. The School Quality Committee required the module to be piloted with a small number of students before it was made available to all students in the school.

My interest in this field developed from a range of experiences. Firstly, from an awareness that students did not always act on feedback on assignments that advised skills development for study. I felt I was providing the same feedback advice to the same students time after time, and there was little evidence to show that students had acted on advice. I teach modules at all levels and have electronic copies of feedback sheets—thus, I was able to track individuals and note that students were not picking up advice on developing generic skills or specific subject related study skills.

Secondly, in my role as school student support co-ordinator, I worked with students at drop-in workshop sessions responding to general student queries about the learning process. In this role I was able to stand outside the 'power relationships', that Higgins et al., 2001, noted made discussion between a student and the marker of their work complex. Many queries concerned tutor feedback; how to interpret it and then how to act on it. These first hand contacts revealed the full nature of the practical challenges facing students. It is very easy for tutors to write comments on essays, such as 'more analysis' or 'full reference required'. But sitting next to students as they attempted to act on such feedback revealed the complexity of the task facing students engaging in academic discourse.

The innovation

The PACE module aimed to provide students with an effective start to their university course, acting on Cottrell's recommendation that 'changes in the student body go hand in hand with the need for different kinds of teaching and with increased emphasis on skills development' (2001, 6).

This module situated the development of skills for study within a model of personal development, which meets the Dearing Report's requirement for students to 'learn how to learn'. Students were encouraged to develop their independence as learners through opportunities to analyse how they stood in relation to 'skills' required for study. Students then decided where to focus their efforts and learned how to set measurable targets for their development.

Learning outcomes

At the completion of the module students are expected to be able to demonstrate:

1. An understanding of what it means to be a student of higher education in terms of academic expectations and how those expectations should be met.
2. An understanding of how university procedures and practices work in relation to potential student issues.
3. An understanding of Personal Development Planning through the production of an initial personal development plan for the first semester, based on an analysis of the student's own Individual Learner Profile.
4. The ability to use feedback effectively by recording the necessary steps and re-writing a negotiated assignment.

The theoretical foundation for this approach is based on the work of Biggs, 2003, who identified metacognitive skills as a third level of

skills, which goes beyond generic and study skills. Metacognitive skills are in essence involved with ‘what a learner does in new context’ (2003, 94), and an awareness of the self as a learner. This links to Race’s 2001 work on leading students to conscious competence, which involves possessing the self-awareness to assess their own learning against specified outcomes. We want students to know why they achieved a particular grade for an assignment, to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and to set targets for their own development.

The final strategy in the innovation focuses on student use of tutor feedback. This provides an opportunity for students to draw on ‘expert’ advice to facilitate their development. The activity on resubmitting an assignment applies Butler and Winne’s advice that positions ‘feedback within a model of self-regulation that guides cognitive activities during which knowledge is accreted, tuned, and restructured.’ (1995, 246)

Returning to Race, who identifies the ‘art of teaching’ in the work that tutors do with learners in assisting student self-awareness ‘to explore their danger box’ and then to work with students to move them ‘towards conscious competence’(Race, 2001, 4). Thus, Race challenges us as lecturers to set our subject learning within a pedagogical strategy which recognises that students are only likely to become effective learners, in any subject area, if they are helped to develop self-awareness of themselves as learners.

Details of the religious studies cohort

PACE was a new module, offered initially to religious studies students as a pilot in Semester 1, 2005-6. At induction all students complete an Individual Learner Profile (ILP), which provides an opportunity for students to consider the fitness for purpose of the skills they possess on entry to HE. The ILP was developed by staff in the School of Art and Design and adapted by most schools across the university, to identify both individual student needs and support required by cohorts of students. Research on this profile by Slater and Peacock set thresholds for students, noting that students with less than 60% in more than one section had struggled, and thus provided a measurement for identifying students who were at medium or high risk of dropping out or failing.

Results from the Individual Learner Profile 2005-6 cohort for all students in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science revealed that over a third of students were at risk (37%), and the figures for the religious studies students involved in this module was almost two thirds (62%). Table 1 below reveals that the religious studies students had a lower perception of their skills than the school average—thus it was appropriate that they were involved in the pilot.

	School	RS Pilot
Percentage of students at high risk (4 sections below 60%)	8	19
Percentage of students at medium risk (2 or 3 sections below 60%)	29	43
Total at risk	37	62

Table 1 – The School profile set against the religious studies pilot group

Table 2 presents the percentage of students who scored less than 60% in the aspects listed and thus were deemed to be at risk. The table reveals that the religious studies students identified particular problems in speaking, which was relevant for this module as students were required to do a presentation. The students also lacked confidence in numeracy but there was little need in the first year modules for students to engage with numbers, as the research methods module in the second year introduces students to numeracy skills.

	School	RS Pilot
Speaking	27	35
Reading	10	10
Writing	13	10
Time management	20	15
Numeracy	45	75
IT skills	12	2

Table 2 – Percentage of students with less than 60% in each area

Three elements of this module will be explored in this study to explore how far three strategic innovations enable students to become ‘architects of their own learning’.

Strategy 1: individualised learning

The approach to skills development in this module is innovative in two ways. Firstly, students are encouraged to think about why they have come to university, and work out what ‘being a student’ means to them. I am indebted to a philosophy colleague, Rob Baron, for his work in this area with all students at induction, and then a follow up session with the RS group. This positioning of skills development within a philosophical context of critical thinking encourages students to adopt a proactive stance and take ownership of their learning. A student noted that the essay on ‘Being a student’, ‘got me to think about why I came to university and how I will make the most of it’. Others wrote of the importance of thinking about goals and responsibilities, and taking an

active part in education.

Secondly, completion of an Individual Learner Profile encouraged each student to think about their own skill level in relation to the learning outcomes of the modules they were studying. This ensured that students made a link between the skills they entered with and the skills requirements of the modules they were studying. The ILP is a short diagnostic questionnaire, covering aspects of key skills, which encourages students to think about their strengths and areas for improvement. Slater and Peacock, 2001, when introducing the ILP to Wolverhampton, noted that ‘Embedding learner support generically from the outset within the curriculum is facilitating the removal of the stigma of seeking assistance and subsequent admittance of weakness’. (2001, 73).

This identification of particular individual areas for development was followed in this project by the specification of a Learner Action Plan, to develop the skills each individual needed to develop in order to be successful. This initiative sought to build on the starting point of the ILP by ensuring that students had the opportunity to do something about the perceptions of their skills that they have at the start of their course. The ILP is based on the student’s perception of her position, and often students are wide of the mark. Some students are not aware of the requirements of higher education and think the skills that served them well in school will suffice. Others worry that they will not be able to cope with higher education, and often such worries are unfounded. Whichever way students are wide of the mark, the ILP is a useful starting point as it raises awareness about the range of skills required for higher education and starts discussion about ways of developing skills.

Resources for the PACE module made it possible for each student to have an individual tutorial. In this tutorial students completed a Personal Development Planning form to identify the area they wanted to focus on for this task and selected at least two workshops to attend to develop their profile. The workshops were run by the Student Union, the Counselling Service, Learning Centres and academic schools.

This approach to skills development enables each student to work from their starting position and think about how to meet their own particular needs. The linking of skills to subject learning made it possible for students to reflect on the ‘process’ of essay writing as they work on

the 'product' (Prosser & Webb, 1994). Traditional approaches to skills usually aim to cover all bases, and this means that for most of the time students may be covering areas they already possess confidence and competence in. In addition, the need to cover all bases means that the amount of time spent on each area is reduced and may not provide the depth and detail that an individual student would gain the most benefit from.

In addition this approach offered an alternative to the debate about free-standing skills modules or embedded skills development in subject modules. Cottrell recommended that skills learning be situated in subjects, with links to 'additional support, skills modules or peer support [that] are part of a multifaceted and integrated approach' (2001, 43).

The benefit of free-standing skills modules is often questioned, due to problems students seem to face in applying their 'skills' development within their subject learning. However, skills development within subject learning can be problematic if the staff delivering the programme do not have sufficient depth in teaching skills. Thus, this 'middle' approach was selected as a way to retain the strengths from each, by providing expert skills delivery within subject contexts.

This innovation acts on the awareness that if students start a higher education course without the necessary skills to be successful, they will struggle to find the time to make the required development to their skills set. In this module students have the time to work on their skills and the point is made that all students need to develop their skills set in order to make the most of higher education. Thus, rather than view skills development as a remedial activity to put right some deficit, this module presents skills development as a normative activity which is beneficial for all students.

Lecture sessions introduced students to all the staff they could usefully encounter to support their learning, through a three minute 'elevator pitch' overview of available support. The elevator technique challenges the individual to present their 'pitch' to their boss in the elevator, in the time it takes the elevator to reach the top floor. Thus, staff presented against the backdrop of a screen shot of the elevator doors closing, and the elevator progressing between floors. Staff modelled both presentation skills and time management skills in their short three minute pitches on how their role supported students.

Students in pairs followed up these areas by finding out more about the role of a particular person. This covered subject librarians, study skills advisors, personal counsellors, careers lecturers, and student union officials. Students then presented their findings to the wider group, sharing the approachability of the staff featured and re-iterating how these people could support students. This introduction to wider university support within the module aimed to bridge the gap that usually operated between students and centralised support. Several students stated that they would find it easier to seek support now they had met staff.

Students selected workshop sessions to aid their development. The majority chose workshops from the programme offered by the Student Union on general skills and using the ePortfolio. In addition many attended the school based sessions on essay writing and time management. The Counselling Service put a special session on for the group on handling anxiety. Student feedback was generally positive. One student reported: ‘The stress workshop helped a lot. After finding it hard to adjust to uni life, stress busting techniques helped. [They] benefited me by giving me the skills and exercises to relax myself during the long bus journey, this enabled me to enter lectures feeling calmer’. Others noted the benefit of meeting other staff and students: ‘Workshops were very good and helpful, and I also got to know other people as a result’.

At the end of the module students completed the ILP again. They did this without sight of their original submission so it is likely that their answers reflected their actual views at the end of the semester. Overall changes in perceptions in the ILP show that the majority of students felt more confident in relation to all areas. In the first five areas the total marks per aspect was 24 (made up of six elements in which students rated themselves on a scale of 1-4) and for ICT the total was 44. There was an overall average increase for students from 115 to 118 points out of a possible total of 188, although there is no baseline average as the main detail is in student responses for each section. Student perceptions of confidence increased in three sections, stayed the same in two, and decreased in one. Student comments showed a better understanding of the demands of higher education and a more realistic assessment of their ability to complete tasks.

	Start of semester	End of semester	Change
Speaking	16	15	-1
Reading	17	17	0
Writing	17	17	0
Time management	16	17	1
Numeracy	16	18	2
IT skills	33	34	1
Total	115	118	3

Table 3 – Comparison of ILP average marks between the start and end of the semester, according to sections

The overall picture provided by this table shows a slight increase, but when individual results were unpacked two significant points emerged. Firstly, the numbers of students in the ‘at risk’ category was reduced from the initial 62% to between 5–10%, which was significantly below the original school average of 36%. Four students had started in the high risk category, with four sections under 60%. At the end of the module, only one student remained at high risk, with four sections under 60%. A similar picture emerged for the eight students who were at medium risk, with only one student remaining at medium risk, with three sections at less than 60%. Thus, the at risk percentage for both risk categories stood at 5% for the RS cohort, which was substantially lower than the school at risk category.

Secondly, the analysis of individual student changes from the start to the end of the semester revealed a number of variables. Generally the trend was for students to show increased confidence, particularly in the areas they sought to develop in the module. However,

some students seem to have revised their views of their study capacity in light of their actual study experiences. There were some individual blips, some caused by students discovering that standards at university were higher than they expected, or other students realising that their skill set was appropriate for university. We can examine the results by considering individual student views on their experiences.

Three main positions were identified by students in relation to the development of their individual learner profile. First, what I have termed ‘position 1: positive’; students who found the exercise useful as it helped the identification of ‘strengths and areas for development’, especially when a weakness was identified as something that ‘affects every aspect of my life as a student’. Second, ‘position 2: neutral’; students who completed the exercises but were neutral on the benefit of such activities. Despite the link between their studies in religious studies and skills development, these students were unlikely to apply study strategies to their RS assignments. Finally, in the third category, ‘position 3: negative’; were students who found the focus on their skills very threatening. Most of the students were mature and did not want to think about any areas of weakness they brought to their course. Rather than use this module as an opportunity for development, these students wanted to get on with their academic subject study and not ‘waste time on skills’.

Individual case studies

The Individual Learner Profile asked students to rate themselves on aspects of six areas of their learning.

Position 1: 'positive'

Student 1 is a mature student, with family commitments, who has to travel a distance to university. Her results on all her modules were good, with an average of B, yet overall her ILP shows a reduction of confidence. She is more confident only in the area of time management. She is less confident speaking, reading and writing, despite receiving positive feedback on modules on her reading and writing skills. Follow up discussion with this student revealed that her view of speaking was influenced by her initial expectations that her degree course would be easier than it turned out to be. She felt that her lower perceptions were due to stress and exhaustion at the end of the semester. She feared that the study load together with family commitments, health worries and travel would make study in the future more difficult. Thus, whilst she recognised that her basic skills were sound, she worried that she would not be able to cope.

	Start of semester	End of semester	Change
Speaking	14	11	-3
Reading	17	16	-1
Writing	15	14	-1
Time management	19	21	2
Numeracy	8	8	0
IT skills	28	28	0
Total	101	98	-3

Table 4 – Comparison of student 1's ILP marks between the start and end of the semester, according to sections

Student 2 showed the largest overall increase and was also the student who demonstrated the strongest commitment to developing her skills in the module. This student took up all opportunities to develop skills, attending more than the required number of workshops and making good use of book and electronic sources for development. Her evaluation noted how skills development had enabled her to improve specific skills, which overall had increased her confidence.

	Start of semester	End of semester	Change
Speaking	13	18	5
Reading	14	20	6
Writing	15	19	4
Time management	19	19	0
Numeracy	17	24	7
IT skills	30	35	5
Total	108	135	27

Table 5 – Comparison of student 2’s ILP marks between the start and end of the semester, according to sections

Position 2: ‘neutral’

Student 3 is a residential student living away from home, who despite showing an overall increase still remained at high risk. There was an increase in four areas and a significant loss of confidence in the area of writing. Follow up discussion revealed that loss of confidence in writing was linked to negative feedback on essays and the experience of failure. It was also clear that the student did not start with a realistic view of the workload in higher education and the range of skills required to complete tasks.

	Start of semester	End of semester	Change
Speaking	10	10	0
Reading	12	13	1
Writing	15	11	-4
Time management	9	10	1
Numeracy	19	22	3
IT skills	35	37	2
Total	100	103	3

Table 6 – Comparison of student 3’s ILP marks between the start and end of the semester, according to sections

Position 3: ‘negative’

Student 4 was a mature student who was following up a lifelong interest in religion and history by taking a joint degree. This student wanted to focus on subject study and did not recognise the need to develop skills. Completing the ILP was considered to be an unnecessary chore, which took time away from subject study. This student felt that skills would emerge through subject study and did not see the point of paying specific attention to study skills. Whilst this student showed an increase in confidence in IT skills it was noted that the requirement to use the e-portfolio had a negative impact on his motivation for study. The requirement to develop new skills was regarded as very threatening and made the student ‘feel stupid’.

	Start of semester	End of semester	Change
Speaking	15	16	1
Reading	15	14	-1
Writing	14	13	-1
Time management	12	13	1
Numeracy	20	21	1
IT skills	34	35	1
Total	110	112	2

Table 7 – Comparison of student 4’s ILP marks between the start and end of the semester, according to sections

Characteristics of this position are similar to those noted by Booth's work on history students, who 'arrive at university primarily wishing to focus upon their subject and a large part of their motivation is bound up with this'. Such students need to be shown that skills are central to their subject, and that 'scholarship and skills go together' (2001, 500).

Strategy 2: learning how to act on feedback

A specific area in which students are able to take more control over their learning is acting on tutor feedback, a learning resource that Orrell, 2006, noted often has only a marginal status. The background to this innovation is located in our attempts at Wolverhampton to meet the requirement in Section 6 of the QAA Code of Practice on Assessment of Students, 2000, to 'ensure that appropriate feedback is provided...in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement' (QAA, 2000).

Written feedback has been identified by many sources as one of the main ingredients in effective student learning. Cottrell, 2003, for example, stated that feedback is the 'passport to better marks', with comments providing more information than grades. However, researchers have identified feedback as the one aspect of the assessment process that is often overlooked or ignored. Chanock, 2000, found that students tend to look at the grade and ignore tutor comments, particularly if they seem negative. Failure to engage with feedback is not a recent phenomenon, Brannon and Knoblauch noted in 1981 that there is 'scarcely a shred of empirical evidence to show that students typically even comprehend our responses to their writing, let alone use them purposefully to modify their practice' (1981, 1).

A cross university workshop on feedback developed the *Using Feedback Effectively* form to guide and support students in their interaction with tutor feedback. (A copy of this form is available in the appendix.) This form guides students through a systematic process to enable them to make the most of the feedback provided by staff. Tutors often feel that they spend a lot of time marking scripts and there is little evidence that students take any notice of the feedback. The reason for this be may be found in the fact that student do not know 'how' to act

on feedback. One student introduced his work on this section with the words ‘So...now I have the feedback...what am I to do with it?’ Weaver, 2006, stated that students ‘may need advice on understanding and using feedback before they can engage with it’, but then found that 50% of students surveyed have never been given any guidance on how to act on feedback. (Weaver, 2006, 379)

	Business (%)	Design (%)	Average (%)
Yes, prior to University	24	29	26
Yes, at first level of University	12	17	14
Yes, in a book on study skills	8	0	4
Yes, other	0	12	6
No	56	42	50

Table 8 – Have students received guidance on how to understand and use feedback? (Weaver, 2006, 385)

The stages within the *Using Feedback Effectively* form link to Maclellan’s research, which found that ‘most students did not view feedback on their learning as either routinely helpful in itself or as a catalyst for discussion’ (Maclellan, 2001, 316).

	Students (%)	Staff (%)
36. Feedback is helpful in detail	sometimes (73)	frequently (43)
37. Feedback prompts discussion with tutor	never (50)	frequently (63)
38. Feedback helps to understand assessment	sometimes (62)	frequently (50)
39. Feedback improves learning	sometimes (72)	frequently (49)

Table 9 – Student and staff responses as modal values (Maclellan, 2001, 310)

For the purposes of this assignment students were to work on the feedback they had received on one of their essays. The *Using Feedback Effectively* form was supplemented by a range of exercises, which encouraged reflection on the process of essay writing from start to finish. These stages encouraged students to look at the detail of feedback, to prepare for a tutorial, and to act on the feedback to develop learning in a specific area. This process applied the recommendation ‘to shift the emphasis to ‘feeding forward’ into a piece of work, rather than simply ‘feeding back’ (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001, 274).

Stage I: positives and negatives

Firstly, students were to break tutor comments on their essay into positive and negative points. Often tutor feedback focuses on negative points and students do not recognise the things they are doing right. Race, 2001, termed this feature as ‘unconscious competence,’ when students do not really know why or how they got something right. By undertaking a systematic overview the student is able to take a more balanced account of their achievements, in order to counter Race’s observation that students ‘often are quite blind to valuable feedback’ (1997, 64).

Students generally found the process useful in helping them to get an overview of their achievements, and to overcome the tendency

to focus on negatives. One student noted: ‘I feel it is important to be aware that you are good at certain things. I used to have a tendency to look at the negative points made and therefore have a negative view of my abilities. I now realise the criticism I receive is for me to use to my advantage’.

However, for the majority of students the recognition of areas for development is central to their development. Race stated that ‘unconscious incompetence’ (sic) was the most important area to gain awareness of as it enabled students to become aware of ‘what they didn’t yet know that they couldn’t yet do’ (2001, 4). Only when students develop this awareness can they move to the position of ‘conscious incompetence’, and actually be in a position to address the area of ‘uncompetence’.

Stage 2: preparation for a tutorial

This stage helps the student prepare for a tutorial by encouraging the listing of questions to discuss with their tutor. Lillis & Turner, 2001, found that feedback could raise more questions for students than it answered. Students need to understand what tutors meant by key terms such as arguments, structure, or explicitness, which may require students to become code breakers to crack, what Sommers termed, a tutor ‘uniform code’ in vague feedback ‘commands, requests, and pleadings’ (1982, 153).

Maclellan’s findings on tutor and student perceptions of feedback showed the greatest discrepancy in the area of feedback prompting discussion. Tutors responded that feedback frequently prompts discussion, but whom they had discussion with is questionable as 50% of students stated that feedback never prompted discussion!

This process of tutorial discussion can also assist students to overcome the psychological barrier of facing criticism. In many cases students often find it easier to put feedback sheets, which are regarded as negative, out of sight and out of mind. If having an essay tutorial is a matter of choice it can be easy for students to opt out of facing up to perceived failings by not having a tutorial. However, when a tutorial is required, students have to face up to the feedback, and through this process should gain a balanced overview of their achievements, which can direct future learning.

The questions prepared by the student for the tutorial address Race's observation that 'students may not have the opportunity to make sense of the feedback they receive' (1997, 64). The requirement for students to develop questions prior to a tutorial facilitates this process, and helps students engage in dialogue with their tutor, the dialogue serving to initiate students into subject specific academic discourse: 'Discussion, clarification and negotiation between student and tutor can equip students with a better appreciation of what is expected of them, and develop their understandings of academic terms and appropriate practices' (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001, 27). The actual process of asking questions about what was meant by a comment could be regarded as challenging the expert judgement of their tutor (Higgins et al.); but for any learning to take place students need to understand the comment and think about how to act on it. Thus, thinking about the question in advance and writing out the words to be used may help students do this in a manner that staff do not find challenging, and enable students to take this important step in finding out what the tutor meant.

Firstly, students can confirm that their interpretation of tutor feedback comments are correct, and check that the intended follow up actions are appropriate. Secondly, students have an opportunity to ask about the tutor comments they do not understand, or to ask how the comments related to the detail in the essay.

This process is important for all students, including high achievers. One student who received a high grade for her essay expressed frustration: 'Can you tell me what exactly is right and what I should do next time and if the essay was so good why didn't I get a higher grade? There must have been something that needs improvement'.

This asking of questions enables the student to enter into dialogue with the tutor, and empowers the student to take control of the revision process. This opportunity to discuss how far they were successful in communicating their intentions is a vital step. Brannon & Knoblauch noted 'Writers know what they intended to communicate. Readers know what a text has actually said to them' (1982, 162). Thus, the tutor can fulfil the role of a 'sounding board' enabling the student to see where their communication was successful and where it needs revision. This step empowers the student through dialogue: 'By negotiating those changes rather than dictating them, the teacher returns

control of the writing to the student’ (Sommers, 1982, 149).

The opportunity to discuss their assignment with a tutor enables a student to engage in academic discourse which is necessarily complex when exploring ideas and arguments. Butler and Winne identified five functions of feedback which are only likely to be achieved in a discursive situation. Firstly, the tutor can discuss how far the student has an appropriate understanding of key concepts in the essay. Secondly, the tutor can suggest sections which required more information. Thirdly, the tutor can discuss with the student how elements of prior knowledge influenced their interpretations in the essay. Fourthly, tutors can help ‘refine’ understandings to help the student discriminate between key concepts. Finally, tutors can challenge false theories that the student might hold, which are incompatible with the range of ideas that students need to be able to take on board.

Students in this study noted that this process of discussion with the tutor enabled them to explore feedback which seemed to be contradictory. One student noted a comment on the script ‘set out your views in an objective manner’ whilst the feedback sheet noted ‘You are developing a strong personal voice’. On the surface these comments seem to conflict and would be likely to confuse the recipient. Clarity is only likely to be achieved through a tutorial, where the student can ask such questions, which would allow the tutor to enter into dialogue and explain the meaning of each comment. Students also drew attention to the fact that the process allows for ‘legitimate questioning of feedback by students’.

Stage 3: Learner Action Plan

Requiring students to develop a Learner Action Plan recognises that the developments in light of feedback will not happen unless there is specific and directed action. A student user of the form noted: ‘I realise that in order to develop my study skills I have to make an effort. I need to research these topics in the same way I do other aspects of my work’.

Firstly, students are required to break the feedback down into major and minor points. This is an important step as tutor feedback may list and mix major and minor points, as illustrated by Sommers: ‘Check your commas and semi-colons and think more about what you are thinking about’ (1982, 151). Only by working out major and minor

concerns will students be in a position to work out how long they should spend on follow up tasks.

In this module students were required to have a 30 minute tutorial to discuss strategies for acting on the feedback with their tutor. Stephani noted that staff assume that students know how to complete the tasks they are set, and staff ‘rarely guide students through or model the process of structuring an essay’ (1998, 348).

The difficulty of acting on advice was identified as a major problem by students. Many stated that they felt it was very easy for tutors to make bland comments about study skill changes, which do not recognise the level of the challenge facing the student. There was widespread recognition that staff need to prepare students for assessments with slots on study skills within modules. In addition providing exemplars, not just of model essays but actual essays with usual feedback, was beneficial in enabling students to see what they have to do.

The *Using Feedback Effectively* form contained information about study skills resources (people, book and electronic) which students could use in their action plan. In addition the *Study Skills Feedback and Recommended Readings* form provided a range of web resources which specify the nature of each grammar requirement, for example for the use of an apostrophe, and provided examples of usage for the student to check their understanding. Students completed this final section to identify the resources they drew on to act on feedback advice. This recording of the steps taken has the dual purpose of encouraging students to take specific actions, and then by making the actions transparent it is possible to assess if the actions have been appropriate for the development required.

Strategy 3. Acting on feedback to re-submit an assignment

Falchikov noted that ‘students often do not read their teachers’ feedback, and when they do so, often misunderstand it. Even when the feedback comments are read and understood, they are rarely acted upon’ (1995, 159). The aim of this strategy was to promote direct use of feedback so that students reflected on their work to address the

feedback comments. This aspect followed the guidance from Ivanic et al. on the timeliness of feedback and the opportunity for students to respond to comments: ‘if necessary change the way you run the course so as to be able to give more and better feedback at times when the students can use it’ (2000, 63).

Taras argued for undergraduates being afforded the opportunities of acting on advice on drafts, practices which are a feature of staff writing experiences. This would give students support when they need it, it would initiate them into academic practice, and encourage students to use feedback: ‘allowing updating and resubmission of weak or failed work would permit direct use of the feedback and would support learning’ (2006, 375).

For this task students were able to select an assignment from either of their subjects for the re-submission exercise. This was an attempt to make this exercise relevant and link the skills development to their subject learning. The majority of students took the opportunity to work on a religious studies assignment—in some cases this was an essay that they had failed and would need to re-submit at a later stage.

Students used the *Using Feedback Effectively* form and completed reflective exercises to record their thoughts at various stages of the writing process. Students had individual tutorials with the module leader as well as with the tutors who provided the feedback on the actual essay they were going to re-write. Students were assessed on their reflection on their learning, the development of their action plan, and how far the final essay had addressed the points raised in feedback.

Two main problems were encountered in this activity. Firstly, the actual tutor feedback that students had to work with was often too brief or too vague for students to act on. Secondly, many students lacked the motivation to work on the feedback. They felt they had completed that task and wanted to move on to the next challenge, and not re-visit earlier work.

Student comments in response to the question ‘Does acting on feedback by re-writing an essay help your learning?’ showed general agreement with the exercise although their comments stressed that they felt they already had too much work and would only undertake such a task if it was worth their while in terms of grades or credits.

Strongly agree 1	2	3	4	Strongly disagree 5
25	25	18.75	25	6.25

Table 10 – Percentage of student responses to the question ‘Does acting on feedback by re-writing an essay help your learning?’

Those who strongly agreed felt the task helped to ‘show me whether I have learnt from my mistakes’, and ‘to know what to improve’. Those in-between recognised the value of working on drafts of an essay and receiving feedback that they could act on: ‘if I do a draft and get feedback on it, I can do better in the final essay’.

Those who strongly disagreed with the benefits of the task felt that their work could improve if they received generic advice as they did not see the benefit of spending time going over the same ground.

Overall, students in the pilot study found the feedback exercise helped them to engage with tutor feedback and to use feedback to develop their learning. The strongest comment in recognition of this benefit came from this student: ‘I realise that in order to develop my study skills I have to make an effort. I need to research these topics in the same way I do other aspects of my work’.

Lessons learnt from the innovation

1. The first lesson is that many students benefited from this explicit opportunity to assess their starting points and develop skills for successful study. One student reported on the acting on feedback exercise: ‘This exercise was interesting and helpful to complete, since I misunderstood some feedback I received and if I did not complete this exercise, I would have continued doing what I was, which would have had a negative impact on my work’.

All the students who completed the module passed. However, two students started the module late, one of whom completed it successfully in the following semester, and one who has yet to complete

all tasks. This pass rate was much higher than their results in the core religious studies module in the same semester, and the majority of students continued to progress in the second semester and start Level 2.

2. Building formative feedback into modules at the start of a degree course helps students by providing the opportunity for gradual and incremental alignment to higher education standards. The approach in this module provided a built-in buffer zone, in which students were able to explore the requirements for writing in higher education, and have the opportunity to respond to formative feedback. If their first experience of assessment is summative, then students may experience failure before they have found their feet in higher education. This can be such a negative experience for some students that they never recover from it. Cannon noted the importance of learning through such experiences: ‘Helping students to manage and learn from setbacks improves their chances of attaining that success, given failure’s ability to teach important lessons’ (2002, 83).

3. In this module students had the opportunity to ‘learn by doing’, to utilise feedback to further their understanding of a task through re-submission. Butler & Winne, 1995, advised such a review of temporal location of feedback, to set it within the process of learning rather than at the end. Falichov, 1995, also recommended that feedback be located close to the ‘behaviour’ in order to reap psychological benefits. Taras provided strong arguments for students having the opportunity to re-submit assignments. She pointed out that this enables students to use tutor feedback and provides an opportunity for students to check ‘if they have internalized and completely taken the feedback on board’ (2001, 609).

The approach is based on the Aristotelian notion of developing good habits through action. By using the form students will learn how to get more out of feedback, and may draw on aspects of the process to assist their future development. This addresses MacLellan’s recommendation that students need to be actively involved for learning to take place: ‘The implication of this is that if students are not actually monitoring and regulating the quality of their own learning, feedback of itself, regardless of its degree of detail, will not cause improvement in learning’ (2001, 316).

Getting more out of feedback can enhance the development of all students, helping students to reflect systematically on tasks (Prosser &

Webb, 1994). Each assessment opportunity can become an opportunity for growth if students develop their own capacity to interpret and act on tutor feedback. The following comment reveals a student’s changed attitude to feedback: ‘Next time I complete an assignment, I am certain I will be more conscientious not to make the same mistakes but more importantly, remember my strengths too’.

Retrospective support for this approach is provided by Bloxham and West’s consideration of the impact that assessment activities had on students in the following year of their study. They noted in particular the importance students placed on face to face contact, which made it possible for tutors to provide ‘verbal clarification of written guidance and feedback’ (2007, 77).

4. Developing independent learners: The vast majority of students involved in this module agreed that ‘feedback contributed to their personal development by identifying areas to work on’.

Strongly agree 1	2	3	4	Strongly disagree 5
53	29	6	6	6

Table 11 – Percentage of student responses to the question ‘Has feedback contributed to your personal development?’

In this approach students were involved in making decisions for their own development. They selected the area for development based on responses in their Individual Learner Profile, and they chose the essay to re-submit. This approach challenges the notion that skills development is a form of remedial activity which only applies to weak students, as all students in the module were able to engage in activities to develop their skills set. The motivation to improve was as strong for students on the cusp of the highest grades as for students with lower grades. In all cases there is a need to initiate students into subject specific academic discourse.

5. Working closely with students as they attempted to interpret

and act on tutor feedback provided an insight into potential difficulties facing students, and raised questions about the nature of the feedback provided by tutors. In many cases students found it difficult to act on feedback that lacked detail or focus. Further study in this area is required to identify the forms of feedback that best facilitate student learning. Bloxham and West's students preferred short explicit feedback written in easy to understand language. They hypothesised that 'less feedback helps the students to focus' (2007, p. 85).

Finally, it is necessary to widen the classification of skills required by students in higher education. The expectation at the start of the module was that students would choose to work on one of the six 'key skills' identified by the QCA. However, student feedback showed that this list needs to be expanded, or the remit of skills needs to be re-specified. Oral communication skills are usually understood in the form of presentation skills, however, students drew attention to the challenge of speaking to staff and even to older students—one student noted the challenge: 'Communication with people older than me. I have always been around people my own age'.

The strategies within this module helped these students develop a foundation for their higher education study through specific learning activities. Students were inculcated into a proactive approach to learning, drawing on the full range of university resources to develop their own skills set to meet their specific study needs.

Further information

Work in the area of student use of tutor feedback is the focus for my National Teaching Fellowship project. This involves the further development of learning activities to help students to use tutor feedback. These can be used by staff to incorporate into sessions for students, or be freestanding for students to use by themselves. In addition I am working on specific guidance which models and guides the development of skills within specific discipline contexts. In both these areas I welcome the opportunity to work with colleagues in religious studies (and cognate disciplines) so please get in touch if you would like copies of reports or for me to run a staff or student workshop.

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Appendix: Using Feedback Effectively form

The strategies employed in the *Using Feedback Effectively* form can be incorporated into sessions by staff, or used by students as a freestanding resource.

The feedback you receive on work is the best guide to how your work is progressing. The comments give you information on how far you achieve the learning outcomes for the assignment, and also comments on the text will provide suggestions for improving aspects of your academic writing. Use this form to develop your skills in this area.

I. Working on feedback:

Read the feedback on your assignment carefully, then re-read the piece of work to see the areas that the feedback refers to. You might use a highlighter pen to cross-reference the feedback to your work, or to draw attention to corrections and suggestions.

Summarise the feedback from your tutor:

Comments on the text

Overall feedback comments

Break the feedback down into:

Good points (note these down so you can do them again)

Areas for improvement (draw out the two main areas from feedback)

2. Preparing for a tutorial

Use these prompts to prepare for a tutorial with your module tutor. Make an appointment with your tutor or go during your tutor's office hours. Take this form and your assignment to the tutorial.

Feedback that you understand.

List the main points.

Fill in the actions you intend to take on these points and discuss with your tutor.

Feedback you do not understand

Make a list of questions to ask your tutor.

Action points. Fill this section in during the tutorial.

Action Plan: Stage 1.

Divide the main feedback between:

Major issues e.g. Referencing

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Minor errors e.g. Punctuation

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Stage 2.

Issue 1: e.g. Referencing

Tutor Advice: To use quotation and reference appropriately.

Action to be taken: Check how to use Harvard:
<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/help>

Areas to develop

Study Skills

If the advice is that you need to brush up on study or writing skills you might find a section listed below will help.

Academic writing

Planning, developing an argument, grammar (sentence construction, punctuation, use of apostrophe), referencing.

Extend your reading base

To find appropriate sources for your work: OPAC (books and journals), electronic data-bases, internet.

Coping with stress

Not able to focus on your work, worrying about failure, how to develop your confidence.

Where to go for help

Recommended books

Look for separate sections on Study Skills or locate at class-mark: 378.170281 WOLF HLSS Student Support—group folder.

Study Skills Advisors

(HLC, book appointment on ext.2301). Use on-line tip sheets on study skills:

<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/help>

HLSS ‘Developing your Study Skills’ sessions.

Academic librarians

Harrison Learning Centre, first floor help-desk, subject starting points:

<http://www.wlv.ac.uk/help>

Counselling and Guidance

Make an appointment at the Student Gateway in MB.

Student Union

Advice and Support Centre

Recommended Study Skills Books

Cottrell, S. (2003), *The Study Skills Handbook*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Good sections on: covers most aspects very well.

Northedge, A. (2005), *The Good Study Guide*, Milton Keynes: Open University.

Good sections on: planning essays, developing an argument.

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Reusable Electronic Learning Objects for Theology and Religious Studies

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I. Project

This paper reports a project partly funded by the HEA Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies. We were particularly attracted by the funding steer of developing electronic delivery given our involvement with two programmes in theology and the study of religion offered by distance learning. Both are well established, with histories predating the merger of the previous Westminster College with Oxford Brookes University. At undergraduate level in

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particular, significant effort has gone into developing an effective electronic infrastructure using Brookes Virtual (WebCT). However, this principally offered support for students, functioning at the lower levels of Brookes's e-learning modes of engagement, expressed as follows:

Mode 1

Baseline course administration and learner support

Uses the web to distribute course information and carry out course administration (chosen from the following): aims and objectives, assessment criteria/pro formas, past exam questions and model answers/assessment sheets, timetabling announcements, reading lists, tutor contact details, course evaluation tools, FAQs, additional web resources, links to field level resources, course/module handbook, lecture notes.

Mode 2

Blended learning leading to significant enhancements to learning and teaching processes

Mode 2 specifies four areas of engagement: Communication, Collaboration, Assessment and Learning Content. We were making good progress in developing communication (improved tutor-student and student-student communications, mainly using discussion boards or email. This enables students, especially in disparate groupings and locations, to exchange information, ask questions and discuss issues relating to the course). We were a considerable distance from Mode 3, a fully online course or module, as we continued to provide all of our modules in a paper-based form. This was nonetheless a long-term goal. As an interim measure, we aimed to develop the Mode 2 Learning Content: 'Flexible access to high quality, reusable learning content, which may include structured gateways to web and other resources with accompanying self-paced independent learning activities, interactive tutorials with feedback, simulations, study and learning skills resources and activities fostering independent learning.' (<http://www.brookes.ac.uk/mediaworkshop/brookesvirtual/modes-ofengagement/index.html>)

The opportunity to bid for funding from the then PRS-LTSN was

therefore timely and welcome. Entitled 'Effective online learning in TRS: course design, learning objects and material transformation', the project's goal was to explore how content from the discipline of TRS might be presented and used within the paradigm of reusable electronic learning objects (RELOs). The challenges were substantial and at times daunting. For example, the very territory itself needed to be defined: What *are* 'reusable electronic learning objects'? Neither participant had a background in electronic delivery: What training had to be undertaken to equip ourselves to create electronic materials? Having done this initial groundwork, new questions emerged: How could the various emerging principles be applied to TRS, as traditionally content-heavy disciplines? What use could teaching staff in those disciplines be expected to make of RELOs? What pedagogical adjustments might have to be made, and what were the corresponding advantages and disadvantages both to teachers and students?

This paper addresses the majority of those questions in the sections that follow.

II. Reusable Electronic Learning Objects

Space precludes a full discussion of the literature exploring the definition and nature of RELOs. It quickly became apparent that this was new territory, with discussions revolving around:

- a) The term itself. So Muzio, Heins and Mundell (2002), in their paper 'Experiences with reusable E-learning objects: From theory to practice' refer consistently throughout to ELOs, despite the fact that their reusability is an essential dimension. These writers cite a range of terms, accompanied by a range of definitions. Alternative terms include: 'Educational objects, content objects, training components, nuggets, and chunks' (Cisco, 2001); 'media object' (South and Monson, 2001); and plain 'learning objects' (Wiley, 2001). We chose to use 'Reusable Electronic Learning Objects' (RELOs) since this incorporated the most frequently-used terms, while also emphasising an important charac-

teristic in their reusability.

- b) Definition of a RELO. In the same paper Muzio *et al.* highlight four ‘approaches to defining ELOs’:
 - i. ‘A granular, reusable chunk of information that is media independent’ (Cisco, 2001)
 - ii. ‘Digital media that is designed and/or used for instructional purposes. Such objects range from maps and charts to video demonstrations and interactive simulations’ (South and Monson, 2001)
 - iii. ‘Elements of a new type of computer-based instruction grounded in the object-oriented paradigm of computer science’ which allows instructional designers to ‘build small (relative to the size of an entire course) instructional components that can be reused a number of times in different learning contexts. They are generally understood to be digital entities deliverable over the Internet, meaning that any number of people can access and use them simultaneously’ (Wiley, 2001)
 - iv. ‘Small chunks of learning (granules, objects) [that] are labeled (meta-tagged within IMS standards) so systems can automatically present a hierarchy of learning objects, that ranges from simulation through topical unit and reusable learning object (RLO) to information objects’ (Internettime.com, 2001) (Muzio *et al.*, 2002:22)

Since we were tasked with the actual creation of a series of RELOs, this literature, together with our developing understanding and conception of RELOs, enabled us to formulate four principles which we committed ourselves to adhering to. These were:

- a) RELOs should be reusable. We interpreted this in as broad a manner as possible, aiming to create RELOs that would be reusable in one or more areas from a range of possibilities:
 - i. Reusability across disciplines. So the content could

be used, for example, by a theologian in one teaching context, and perhaps a geographer in another, and an art historian in another.

- ii. Reusability across levels. We found we needed to relinquish our inbuilt instinct to define learning outcomes from the outset, and aim to create (certain) resources that could be used for different purposes at different levels, from foundational to postgraduate. We anticipated that this would enhance the attractiveness of RELOs as a tool in teaching and learning.
- iii. Reusability across modes of instruction. We wanted to create RELOs that could be used in face-to-face classes, as well as in a more traditional distance learning environment, and online courses, together with a blended learning approach.

- b) RELOs should be self-contained and discrete, not deliberately building on something which has come before, or anticipating and preparing the way for something to come.
- c) RELOs should take advantage of their electronic form. There should therefore be an added value by dint of the fact that they are electronic. (By implication, this suggested that they would *not* be equally reproducible on paper. Our debates over this point led us to differing conclusions, which will be discussed later.)
- d) RELOs should be accompanied by a set of metadata. This was one of the few terms of jargon we allowed ourselves. Metadata refers to the important information about each individual RELO (author, ownership, copyright, content, etc.) which will permit potential users to find a RELO that they can appropriate.

Working through these issues, we realised that to a point, the concept of a RELO, and especially that of a RLO (reusable learning object) was already familiar. Journal articles, chapters in edited books, images, and one-off radio and television programmes are just some examples. With

the exception of the provision of metadata (and even this could be likened to a sophisticated electronic library classification system), many of these could be considered to fulfil aspects of our other RELO criteria. The challenge would be to bring them all together: a challenge we relished but approached with some trepidation.

III. Creating RELOs

III.1 Six RELOs

Having established basic RELO principles, we then decided to work on the creation of six RELOs, deliberately targeting different styles and forms. Our discussions resulted in a goal of creating:

1. a RELO using image(s)
2. a study-skills RELO
3. a RELO which was the transformation of a 2-hr face-to-face class
4. a RELO using part of an existing paper-based distance learning module as its base
5. a RELO which focused on content but which started from scratch
6. a podcast (audio)

We took three each, one colleague working on the first three, the other on the second three. Regular communication took place between us as we progressed, and we were supported in a range of ways by Oxford Brookes's learning technologists, and in particular by a member of staff from the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.

Conceptually, the easiest type of RELO to create was that using image(s). Clearly a work of art stands alone, lends itself to use and reuse in a multitude of contexts and levels, and can be reproduced electronically. We turned to the Methodist Church Collection of Modern Christian Art which is based at Westminster Institute of Education (Oxford Brookes) and, with the kind agreement of the Trustees, chose two contrasting images of Holy Communion. Conscious of the need for reusability, we provided information about the picture itself under each,

and included a few brief quotes from one of the artists in which he speaks about the relationship between his Christian faith and his art. This RELO therefore became the smallest and shortest.

Students on our undergraduate degree, a BA in Theology and Religion, are sometimes asked to write a critical book review as part of their assessment. They often find both the ‘book review’ aspect and the ‘critical’ aspect challenging. Our second RELO was entitled ‘Critical Thinking through Book Reviews’, immediately addressing the reusability factor head on: this could be used by someone wanting to work at writing book reviews, and by someone wanting to work at their critical thinking. It made significant use of the electronic environment, providing links to model reviews, offering feedback to interactive tasks and activities using pop-ups, and referencing internet sites focusing on critical thinking. Intended as a self-study tool, the RELO begins with a brief introduction to the principles of critical thinking, then moves to a case study using a book review as a model. From there it moves to epistemology and learning styles, suggesting that critical thinking might come more naturally to some people and less to others. For those who need to specifically acquire the skill, it offers hints and tips, asking students then to critique a highly critical book review posted on Amazon.com. In its entirety, we anticipated that it might take students approximately 45 minutes to work through.

The transformation of a two hour face-to-face class was a much bigger challenge, principally because of size, or length. (At this point, we introduced our second jargon term: granularity. Those working in this area speak of ‘coarse’ and ‘fine’ granularity; Wikipedia defines ‘granularity as ‘The extent to which a system contains separate components (like granules). The more components in a system—or the greater the granularity—the more flexible it is.’) Both our previous RELOs had been ‘fine grained’: neither had separate, distinct elements embedded within it because their size was comparatively small; each functioned as an integrated whole. When creating a much larger RELO which would necessarily have a higher degree of granularity, we needed to consider both how to present the material and how to handle the relationship between the various components. The solution we found was to create a master RELO, with a number of subsidiary mini RELOs. For the master, we included (for the first time) stipulated learning outcomes, necessarily therefore restricting its reusability. Each

of the mini RELOs, however, conformed to our previous principles. (Interestingly, Muzio *et al* cite Cisco's (2001) discussion of:

...[an] RLO, which is defined as a collection of reusable information objects (RIOs), overview, summary, and assessments that supports a specific learning objective. An RIO is defined as a collection of content, practice, and assessment items assembled around a single learning objective. RIOs are built on templates "depending on what is being communicated, whether content, fact, process, principle, or procedure." (Muzio *et al*, 2002:22)

While our RELOs do not exactly match Cisco's RIOs, this third RELO certainly affirmed the network's sense that a distinction needed to be made between singularity and plurality.)

RELOS 4,5 and 6 were all aimed at Masters Level. A key reason for this was that the colleague working on these RELOs was heavily involved with an MA in Practical and Contextual Theology taught by distance learning and so wanted to respond directly to a concrete need and challenge.

The transformation of part of an existing paper-based distance learning module (RELO 4) seemed at first the most straightforward and potentially least time consuming RELO to be developed. However, it soon became very clear that the fundamental principles that we laid down for RELOs, especially those of their reusability, their self-contained and discrete nature and the requirement that they should take advantage of their electronic form, made the task very challenging. It was simply not possible to take written text and rearrange it into an electronically appropriate format. The part of the module chosen was in no way self discrete and relied heavily on preceding parts of the module. Also, the text of the module itself did not lend itself to the electronic format. The RELO needed considerable development to meet the basic criteria laid down. The resulting RELO, it was felt, met these criteria but was not a particularly good example of the benefits of RELOs for teaching and learning in HE.

RELO 5 (a RELO which focused on content but which started from scratch) was a very challenging, but in many ways the most rewarding, RELO to develop for the colleague working on RELOS 4, 5, and 6, hence the extensive description of the process of developing the RELO here. The RELO focussed on an interactive analysis of the

contextual nature of theology. It introduced students to the claim (certainly not accepted by all) that Christian theology is contextual by its very nature. In order to do this in a discrete (in the sense of being self-contained) and coherent way it was decided that following elements would be included:

- The RELO would start off with an appropriate and powerful image that was an example of contextual theology.
- The RELO needed a clear introduction in terms of what was about to be encountered. So an introduction to the format of the RELO was included which explained firstly that the RELO was in effect a critical activity, and secondly that students might not agree with or share the theological position that they would encounter but that they would be expected to take a critical approach to both the ideas in the RELO and the RELO itself. Hence, regardless of the students' own perspective, they were expected to engage critically and appropriately with the ideas presented. The RELO ends with a synoptic task bringing together the ideas encountered, with the students' own reflections on them in a piece of critical theological reflection.
- The underlying claim that Christian theology was contextual needed to be explained especially in relation to more traditional understandings of theology as objective and universally true. This then was a positioning exercise and there was a body of knowledge that needed to be engaged with. Students are asked to read some of these and write a brief analysis of the key ideas. After this there is then a self-check in terms of both ideas and styles of reflecting critically built into the RELO by asking them to read two reviews of the texts studied, giving them electronic access to these reviews.
- It became clear that an introduction was needed to key related ideas, those of postmodernity and poststructuralism, but there was a limit to how much information could realistically be included here. So an activity that encour-

aged students to research and understand the terms more fully was built into the RELO. The level of engagement here therefore depended on the students' own knowledge and understanding.

- The RELO then moves on to exemplify the contextual nature of theology, and black theology was used as a way of exemplifying the underlying claim of the RELO. Finally it brought students' learning together in an activity designed to reflect on and engage critically with the claim that all Christian theology is contextual.

RELO 6: a podcast (audio). The final RELO to be developed was a podcast of a debate between two tutors focussing on the issue of the compatibility or incompatibility of feminisms and Christian theology. This debate is key to the MA programme one of the tutors was involved with. The format of an audio debate which would be accessed as a podcast seemed particularly appropriate to the subject matter. It was felt that the written form did not sufficiently convey the finer details and nuances of a debate. As such, the audio debate, accessed as a podcast seemed an excellent example of the benefits that the e-learning format could offer. Given the challenges which arose in making the first five RELOs a reality, however, this one has thus far remained at the level of the theoretical.

III.2 Issues

The major issues in the creation of RELOs that emerged as we progressed were as follows:

The purpose of a RELO. This was intricately bound up with its reusability. So a RELO which had a specific teaching purpose, especially of content, often became less easily transferable from one teaching context to another, from one discipline to another. Nonetheless, we became increasingly aware of the many different layers that exist within, say, an academic journal paper. While its authors might (indeed, should) have made clear its overall thrust, nonetheless, readers are free to take and use any of its constituent threads to serve their own purposes, so long as it remains true to the original context. Hence each of our last three RELOs, while highly content-laden, are offered with

this possibility in mind. We came to view RELO 1 as a teaching resource: something which teachers could use in whatever way they wished. Options included a basic introduction to Holy Communion (low level), an exploration of the contextual nature of a specific aspect of theology (higher level), a discussion of the relationship between art and faith (cross discipline)... These would clearly depend on the expertise of the teacher to draw out appropriate points. A study skills RELO such as RELO 2 had a different purpose altogether, and this facilitated its self-contained nature. Defining the purpose of individual RELOs therefore became an important aspect of their design.

Linked with this was the issue of whether (and how) content could be presented in a way which heightened its effectiveness as a result of its electronic character. Our RELOs divided into two groups, one which attempted to exploit the electronic medium (1 to 3), the other which presented text electronically in a similar way to its presentation on paper. Our discussions suggested that other considerations were slipping in at this point. One argued that the real benefit of the electronic medium was the consequent accessibility of material, almost regardless of its pedagogical style; the other concurred but parried that pedagogy and presentation, in order to be as effective as possible, should exploit the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of the medium. The electronic presentation of content has received much attention over recent years (see, for example, Laurillard, 2002), and the discussions will no doubt continue.

IV. Piloting and evaluation

Once two or three draft RELOs were created we were in a position to begin piloting them and seeking feedback. This was done in a number of ways.

First, we presented our work and the thinking behind it to colleagues both at institutional and at university level. For most, it was entirely new territory and questions revolved around the 'atomisation' of knowledge; the role of the teacher/lecturer; the challenges, strengths and weaknesses of student-centred approaches to teaching and learning; and the frequent need for teachers to 'own' the material they were using, which implied they also needed to create it themselves.

This last had big implications for the reusability question. Colleagues from beyond TRS were able to engage with our work and were particularly interested in RELO 2, the study skills RELO. At the time of writing, two academic staff from other disciplines are working at transforming it for their own purposes, simply lifting out the TRS-centred book reviews and replacing them with reviews from their own subjects. This is an exciting development, entirely within the spirit of RELOs, which gives the reusability factor a new dimension.

Second, we posted the draft RELOs on our BA in Theology and Religion WebCT site and asked students to engage with them and give feedback, using the RELO principles articulated in section II. The following is a selection of quotes from this feedback.

RELO 1

I've looked at this RELO a couple of times now and really enjoyed it. Although I have no artistic talent at all it's an area I'm very interested in.

It's definitely re-usable.

It's different from any other area I'm studying, so is not looking forward or back, but knowledge gained from other modules will inform my ideas—there was quite a lot of work about the Eucharist in the Ecumenism module.

It's been great being able to access it electronically, but to be able to make intelligent comments, I'm going to have to print out the images so I can have them to hand while typing. Does this defeat the object of it being an electronic resource, or does it just mean my computer skills are nearly as bad as my artistic ones?!

RELO 2

I think this is a useful direction to point students in, both for critical thinking and book reviews. For the latter when read in conjunction with the library tutorial on CRBs I found between them they covered a lot of guidance. One of the problems I find with critical thinking is being a novice in this field I am reluctant to comment on the “experts”! The RELO is especially useful in this respect as it

shows you how to make balanced decisions on the merit of a book or article.

I haven't finished working through all of this yet—but couldn't wait to join in the discussion! As Alison knows, I have difficulty with critical thinking and this has already helped a lot. Much of it is to do with confidence and it's nice to see that acknowledged and a structured approach suggested to deal with that. The ideas of separate and connected knowing makes a lot of sense and it's really reassuring to read that other people find it to be like a foreign language.

RELOs 1 and 2 have attracted the majority of attention, largely because they were the most complete when posted. Feedback continues to come in, however.

Interestingly, the discussion revolving around RELO 1 eventually inspired one student to work on a dissertation on iconography.

Third, we initiated and followed-through Oxford Brookes's registration as a contributor to JORUM, a JISC-funded collaborative venture in UK Higher and Further Education (H and FE) to collect and share learning and teaching materials. JORUM is a free online repository service, akin to an electronic library catalogue. With the help of the JORUM staff we have uploaded our first two RELOs and made them publicly available not only to those working in our subject discipline, but to any others. The JORUM cataloguing system has resulted in us placing our RELOs in a subject-specific area. However, the associated metadata, including key words, a description of each RELO, and more, will hopefully allow others to find, explore and use our work. JORUM also invites comment from users of each RELO; while thus far none has been received, this is a useful feedback mechanism.

Fourth, we presented five RELOs at the annual Higher Education Academy conference held in Nottingham in July 2006. Here, delegates were invited to engage with both the thinking behind the RELOs and with the finished products themselves. Feedback was positive. Delegates attended from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines and much discussion revolved around the RELOs' reusability in these other contexts. One delegate was excited at the Holy Communion RELO since he was a lecturer in dance, and foresaw a real use not only for the RELO itself, but also for JORUM as a centralised means of accessing such resources. We also presented our findings at a subject specialist

conference on Theology and Religious Studies at Oxford University. Again, the project was received with great interest and the potential of RELOs for the future of the discipline provoked very interesting debate.

VI. Final comments

As the project approaches its end, we are in a position to evaluate the variety of dimensions embedded within it, not least with reference to the feedback provided. Almost without exception, the most significant contribution of our work, not only to the subject discipline of TRS but also to the wider educational world, was our identification of RELO characteristics which we then used to guide our design of each RELO and to evaluate the extent to which we had genuinely created a reusable electronic learning object. Now, as we continue to develop our distance learning programmes and consider how to make increasing use of the electronic domain, RELOs are high on the agenda, although we continue to wrestle, in particular, with how to heighten the electronic effectiveness while maintaining an appropriately high standard of delivering material traditionally presented textually. A second grant from the Subject Centre for PRS is allowing us to expand further, and we have plans to explore the issues already raised by writing and designing an academic journal paper in RELO style, create a range of multimedia RELOs, and work at constructing an interactive self-study RELO that will help students focus on technicalities in essay writing such as referencing and formatting.

This has been a steep learning curve for us both. We started out as complete novices in virtually every area: definitions of learning objects, knowledge of how to transform a word document into an electronic format (we used a very simple mark-up programme called ‘Course Genie’), how RELOs might subsequently be used. We continue as novices, in some ways, but with a much greater understanding of the whys and hows. If one spin-off of this report is that it encourages others to put a toe in the water, then we will have achieved much more.

Our RELOs can be accessed through JORUM at <http://www.jorum>.

ac.uk > Library > JACS > Historical and Philosophical Studies > Theology and Religious Studies, where they reside in splendid isolation. Your institution needs to register with JORUM, but once done, please pop in and leave us feedback. Thank you.

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Philosophy, Interdisciplinarity and ‘Critical Being’:

The Contribution of Crichton Campus’
Philosophy-based Core Courses to Personal
Development and Authenticity

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Our students...have not merely to perform competently, they have to...offer a rationale for what they are doing and for the discarded alternative actions.¹

‘Human beings differ profoundly in regard to the tendency to regard their lives as a whole. To some men it is natural to do so, and essen-

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tial to happiness is to be able to do so with some satisfaction. To others life is a series of detached incidents without directed movement and without unity. I think the former sort are more likely to achieve happiness than the latter, since they will gradually build up those circumstances from which they can derive contentment and self-respect, whereas the others will be blown about by the winds of circumstance now this way, now that, without ever arriving at any haven. The habit of viewing life as a whole is an essential part of wisdom and of true morality, and is one of the things which ought to be encouraged in education. Consistent purpose is not enough to make life happy, but it is an almost indispensable condition of a happy life. And consistent purpose embodies itself mainly in work.²

The weekend I spent with [Primal Scream] in New York brought home to me the perils of being too ‘rock ‘n’ roll’. I’ve always tried to bear in mind that famous Kipling line (Rudyard, not Mr, obviously) about patriotism; ‘What do they know of England, that only England know?’ Substitute pop music for England and you have very sound sentiments. If you only know about B-sides and acetates and line-ups and serial numbers, then you are merely a statistician. To understand pop music fully, you have to know and care about families, cooking, holidays, sport, trousers, literature, transport, fishing, all that stuff.³

My aim here⁴ is to assess the contribution of the philosophy-based ‘core courses’ of Glasgow University’s Crichton Campus⁵ to the educational aim of ‘personal development.’ First I will briefly describe the content and rationale of these courses; second I will explain, assess and

¹ Ronald Barnett, *Higher Education: A Critical Business*, p.104

² Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness*, p.140

³ Stuart Maconie, *Cider With Roadies*, p.30

⁴ My thanks to Ben Franks, Sean Johnston, Michelle Kane, Angie McClanahan and Ralph Jessop for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

⁵ It is no secret that Glasgow’s presence at the Crichton is likely to be phased out. Since the curriculum is not relevant to the factors that have led to this decision, then a championing of, and research into the value of core courses remains valid. The comments in the conclusion of the paper that concerns future developments is now probably not pertinent to the Crichton, but it is still of theoretical interest and of course, of relevance to any future curricula that share features of what’s been achieved in Dumfries.

reformulate the meaning of ‘personal development’, as addressed in the Dearing Report⁶, in terms of Ronald Barnett’s notion of ‘critical being’; and third I will show how the core curriculum and associated pedagogical approaches can help achieve some of the key features of ‘critical being’. Of great importance here, I will argue, is their potential for avoiding a pitfall that could result from certain (directive) ways of implementing personal development; specifically, its clash with the ideal of authenticity.

I: Core courses

In Scottish universities, students generally receive a broader based education than is found in most other UK universities. New undergraduates at many institutions in Scotland are aligned with a faculty rather than a department so that in their first and second years they will take three courses each semester in three different subjects within that faculty. Subject specialization comes after this point, and many students will end up specializing in a subject or subjects different from their initial choice.⁷

Glasgow University’s Crichton Campus (in Dumfries) shares the ethos of the Scottish generalist tradition, but differs from the model described in two ways. The first is that it does not restrict choice to faculty; students can choose from courses from the natural sciences, social sciences, creative and cultural studies, and humanities. The second is the existence of four compulsory ‘core’ courses that, in Crichton’s initial curriculum design at least, are to be taken by all undergraduates no matter what their intended specialism(s).

The aim of the core courses has been well described by Ben Franks in the previous edition of this journal.⁸ Briefly, it is to provide students with a rounded intellectual grounding; in particular one that

⁶ The Report of the National Committee for Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997.

⁷ ‘At the University of Aberdeen, for example, 60 per cent of the students on undergraduate MA and BSc programmes graduate with degrees which are different to those declared as intended at entry.’ (‘Report of the Scottish Committee’, National Committee for Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE), 1997, Ch.2, Section 2.14)

⁸ Franks, B., 2006. More specific details of the cores curriculum can be accessed on the Crichton website: http://www.cc.gla.ac.uk/layer2/core_modules.htm.

emphasises ‘the search for areas of similarity between different forms of knowledge and accenting areas of conflict within the differing epistemologies’⁹. It is to promote a meta-understanding of specific disciplines (e.g. applying epistemological, textual and ethical perspectives), and it is to help forge a ‘democratic intellect’—one that applies itself critically and responsibly to social and ethical issues. Three of the four are in a wide sense philosophical, but not so wide that any would be out of place in the curriculum of a traditional philosophy department. One course (*Science: History and Culture* (S:HC)) concerns the philosophy, sociology and history of science; another (*Issues in Contemporary Society* (ICS)) concerns applied ethics and political philosophy, and the third (*Argument-Rhetoric-Theory* (A-R-T))—which is substantially practical or exercise-based—concerns, among other things, the status of argument, reason and dialogue in post-modernity. The fourth (*Text and Communication* (T&C)) is about textual analysis and would be more at home in a media or cultural studies department, but is still recognizably philosophical in so far as it places heavy emphasis on ideology and interpretation (writers discussed include Marx, Kafka, Benjamin, Ortega, Wittgenstein and Barthes).

II: Personal development

In this section I want to unpack the idea of ‘personal development’ as it is understood in higher education, making specific reference to the recommendations of the Dearing Report and to Ronald Barnett’s ‘critical being’. On the face of it the factors relevant to personal development are broadly agreed upon by Dearing, Barnett and other theorists and practitioners (such as Stella Cottrell¹⁰), but as I shall go on to argue in the next section, Barnett’s approach appears distinct enough (or is detailed enough about implementation) to immunize it from a danger concerning student authenticity that I will highlight.

The features of personal development contained in the Dearing Report¹¹ can be summarized as: 1) Students should have knowledge of

⁹ Franks, B., 2006: 130

¹⁰ For example Cottrell, 2003.

¹¹ The ‘National Report’, NCIHE, 1997.

how to learn.¹² 2) They should have more explicit knowledge of the ‘key skills’ their degree programme will offer them.¹³ 3) There should be greater reflection on their progress and on the relationship between study and professional work (requiring more opportunities for work experience).¹⁴ 4) There should more choice between ‘different types of higher education programme, including more offering a broader knowledge of a range of subjects.’¹⁵ 5) There should be an awareness and ability to ‘adapt to the implications of change, while maintaining the values which make for a civilized society’.¹⁶ This last involves the understanding that learning is lifelong.

The relation to some of Richard Peters’ aims of education is clear¹⁷. Dearing is advocating breadth as well as depth of knowledge, and that learning should be transformative (i.e. have an impact on the way we perceive the world and conduct ourselves beyond academe). The report is at odds with Peters, however, to the extent that a principal aim is not learning for its own sake—a love of one’s subjects—but to produce more instrumentally competent graduates that are better suited to the demands of the workplace. This is symptomatic of what Barnett, Parry and Coate call the ‘performative shift’.¹⁸ The committee was asked to take account of the ‘principle’ that ‘learning should be increasingly responsive to employment needs’, and indeed many of the items expressed by the Department of Education as ‘principles’ and ‘context’ that constrain the report concern economics.¹⁹

¹² Dearing Recommendation 2

¹³ Dearing Recommendation 2

¹⁴ Dearing Recommendations 18-20

¹⁵ Dearing Recommendation 14

¹⁶ Dearing Summary Report, section 21.

¹⁷ These are an intrinsic (rather than instrumental) enthusiasm for knowledge, depth of knowledge, breadth of knowledge, and the capacity for the academic learning to transform perceptions of the world outside the classroom. (See, e.g., Peters, R., 1973)

¹⁸ Barnett, Parry and Coate, 2004: 142

¹⁹ In the mix though there is at least the recognition that higher education in the UK ‘continues to have a key role in developing powers of the mind, and in advancing understanding and learning through scholarship and research’. Also acknowledged is the part it plays ‘in the nation’s social, moral and spiritual life...and in enabling personal development’ (‘Annex A to the terms of reference’).

Even if the motivation underpinning this report is economic to the degree that we should be cynical about the reasons behind personal development being so strongly recommended, the ‘performative shift’ shares an important structural feature with what I understand as a form of authenticity in relation to learning. The relationship between personal development and authenticity I will discuss later, but as a prelude to this I will say that the *context* of academic learning should be recognized by the student. By context I mean things like their reasons for being at university and studying what they are studying in terms of things like life projects (vocational and otherwise), personality, ideals and ideology (however inchoate these might be). Any disagreement I have with Dearing (and others, like Cottrell) does not (here at least) concern the intrinsic versus the instrumental value of knowledge in higher education, but rather the intrinsic versus the instrumental value of certain contextualizing elements of personal development.

A wide-ranging and detailed account of the ideal graduate that incorporates personal development as it has so far been conceptualized is Ronald Barnett’s notion of ‘critical being’.²⁰ It stems from his expansion of ‘contemporary forms of criticality’. ‘Critical thinking’, he says,

is more than thinking. It involves action, if only in the sense that the expression of a critical thought is a definite intervention in the world. And it involves the self. The development of critical thought brings the development of the self. The self is not outside the critical thinking but is intimately implicated in it; and nor is this only the cerebral self. The expression of critical thought calls for emotion (if only emotional control), commitment and courage. Criticality, therefore, embraces action and the self just as much as it embraces thinking. Accordingly we should abandon the notion of critical thinking as central to higher education and replace it with a more encompassing idea of critical being, which embraces action and the self together with thought.²¹

Barnett, then, identifies three ‘domains’ of critical thought: ‘theoretical knowledge’, ‘action’ (including skills) and ‘self’. Only a combination of these three, closely interlinked, domains can generate the ideal of

²⁰ Barnett, 1997, 2004.

²¹ Barnett, 1997: 48

‘critical being’. This has important implications for the critical aspect of this paper, and it is something I will highlight as I use these domains as headings under which to develop a more detailed picture of critical being.

I. Theoretical knowledge

a. **The contextualization of knowledge.** Dearing recommends that ‘all undergraduate programmes include sufficient breadth to enable specialists to understand their specialism within its context.’²² What is meant by ‘context’? First there is contextualization among other academic knowledge; second social contextualization—for example among ‘corporate, professional and industrial’ applications.²³ This is principally addressed by Barnett under ‘action’. Both of these can give rise to questions such as ‘Why does [English, chemistry, history etc.] matter?’²⁴ Third there is contextualization among the complex whole of individual projects. This is addressed under ‘self’.

The first of these—the importance in education of the contextualization of academic knowledge among other academic knowledge—is a familiar ideal.²⁵ For one thing over-specialization and too narrow a focus are seen as contra a balanced, moderate personality ideal, and contra an intuitive notion of an educated person. The political dangers of such specialization—for instance scientists ignorant to the ethical ramifications of their research—has been written about at length by Mary Midgley.²⁶ A second factor is simply that a student’s understanding of their subject is impeded at a cognitive level by excessive specialism. Endless examples can be given, but two are: the importance of the scientific revolution for understanding aspects of Descartes’ philosophy, and the importance of early twentieth century American politics for understanding the rise of scientific behaviourism. Perhaps a good measure of contextual understanding is a student’s ability to explain the meaning and purpose of their discipline (or parts of it) to a lay person.

²² Dearing Recommendation 16.

²³ Barnett, 1997: 113

²⁴ For a discussion along these lines with regard to philosophy, see David Cooper (1996, p. 87).

²⁵ See, for example, Peters, 1973; Cooper, 1983, 1996; Midgley, 1989

²⁶ Midgley, 1989

A further point about breadth, about which a great deal more will be said over the course of this article, is Barnett’s suggestion that knowledge extending beyond one’s specialism aids the student’s ‘acknowledgement of the relativity of knowledge.’²⁷ Different disciplines can supply different perspectives on a given topic, perspectives that are not always commensurable.

b. **Reasoned thinking.** ‘Employers emphasised to us in their evidence the importance of high level analytical skills...[They are] concerned about the general capabilities of those with higher education qualifications’, and ‘they are often looking for rounded but adaptable people who can successfully tackle a range of tasks...’²⁸ To a great extent this kind of analytical skill corresponds with informal logic; little explanation should be needed. It includes non-subject-specific reasoning skills such as the ability to spot arguments and identify fallacies; an understanding of the meaning and significance of validity and truth, and an appreciation of what Douglas Walton calls the ‘rules of persuasion dialogue’,²⁹ and Barnett calls ‘the general rules of rational discourse’ (for instance ‘turn-taking, acute listening, respect for the other’s point of view’).³⁰ A widening of the idea of spotting and analysing fallacies sees it as including an ability to assess evidence in a fashion more familiar to natural and social sciences (e.g. external validity and causal fallacies).

This aspect of the knowledge domain merges with the ‘action’ (or skills) domain, but what can be more clearly seen as a skill is critical thinking as it refers to the forms of analysis we expect from students in, say, essay and report writing. As such this will be addressed under the ‘action’ heading.

c. **Meta-awareness of academic knowledge and specific disciplines.** Barnett discusses epistemological and ethical forms of ‘meta-critique’.³¹ It is, he says, a form of criticism ‘that works outside the conventions of the discipline’, and it concerns, for example, biases caused by ‘sectional interests’ and ‘particular epistemologies’, and the

²⁷ Brockbank and McGill, *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education*, p.4.

²⁸ NCIHE, National Report, 9.4

²⁹ Walton, 1989

³⁰ Barnett, 1997: 110

³¹ Barnett, 1997: 72-3

significance of ethical perspectives.³² With the ethical form of metacritique comes an awareness of the non-neutrality of academic knowledge. An example (which heavily influences the core course *Science: History and Culture*) is a post-Kuhnian sociology of science, and of course, in terms of its relation to other disciplines, philosophy is meta-critical. As I will discuss later, when this kind of perspective transfers to the individual's understanding of their own values we have a merge with the 'self' domain.

2. Action

Two connected, but still quite distinct, components are included in Barnett's action domain: one is skills such as critical thinking and communication, and the other concerns the link between formal learning and the outside world (primarily the workplace). The latter is not theoretical knowledge of the typically academic kind, but rather knowledge—or know-how—applied in a fairly specific (say, vocational) situation. It is this that justifies its inclusion in a separate domain.

a. **Critical thinking skills.** Referring to Dearing and similar recommendations in other countries, a recent review of critical thinking in education acknowledges that 'national government policy as well as employers are demanding that education, no matter in what discipline or at which level, ought to enable graduates to think 'smarter'.³³ This translates into the kinds of skills that demonstrate autonomous, creative thought and the ability to problem-solve, and that epitomize the (often implicit) expectations of higher education.³⁴ For example, Maclellan and Soden's taxonomy of critical thinking includes the ability to unpack

³² Barnett, 1997: 18

³³ Pithers and Soden, 2000: 237

³⁴ Different disciplines will prioritize different critical thinking skills, and there might be a case for saying that the form of critical thinking associated with a particular discipline cannot be meaningfully abstracted from that discipline. Even if this is right, a person's approach to work, and to their life as a whole is surely benefitted by a reasoned approach that is more or less generalizable (at least within a culture). For instance Pithers and Soden say, regarding the 'Australian context', that abilities such as problem solving and 'collecting, analysing and organizing information' are 'seen to be at the core of life-long learning to improve students' flexibility and adaptability when they enter the workforce.' (2000: 238)

concepts, recognize contradictions, develop arguments, provide evidence, examine the implications of evidence, question interpretations of evidence, and suggest alternative interpretations.³⁵ Many higher education courses incorporate skills specific to certain fields of work³⁶, but non-vocational courses can be explicit in their teaching and assessment of these transferable abilities.

b. **Communication.** Aspects of effective communication that can be developed by higher education include presentation skills (including the use of technology); clarity and brevity of written communications; and ‘people skills’ such as team work, listening, negotiation, assertiveness, leadership and offering and accepting constructive criticism.³⁷

c. **Learning to learn.** To the extent that this can be seen as separate from specific skills needed for successful production of assessments, learning to learn offers a partially objective perspective on processes of learning (e.g. learning ‘cycles’, learning ‘styles’, learning ‘approaches’ (deep, shallow, strategic), the relationship between psychological states (for example anxiety) and learning, levels of comprehension, the role of writing in comprehension, ownership of knowledge, the ‘illusion of learning’, strategies for memorizing etc.). It merges with the self domain when the student starts to make sense of their own capacities, tendencies, approaches, experiences etc. in light of the theory. If this is close to the self domain, and the theory close to the knowledge domain, the *skill* here is being a more effective learner. This comes from an informed reflection upon the self which over time changes learning habits.

d. **An awareness of what higher education means and what it can offer.** This includes an understanding (and experience) of how academic work (both subject matter and approach) relates to professional work, and a recognition of what knowledge, skills and attitudes are valued by the cultural climate students find themselves in.

3. Self

a. **The habit of reflection or self-monitoring.** This can be seen as incorporating all of the above with the suffix ‘and what this means for

³⁵ As described in Heron, 2006: 212-213

³⁶ See, for example, Barnett et al, 2004, pp. 148-149.

³⁷ See, for example, Cottrell, 2003, Ch.5

me personally’; but it also refers to seeing oneself as a learner in terms of other projects in one’s life and in terms of one’s life as a whole. Pertinent questions include,

- What do I really want to achieve from life?
- What kind of person do I want to be?
- Am I clear about my personal goals and ambitions?
- Am I making the right decisions to get me where I really want to be?
- Am I in charge of my life and my studies—or am I just hoping it all will work out somehow?³⁸

This element of the self domain crosses over with the skills domain to the extent that the habit of reflection can be instilled by practice.³⁹ More will be said about this when I discuss authenticity.

b. **Autonomy.** By this I mean the ability to be self-directed; to be able and willing to make informed decision—decisions that involve critical thinking and appropriate knowledge of the kind described in the other domains, but also, vitally, self-knowledge and self management.

This idea is strongly linked to emotional intelligence: ‘emotional autonomy’ is, for Francis Dunlop, ‘the culminating feature of any emotional education’.⁴⁰ Central to this is the kind of self-understanding and acceptance advocated by humanistic psychologists like Carl Rogers. The idea of a self to which we have to be true is highly unfashionable in philosophical circles, but at the very minimum I presume we can accept the sense of an authenticity in which the student ‘must not let ... fashion, intellectualism, or a purely ‘instrumental’ life tempt him to deny *his* feelings, as is so common today, especially among the products of higher education.’⁴¹ Whatever the origins of this individual self, and whatever its mutability, the phenomenology reveals a degree of capability to stand back from our current situation and make choices

³⁸ <http://www.palgrave.com/skills4study/pdp/about/index.asp>. Accessed 25.1.07

³⁹ See, e.g., Cottrell, 2003, Ch.7.

⁴⁰ Dunlop, 1984, p.108

⁴¹ Dunlop, 1984, p.109.

that are in some sense ‘our’ choices and that in some sense are aligned to what ‘we’ want rather than what others expect of us.

c. **Passion and ownership.** Passion here, in a Kierkegaardian or Jamesian way, refers to the *quality* of thought and action—its intensity and *felt* personal significance. Barnett says:

Even to speak of the student imbuing her truth claims and her actions with her own meanings does not get at what is at issue here; or even to speak of the student being autonomous; or even of the student being self-motivated. ... What is further required is that the student injects some energy of her own. The student’s own will has to come into play: the student has to will her truth claims or her actions or even her own self-reflections. ... Authentic interventions cannot be made without critical energy.⁴²

A lot of what has preceded this points to the importance of students owning their ideas and actions. Ownership can refer to depth of understanding—something like the ability to put something in our own words in a way that captures its nuances and sophistications—but also to an awareness of the meaning of something for one’s life as a whole. Placed in such a perspective the ‘energy’ Barnett talks about is all the more likely to be present because this kind of awareness tends to bridge any divide between thought and action.

d. **The contingency of values.** A sensitivity to cultural differences, to the relatively fluid nature of our current culture, and to the implications this has for work is stressed by Dearing. Barnett’s approach is, predictably, more holistic, and merges into a sort of post-modern personality ideal familiar from the work of, among others, Richard Rorty. Barnett says:

Through ... critical self-reflection, we become more fully human ... we come to a fuller insight into our knowledge frameworks and their ideological underpinnings, which we might otherwise take for granted.⁴³

His constant reference to the students in Tiananmen Square illustrates his agreement with Schumpeter’s view that:

⁴² Barnett, 1997, p.172

⁴³ Barnett, 1997, p. 45

To realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.⁴⁴

In a similar fashion to Rorty's 'liberal ironist'—someone 'who faces up to the contingency of his or her most central beliefs and desires'⁴⁵—Barnett identifies two 'levels' of reflexive awareness.⁴⁶ One is interpersonal: the post-modern age requires us to be aware of the contingent nature of our beliefs and thus the legitimacy of the beliefs of others. We have a responsibility to be open to other discourses and to be modest towards our own. The other is individual: we must take responsibility for fashioning our own lives—the values we adopt, the action we take, the overall 'project' that makes sense (however provisionally) of our current commitments—and moreover, we must do this *with energy and commitment*.

III: Critical being and authenticity

Clearly then the three domains of critical being are strongly interrelated, but Barnett sees the self domain as sovereign, and I agree. Its privileged position comes about because theoretical knowledge and skills do not stand alone for the individual, but are valued for a reason. Among his eight forms of critical self-reflection is what he calls 'reflection as self-realization'. He says:

We become ourselves by becoming more aware of our own projects, and being secure about ourselves as pursuers of those projects. More than that, projects hitherto classified as attempts to understand the world are reconstituted as projects of self-discovery.⁴⁷

For Barnett's ideal student subject-specific learning is placed not just in the context of other subjects, but in the context of the learner's

⁴⁴ Cited in Rorty, R., 1989: 61

⁴⁵ 1989: xv

⁴⁶ 1997: 45

⁴⁷ 1997: 98

authentic projects. They should be able and ready to address questions like ‘Why am I in HE?’ and ‘Why am I following *this* programme at *this* institution?’: questions that require relatively holistic answers concerning where—at this juncture at least—they see their lives going; answers which in turn require the forms of knowledge described above, and the enactment of which requires the virtues described above (which are, in turn, supported by the competencies described above).

Through critical reflection the self can pull these strands of criticality together into a coherent whole, and it is this whole that is similar to the idea of authenticity. The way I understand authenticity is drawn from the existential tradition—Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in particular. It is not simply a matter of being true to ourselves in the psychological or psychoanalytic sense, but of being true to our *condition* (principally one of contingency). The authentic person is developing a rounded view of themselves (in terms of competencies, attitudes, preferences and values) and of the world (what’s to know, how we can know it, individual and cultural differences etc.). They are brave and resolute in their formulation and enactment of projects that grow from, and test out, these competencies, attitudes, preferences and values. In part these projects succeed and fail to the extent that they co-ordinate with a world realistically perceived.⁴⁸ The ability to evaluate and change self-perceptions and projects in light of successes and failures is facilitated by key intellectual and emotional competencies (such as reasoned thinking, problem solving, managing fear and anxiety, social competence and healthy self-esteem).

The ideal graduate is then a ‘passionate sceptic’⁴⁹, they are brave⁵⁰ and they acknowledge that their ‘hold on life is fragile.’⁵¹ They are tolerant and modest, and yet committed. They are an ‘ironist’ in Rorty’s sense, and very much in the sense that Owen Flanagan talks of the ironist as a ‘confident unconfident’; someone he ‘likes’ because she is,

... a realist, and realism is a form of authenticity, and authenticity

⁴⁸ I will brush over the view that accuracy of perceptions about the world and our selves has been found to impede happiness, well-being and growth. If this is correct (which I suspect it is not) then at least reasonable accuracy is required, and that will do for my point about authenticity.

⁴⁹ Barnett, 1997: 21

⁵⁰ Barnett, 1997: 22

⁵¹ Barnett, 1997: 174

seems to turn out ... to be good, better, at any rate, than the alternative. ... The ironist is a virtuoso of playing mirrors off against herself, of saying "right ... but then again." Or, "I'm going ahead in this way, there's more to be said, and some of that more will undermine my present confidence in going ahead in this way, but there is not world enough and time. So here I stand."⁵²

Critical being, I am claiming, can be usefully seen as a fusion of personal development (in, say, Dearing and Cottrell) and authenticity.

IV: Critical being and the curriculum

How does the student experience personal-development? In the concluding *Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard (or his pseudonym, Climacus), explaining his reasons for using indirect communication, says,

My principle thought was that in our age, because of the great increase of knowledge, we had forgotten what it means to exist ... this must therefore be set forth. But above all it must not be done in a dogmatizing manner, for then the misunderstanding would instantly take the explanatory effort to itself in a new misunderstanding, as if existing consisted in getting to know something about this or that.⁵³

Similarly, Barnett believes that the 'critical capacities in all three domains ... are not to be taught in any straightforward sense, *but are to be won by the student themselves*.'⁵⁴ This is something I agree with, but not something which is addressed by Dearing or by other dedicated books on personal development in education. There is something about attaining critical being that requires it to be self-generated in a way that many approaches to personal development miss.

The problem, as I see, it divides into two issues. One is whether critical being *can* be taught in an explicit way, and the other is whether

⁵² Flanagan, O., 1996: 207

⁵³ Kierkegaard, 1941: 223

⁵⁴ Barnett, 1997: 173 (my emphasis)

it *should* be. As far as the ‘can’ question goes, the obvious problem with artificial means of prompting reflection of these kinds is that students do not take ownership of them. They do them because they have to and not because of any real appreciation of their sense and worth. And worse still, they resent having to do them. Perhaps in a similar fashion, a guaranteed way to impede a student’s intrinsic interest in a subject is to tell them that they should love it for its own sake. The correct way is just to teach it (enthusiastically and competently), and *they* will decide whether they love it or not. This analogy falls down in higher education however when these aspects of the curriculum are topics the students have not chosen, and if their attitude is one of resenting having to be there they will (understandably) adopt a strategic approach and, in effect, *not* let the teacher teach.

I do, though, think that if certain new features of the curriculum are taught properly students can quickly forget their resentment and start enjoying what they are learning (this is something we have consistently encountered with the core courses). But as far as the full potential of critical being goes, there is a limit to this. Perhaps the engaged student is liable to treat the more personal elements as theoretical knowledge (for example the psychology of learning), or as a set of skills. If it is essay-writing, CV-writing, time management, problem-solving or even interpersonal skills that are being taught then this can be understood and usefully engaged with as ‘skills for life’ or ‘skills for success’. What Kierkegaard and Barnett appreciate, however, is that the passion that drives critical being (and that is basic to authenticity) not only cannot be communicated directly, but these skills will create an illusion of authenticity that will obscure the requirement for passion and ownership. Students are exposed to the danger of feeling that they are engaging with ‘the problem of life’ just by stepping outside traditional academic learning and making themselves reflective and rounded in this prescribed way. In short, this runs the risk of ‘authenticity by numbers’, and that is a contradiction.

Part of my ethical worry concerns the fact that even if authenticity is not obscured in this way and these aspects of personal development are understood as, say, a means to success in professional life, then students need to understand *why* they are doing this and this takes us into ethical territory. Either they unreflectively accept the need to be (say) employable, or they reflectively make the choice to divide them-

selves into something like an employable self and a ‘real’ or ‘whole’ self. The first of these options lacks consent—no choice is made because there is no awareness that there is a choice to be made—and the second requires a level of critical understanding that is far from ubiquitous among young undergraduates. Where there is this understanding, personal development seems ethically relatively unproblematic, but how are we to assess which students have it and which do not? And even if this is viable, do we then implement a two-tier personal development curriculum?

My deeper ethical concern is this: authenticity is firmly in the private domain of the individual. It is something they can only—and will only want to—gain *for themselves*. To try to force it upon them will not only not work, but it is *invasive*. There are of course all manner of ways in which an individual is shaped by culture and has to conform, but (and maybe this is exaggerated by Western culture) subjective understanding of, and passion about, the direction one takes in life—essentially how one sees the world and what one cares about—is deeply personal. There is a limit to what we can be told (however implicitly) to do. We need to make our own mistakes and learn from these; as deBeauvoir says, ‘To want to prohibit a man from error is to forbid him to fulfill his own existence, it is to deprive him of life.’⁵⁵ Such freedom is a vital part of what being a young person—typically, perhaps, until one’s mid-twenties—is about, and arguably any explicit schooling that impinges on this is an infringement on personal freedom. I am not claiming here that the individual is entirely alone in developing authentic self-awareness—parents, friends and other intimates play a part—but the crucial difference is that these people engage (or should engage) with them *in their particularity* and not as part of a generalized, state-sanctioned education.⁵⁶

Just as a student’s intrinsic love of a subject is not a top-down matter, nor is their self development to the extent that it resembles

⁵⁵ deBeauvoir, 1994: 137-138

⁵⁶ A related worry is expressed by Francis Dunlop like this: ‘It is important, too, that these attempts to prepare children for autonomy do not result in promoting self-study or introspection ... If people become too *interested* in themselves they become less capable of intervening in their own internal economy. The stress should be on responsible action; self-scrutiny ... should be more ‘glancing’ and incidental than direct.’ (1984: 110)

authenticity. And just as the intrinsic love of a subject is transmitted, indirectly, by a teacher who loves it intrinsically, so authenticity must be transmitted indirectly; it must be stimulated rather than taught. In part this is achieved by teachers who, in Barnett’s words ‘live out their own identities fully and utterly’⁵⁷, but in part I argue that it can be enabled by a curriculum that more explicitly contains philosophical elements.

V: Core courses and critical being

I am, then, arguing, that a student’s being disposed to the pivotal ‘self’ element of critical being should, as far as is possible, be organically stimulated by changes in the academic curriculum (and changes in teaching practice) rather than being more artificially introduced. I want to argue in this section that the cores can help achieve critical being in a number of ways. They are especially effective in the knowledge domain, fairly effective in the skills domain and, perhaps most interestingly, they can play a vital and appropriate (non-intrusive) role in the self domain. I shall develop my position under the headings of ‘contextual knowledge and metacritique’, the ‘freeing of the individual from ideological delusions’, ‘reasoning skills’, and ‘stimulating self-reflection’.

1. **Contextual knowledge and metacritique.** As I have described, the Scottish system, and the Crichton set up in particular, allow students to study a fairly wide range of subjects. Is this by itself though likely to generate a true breadth of knowledge? Two pitfalls face a multidisciplinary curriculum: one is superficiality, and the other is an inability to integrate the separate disciplines.

‘Interdisciplinarity’ Barnett says,

is of critical importance. ... It encourages the possibility of different cognitive perspectives being turned on a subject and so illuminating it in different ways. This can be said simply enough but it is fraught with problems, both of an epistemological and of an operational kind. Precisely how, in any one course, are such multiple perspectives to be opened to students in a serious way? A superficial encounter with a rival disciplinary perspective could be counter-

⁵⁷ Barnett, 1997: 109

productive: it could present unwelcome cognitive challenge and fail to bring even the cognitive transformation that a deep familiarity with a single intellectual field would bring.⁵⁸

The cores lessen this risk. On the one hand it is important that they are themselves inherently interdisciplinary, rather than forming part of a set of courses originating in separate disciplines. This inherent interdisciplinarity takes two forms:

- a) They deal with themes that sit on the cusp of different disciplines such as applied ethics, the history and sociology of science, and ideology in different forms of text.
- b) They are theoretical/philosophical and deal with meta-questions applicable to many or most subjects.

In these ways they illuminate deep connections between disciplines; connections ‘reflecting long-established and natural groupings of subjects, or new combinations with recognisably organic connections.’⁵⁹ They help students develop the habit of looking at their specialism from other angles that might otherwise remain alien—historical, philosophical, sociological, political, textual etc.—and as such they are a form of ‘integrated interdisciplinary’.⁶⁰ This partly corresponds with what Barnett means when he says that interdisciplinarity must be ‘critical interdisciplinarity’;⁶¹ an interdisciplinarity that ‘engenders ... discursive creativity’ and creates ‘opportunities for spontaneous and fruitful cross-linkages across the discourses represented by the university.’⁶² On the other hand the cores avoid superficiality by functioning coherently as a package. Several themes run through all four of them (notably politics and ethics, interpretation, and the contextualized nature of knowledge) and thus each semester for their first two years these themes are reinforced. At my most optimistic I would say that the student who studies one discipline along with the cores is on the way

⁵⁸ Barnett, 1997: 19.

⁵⁹ NCIHE, National Report, 9.6

⁶⁰ See Franks, B., 2006: 129-132.

⁶¹ Barnett, 1997: 19

⁶² Barnett, 2000: 104

to a critical breadth that meets, among others, Barnett’s ideal and the kind that (for different reasons) is advocated by Dearing.

So it is precisely via meeting the requirements of ‘metacritique’ that the cores help establish a viable contextualizing interdisciplinarity and thus the breadth of knowledge desired in university graduates.

2. **The ‘freeing of the individual from ideological delusions’.** The notion that we can never be completely free from ideology and that no ideology is immune from questioning is part of critical being and something stimulated by all four of the cores. Ideology is tackled most explicitly in ICS, and combined with T&C’s detailed analysis of language, meaning and ideology in a variety of texts (including news bias), and S:HC’s questioning of science’s objectivity, we come close to David Cooper’s concern (after Nietzsche) that a ‘teacher ... can have few more important tasks than to alert the young to, and loosen the grip of, the many metaphors we live by.’⁶³

3. **Reasoning skills** and the application of these in presentations, debate and ‘persuasion dialogues’ figure prominently in the cores. There is a web-based reasoning section in S:HC that runs parallel to lectures; features of arguments are revised and developed in ICS, and informal logic is a central element of the A-R-T curriculum. The final section of this course offers a metacritique of reasoning itself.⁶⁴

Communication skills are taught and practised in the debates and dialogues that occur formally in A-R-T and informally in the highly discursive seminars of the other three cores (especially ICS). Although a group presentation forms part of the formal assessment of T&C, I am aware that many courses these days (not least at the Crichton) involve students having to present orally, and so the cores do not stand out in this specific respect.

4. **Stimulating self-reflection.** The cores are precisely *not* personal development courses, and that, if my argument in the last section holds, is to their advantage. However, I believe they are able to stimulate the self-reflective aspect of critical being. Barnett says,

In critique, quite different views of an object or a topic might be proffered as alternative perspectives are taken on board. This is real

⁶³ Cooper, 1983: 139

⁶⁴ Specifically, pragma-dialectics and post-modernist critiques of argument.

cognitive and personal challenge, and it may open up the way to a transformation of the individual student.⁶⁵

Barnett sees metacritical thinking as linked to autonomy and thus to authenticity. Regarding students' understanding of their subjects, reflexive questions like

How secure is it? How deep is it? How wide-ranging are the connections that I am making with other topics? How much reliance am I placing on authorities ...? How original is it? How bold is it? How clear is it? ... indicates a self-monitoring capability which is an essential condition for human autonomy.⁶⁶

The previous three points all contribute to this capability, and more precisely the core courses have an influence on self-reflection and authenticity in two ways.

The first is via the curriculum (ICS and other examples of ethics and ideology). 'We are in the presence of critical thinking' says Barnett, 'when a student comes to recognize the essential contestability of all knowledge claims. When that state of mind has been reached, the student understands not just that what she encounters in books and elsewhere ... as contestable, but that her own ideas are contestable too.'⁶⁷ Since values and ideas form part of our identity, scrutinizing them objectively should also open our selves up to scrutiny.

Through having to confront unfamiliar subject matter, theories and perspectives, a form of what Peter Jarvis calls a 'disjunction' is liable to occur.⁶⁸ A disjunction is a significant rupture in an individual's beliefs caused by an encounter with a contradictory or incommensurable point of view. That the term is resonant with the 'upheavals of thought'⁶⁹ that can be defining of emotional episodes is no coincidence: the encounter is not 'cold', but personal and therefore emotional.

In terms of learning, the student is more likely to experience disjunction on the core course than in other parts of the curriculum, and

⁶⁵ Barnett, 1997: 19.

⁶⁶ Barnett, 1997: 70-1

⁶⁷ Barnett, 1997: 71

⁶⁸ Jarvis, 1992

⁶⁹ The title of Martha Nussbaum's 2002 book on the intelligence of emotions.

thus more likely to be jarred into reflexivity and creativity. The reflexivity could be at the level of the subject matter itself and its connection to their own values and beliefs, but it could also be engendered by confusion that arises concerning why they should have to be taking these courses in the first place. This can force on them the requirement to engage with the creative process of making connections between cores and their other courses, and also to ask questions about the purpose of (their) higher education in general.

The second way in which the cores can stimulate self-reflection is through the integration of disciplines extending to the integration of self. Why might this transference occur? One reason is that a self is partly a collection of beliefs. Some of these will be addressed directly by philosophical topics (see a) above), but others will be more indirectly affected. This is because the cores environment engenders the habit of reflection and integration, and this habit is liable to extend to one’s self as a whole. If a student becomes used to contextualizing intellectual input, they are perhaps also primed to contextualize the process of learning itself—in other words, to contextualize themselves as *learners*. The implied perspective is something like this: “My learning is part of a greater set of projects that, in a certain, important, sense, defines me”. The set of projects is understood as more or less contingent, and perhaps most critically (especially for younger students) could contain a number of unknowns. (What is unknown might principally amount to self-knowledge that can only be gained by formative experiences such as higher education.) What is fairly well understood though is that learning and their current activities are, inevitably, contextualized.

Some examples are questions like ‘Why am I in HE?’ and ‘Why is this piece of learning important?’ (Answers might be: 1. Because I enjoy finding out about it (I’m intrinsically interested in it). 2. Because I need to know it in order to make sense of something I’m intrinsically interested in. 3. Because it’s part of a broader subject area that is not only of intrinsic interest to me, but that will form part of a knowledge and skills base vital for my intended ambitions (personal virtues, career etc.). 4. Because I need to know it to pass my exam.)

VI: Conclusion

I hope I have shown that the cores can go some significant distance towards engendering critical being. In this conclusion there are three points I want to make concerning the implications of what I have argued for.

First, there is more that could be achieved in terms of critical being considering the sorts of freedoms the cores rationale allows. Some examples, briefly stated, are these:

- a) An explicit questioning of learning and education and in particular higher education. This is already touched on in ICS and A-R-T, but could be expanded and made increasingly self-referential.
- b) Integrating T&C with study skills: for example seeing essays as themselves a form of communication—narrative structure, bias, authority, originality etc.
- c) Introducing critical thinking specifically in terms of academic (and other) writing skills, complimenting the reasoned thinking that forms part of S:HC, ICS and A-R-T.
- d) Being more varied in our teaching methods (for example peer assessment, problem-based learning, conceptual diaries, withholding formative grades (though not comments)). Even if these turn out to be no more effective than traditional methods, if they are unusual or unexpected enough this might further encourage criticality (via disjunction) in the students.

My second point concerns the implications for philosophy as a discipline, and if the cores are as valuable as I am claiming they are, then these could be substantial. On the one hand the suggestion is that most or all students can benefit from having philosophically based materials as core to their curriculum; and on the other it is argued that broad educational aims, now recognized by higher education policy in the UK, could be significantly fulfilled by the inclusion of such subjects in the

curriculum.

My final concluding point is that if the plausibility of the conceptual link between the cores and the self domain is accepted (or tentatively accepted) the extent to which this works in practice remains to be seen. My personal experiences and those of my colleagues suggest it does work with many students, but a more systematic investigation is needed. It is this that will be addressed by the interviews that will form a central part of the next stage of this project, the results of which will hopefully appear in the next edition of this journal.

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Undergraduate Philosophy and the Corruption of the Youth

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Introduction

In Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, Meletus accuses Socrates of corrupting the Athenian youth. The basis for his accusation is that Socrates is undermining the traditional values of Athenian society. Socrates describes what Meletus accuses him of as follows:

He [Meletus] claims I'm a manufacturer of gods, and he says this is why he's prosecuted me, that I create new gods and don't recognise the old ones.'

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In the trial of Socrates (portrayed in *Apology*), Socrates appears to go no way to refuting this accusation. Indeed his behaviour seems to reinforce that accusation by respecting his own authority (and his own god) more than the authority of the courts. With regard to Socrates' behaviour at the trial, Harold Tarrant asks,

What kind of example was it to the young men of the city to be showing a respect of the authority of the courts which was less than the respect for a God which he, as an individual, believed was speaking to him? Could they not make appeals to their own private religious ideas, and exempt themselves from the authority of the democratic institutions too? Socrates' very conduct in court could be taken as proof that his conduct in general promoted insubordination and a lack of respect for any authority.²

Given that Socrates is held to be an exemplar of the philosophical attitude, could the teaching of undergraduate philosophy also be tantamount to corrupting the youth in precisely the same way? After all undergraduate philosophy questions all of the fundamental beliefs and assumptions that ground Western culture, and then attempts to replace these old 'gods' with the new 'god' of the power of the students' own reasoning and, therefore, his or her personal authority. Thus, an undergraduate philosophy student will be led to question the traditional view on god, morality, and values. Indeed, they will be pushed further to question the very reality of the fabric of the universe and whether we can really know anything at all.

Consequently, it seems correct to conclude that undergraduate philosophy is likely to promote the insubordination and a lack of respect for any authority that Socrates' general conduct was said to have done. So, might the attempt to teach undergraduate philosophy be corrupting or, at least, misguided?

On the other hand, even though the Athenian state may have viewed Socrates' influence as corrupting, his steadfast search for truth, irrespective of cultural traditions and values, has made Socrates the exemplar of intellectual integrity. Indeed, the idea of the liberal arts has

¹ Plato: *The Last Days of Socrates: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito and Phaedo*, p.8; *Euthyphro*, 3b.

² *Ibid.*, p.35.

its roots in the ancient Greek understanding of education, which is partly indebted to Socrates. As James Bowen points out,

It was the ancient Greeks who developed the notion that the only activities worthy of the name of education are those that enable man to transcend the limitations of time and space imposed by his finiteness; the limitations, that is, of a biological basis that ties him to a particular moment and place in which to live his life. Man, at least in the generic sense, has the capacity to make this transcendence through a properly organised set of experiences, and the Greek position was that these should be concerned firstly with heightening sensitivity to, and facility in, language (both speech and writing); and, secondly, through this instrumentality, with exploring the realm of the timeless and placeless; that is, the realm of ideas...Because they [the ideas] were held to be the means by which man can be liberated from his limitations, these studies, based on language and mathematics, were therefore called the liberal arts, and this distinguished them from the 'illiberal' crafts, which were the customary activities of menial workers.³

Hence, it seems clear that those of us concerned with education in this sense should side with Socrates and against the Athenian state, and we should also, therefore, advocate the teaching of modern day undergraduate philosophy.

However, the accusation that philosophy corrupts the youth is raised again, not this time by the Athenian state, but by Plato himself. In his outline of education in the *Republic*, Plato says that in order to avoid harm, instruction in dialectic (a method of reasoning in which all assumptions are questioned) should only begin when the student has reached the age of thirty, and should continue for five years. The reason for this delay is that he observed people to become thoroughly rebellious if it was taught to them too early. Plato's Socrates explains why this might be as follows:

'Well suppose...that the kind of person we're imagining is faced with a question like 'What is right?' He answers that it consists in the conduct enjoined by the originator of his society's code, but the argument proves him wrong, and proves him wrong again and again,

³ *Theories of Education*, p.4.

until he's battered into thinking that this code is no more right than wrong. Then the same happens with morality and goodness and all the qualities he used particularly to respect. What do you think the consequences of this are on his behaviour? What will happen to his respect and obedience?

'He'll inevitably become more disrespectful and disobedient than he was before,' he [Glaucon] said.

'Now, when he's changed his mind about what to respect and about his former familiar code...and at the same time can't discover the truth, where can he turn? Doesn't it only make sense to think of him being seduced by the tempting lifestyle?...So he'll stop being law-abiding and become rebellious...People who are exposed to rational arguments, then,...are quite likely to rebel and, as I suggested a moment ago, we should forgive them, don't you think?'

'Yes, and feel sorry for them,' he added.

'So if you want to avoid having to feel sorry for your thirty-year-olds, then you must handle rational argument with the utmost circumspection, mustn't you?...And one important precaution you can take is not to let them get wind of rational arguments when they're young, don't you think? I mean, I'm sure you've noticed how when adolescents get their first taste of argumentation, they abuse it and treat it like a game. They can't find any other use for it except disputation; they use knock-down arguments which they borrow from others to demolish people's positions. Like puppies, they love to tug away at anyone they come across and to tear his argument to shreds with theirs...So before long—once they've demolished a lot of arguments and often had their own demolished as well—they find they've radically changed their minds about everything... An older person, however,...is hardly likely to succumb to this insanity: he'd sooner resemble someone who's willing to practise dialectic and look for the truth, than someone who trivialises everything with his game-playing and disputatiousness.'⁴

In other words, for Plato, rational argument, or dialectic, leads to a young person being battered into thinking that society's code of what is right as

⁴ *Plato: Republic*, 538c-539d.

well as what is moral and good, and all the qualities or values he respects, are no more right than wrong. Thus, dialectic leads to an utter scepticism of all values. So, Plato believed this would lead such a person into a lifestyle of enjoyable pursuits rather than doing what is right, that is, to a life of hedonism. Hence, for Plato such a person is corrupted.

So, even though we may be committed to the idea of liberal education, Plato suggests here that introducing students to philosophical argumentation might only be viable once the student has reached a relatively high level of maturity. Indeed, he suggests that such an introduction is likely to be counter-productive or even positively corrupting, in the sense that students are driven to a life of hedonism and nihilism.

One response to these worries may be to suggest that the teaching of philosophy need not be such a personally challenging affair for the students. The approach could be more historical such that the same material is covered, but without the same danger of corrupting the youth. Indeed, these two different approaches to teaching philosophy are in tune with two major strands in educational theory. The traditional theory of education corresponds to the historical approach and the progressive theory of education corresponds to the more personally challenging approach. And, in fact, the traditional theory of education usually traces its origins back to the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. It might be concluded, therefore, that if philosophy is to be true to its own heritage, it ought to teach philosophy in a traditional way, in other words, only historically.

However, this argument for a historical approach only stands if Plato and Aristotle's educational theories really are of the traditional kind. Since, if they are not, taking an historical approach may not be teaching their philosophy at all. Consequently, in Part One, I will briefly describe the two types of theories of education. I then suggest that it seems untenable to associate the traditional theory straightforwardly with Plato and Aristotle whilst at the same time associating the notion of genuine education and liberal arts, which seem inherently progressive, with Greek culture more generally. I then go on to argue that part of the confusion can be explained by the distinctiveness of Plato's higher educational programme, which seems inherently progressive.

Part one

Educational theory, Plato and Aristotle

The traditional model of education, which is said to have arisen out of Plato and Aristotle's theories, is also thought of as conservative. Bowen's synopsis of the traditional approach as follows:

The authority of the teacher is stressed and his role is seen as one of instilling in his pupils a required body of set subject matter. Little attention is paid to individual differences or children's interests, children are expected to remain quiet and passive and, to this end, coercive techniques are common. The school is cut off from outside life and what goes on within is seen primarily as a preparation for the future rather than an enrichment of the present. The basic stress is on the knowledge to be acquired and it is this that determines the aims; notions such as development of potentialities or self-realisation being largely ignored. Utilitarian and practical knowledge is seen as fit only for the less able, who are to receive a minimum education, the full programme being open only to the intellectually gifted.⁵

The progressive model, which is thought of as liberal, received its first description and elucidation from Jean-Jacques Rousseau⁶ and John Dewey.⁷ Bowen's description runs as follows:

Here, the child's interests and needs are regarded as the main factor in deciding what should be taught, and instrumental and practical knowledge is given a place in the curriculum. Activity methods and learning by discovery replace formal instruction as the dominant educative process, and examinations and testing are given less stress. The teacher's role is seen as one of encouraging the development of individual potentialities rather than moulding children according to some preconceived pattern. He becomes a guide more than an external authority figure and thus coercive techniques are used only as a last resort, if at all. Life in the school

⁵ *Theories of Education*, p.14.

⁶ *Émile*, 176.

⁷ *Democracy and Education. An introduction to the philosophy of education*, original 1916.

is related wherever possible to life outside the school, and education is seen as an enrichment of the present at least as much as a preparation for the future.⁸

Even from these brief characterisations, we can see that there seems something odd about associating Plato and Aristotle's philosophy, which emerged out of a culture that developed the notion of liberal arts,⁹ with the traditional conservative model. That association becomes particularly jarring when the traditional model is said to largely ignore the 'development of potentialities or self-realisation,'¹⁰ yet the Greek ideal of education is said to be precisely concerned with those things:

The Greek notion that genuine education is wholly disinterested and autonomous, for example, survives fully in our concept of the truly educated man. Implanted firmly in us all is the belief that each of us has an unfulfilled 'potential' and that only 'genuine' or 'true' education will ever develop this. Although we may try to ignore the intuition, we suspect that inside each of us is the void of unrealised excellence.¹¹

However, the potential misappropriation of Plato and Aristotle as originators of the traditional model can be, I think, resolved through developing some of the detail of Plato and Aristotle's theories of education.

An obvious area of potential confusion lies in the difference between early and higher education, since one might take a traditional approach in the former and a progressive approach in the latter. It is clear that the early educational programme advocated by both philosophers is similar and could be classified as traditional because they are both quite strict about inculcating the right habits in the young. Although they differ in that Plato emphasises the generation of a harmonious psyche just as much as habit. Thus, although he does not warrant the traditional tag as straightforwardly as Aristotle does in early education, his programme still seems traditional.

⁸ Ibid., pp.14-5.

⁹ See quotation above, footnote 3.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.14.

¹¹ Ibid., p.5.

With regard to higher education, however, their educational theories differ markedly for fundamental epistemological reasons. As we will see, Aristotle's approach seems to fall neatly into the traditional camp, whereas Plato's approach seems to have the characteristics of a progressive approach.

Higher education

One of the main differences between Aristotle's account of higher education and Plato's is that dialectic is the explicit focus of higher education for Plato but not for Aristotle. Indeed, the first ten years of higher education (ages twenty to thirty) are, for Plato, a preparation for tuition in dialectic, which takes place in the following five years.

This difference is not merely superficial but goes to the heart of Plato and Aristotle's philosophical differences. For Plato, only dialectic can get at absolute truth. He says, 'I must remind you...that the power of dialectic can alone reveal this [absolute truth].'¹² And this is because only dialectic can allow us to approach the realm of the forms (true reality), of which the sensuous world is merely a pale imitation. For Aristotle, however, we acquire an idea of the essence of something and, therefore, knowledge of it, through repeated exposure to things of that kind. We build up knowledge by extracting the form or essence of an object from particular instances.

In other words, then, Aristotle's epistemology is inductive, whereas Plato's is deductive (once we have been reminded of knowledge of the forms through dialectic). This leads to a great difference in their general approach to education. As Bowen puts it, with regard to Aristotle's inductive epistemology,

One of the fundamental tasks of the teacher, then, is to provide the child with the concrete experiences necessary to make this final reflective judgement, which leads to definite knowledge.¹³

He goes on,

¹² *Doctrines of the Great Educators*, p.24 and *Republic* 533.

¹³ *Theories of Education*, p.84.

This model of how the mind acquires knowledge has been very influential as a guide to the nature of the teaching-learning process right down to modern times and has given much support to the traditional concept of the teacher as one whose task it is to feed the necessary items of knowledge into the developing mind.¹⁴

However, for Plato, each student already has knowledge of the forms locked away in their memory. Hence, it is the purpose of dialectic to encourage each student to recover this knowledge from within the self.¹⁵ Consequently the higher education of mathematics and dialectic do not lend themselves to the traditional form of education. Indeed, because they concern non-sensible objects—the forms—it is impossible to transmit them. Since, that could only occur through some sensible medium or other (writing or speech). Rather, the student can only be guided to discover them in their own minds.

In addition, the idea that Plato's approach is progressive and Aristotle's approach traditional is borne out by their styles of teaching and writing philosophy. Plato only wrote in dramatic dialogue form whereas Aristotle's 'books' (which are thought to be his lecture notes) are didactic.

So, it seems that where early education is not confused with higher education, Aristotle may be responsible for the traditional model of education and not Plato. Aristotle's inductive approach lends itself straightforwardly to the traditional model whereas Plato's dialectic is inherently progressive.

It seems, then, that it would be a mistake to take a historical approach to teaching Plato's philosophy. Since, such a traditional mode of teaching does not engage the student in dialectic and so cannot allow the student to discover true knowledge, which is the goal of Plato's philosophy. An historical approach, in other words, would not be teaching Plato's philosophy at all.

Thus, assuming we want to teach Plato's philosophy, we should take a progressive approach. However, the corollary of the progressive

¹⁴ Ibid., p.84.

¹⁵ This is, of course, Plato's doctrine of recollection in which it is said that learning is the recovery of knowledge from a previous existence. At birth we suffer total amnesia, so gaining knowledge is a case of each student recollecting the knowledge they once had.

approach to philosophy is the subject of this whole paper. Plato's dialectical method *begins* by undermining conventional beliefs, values and morality, and so begins by exposing the student to the danger of corruption (if they are under 30 years of age). So, I now want to discuss Plato's method of teaching philosophy and its justification in more detail to get a clearer idea of how it may corrupt the youth. This will allow me to conclude by suggesting some practical steps that might be taken to counter or overcome the corrupting effect of undergraduate philosophy.

Part two

Plato's dialectic

With regard to method, Plato's early dialogues are characterised by 'elenchus' and his middle and late dialogues by the 'hypothesis' form of dialectic.

Elenchus

Richard Robinson defines 'elenchus' as,

Examining a person with regard to a statement he has made, by putting to him questions calling for further statements, in the hope that they will determine the meaning and truth-value of his first statement. Most often the truth-value expected is falsehood; and so 'elenchus' in the narrow sense is a form of cross-examination or refutation. In this sense it is the most striking aspect of the behaviour of Socrates in Plato's early dialogues.¹⁶

In other words, after putting a general question to someone, Socrates then asks questions about the primary answer given. This then leads the answerer to draw out implications of their primary answer that contradict the primary answer, thus producing a refutation of that answer.

In order to elicit a primary answer or premise from the interlocutor, Socrates employs various strategies that constitute what is known as Socratic irony or slyness. Robinson points out that,

¹⁶ *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, p.7.

The statements that he is 'seeing whether the answer is true' are insincere. So are the earnest requests for instruction by which he obtains the primary answer.¹⁷

Socratic irony also occasionally involves inviting reciprocity in elenchus,¹⁸ but this is only so as to persuade his interlocutor to submit to questioning, or is an excuse for Socrates to launch into a long speech. Socrates also feigns a bad memory in order to entrap others into pontificating.¹⁹

Because elenchus involved the use of irony to elicit an initial response and then an eventual refutation of that response, elenchus could have very negative effects. Victims often became ill disposed towards Socrates. For example, Thrasymachus complained of 'Socrates' usual slyness'²⁰ and believed Socrates deliberately tried to make trouble in arguments.²¹ Also pleasant discussions could turn into quarrels.²²

The natural question at this point is then, what could possibly justify the practice of elenchus? Plato discusses this in three dialogues. Firstly, Robinson describes Socrates' position in the *Meno* as follows,

Elenchus changes ignorant men from their state of falsely supposing that they know to the state of recognising that they do not know; and this is an important step along the road to knowledge, because the recognition that we do not know at once arouses the desire to know, and thus supplies the motive that was lacking before. Philosophy begins in wonder, and the assertion here made is that elenchus supplies the wonder.²³

Thus, we can say that elenchus does not 'actually increase knowledge, but only prepares the ground for it.'²⁴

¹⁷ Ibid., p.9.

¹⁸ *Gorgias*, 462a

¹⁹ *Meno*, 71c

²⁰ *Republic*, I, 337a

²¹ *Republic*, 341a

²² *Laches*, 195b

²³ *ibid*, p.11

²⁴ *ibid*, p.12

Secondly, in the *Sophist* the focus of elenchus is not so much to arouse the desire to know, but to remove a barrier to the acquisition of knowledge. That barrier is the conceit that we already know. Hence, elenchus is described by analogy with medical purging, and is, therefore, an essential preliminary to acquiring knowledge.²⁵

Thirdly, in the *Apology* Socrates explains that the origin of his habit of elenchus was the Delphic god's statement that no one was wiser than Socrates.²⁶ This statement perplexed Socrates because he felt that he had no wisdom, yet also believed that the god could not lie. Hence, in an effort to resolve his perplexity he began to study men with a reputation for wisdom, but found that they were not wise after all. He, therefore, concluded that he was, in fact, wiser than the wise because whereas they knew nothing, he at least knew that he knew nothing.²⁷

Socrates did, however, continue with elenchus beyond this point, because he felt that the god had imposed a duty on him of demonstrating to all men that no man is wise. He also says that the purpose of elenchus is to shame people into putting the virtue of the soul first.²⁸ Hence, in *Apology*, the ultimate aim of elenchus is thought not to be intellectual education but moral improvement, to make men better men. And elenchus can achieve this because men can only be virtuous if they know what virtue is, and they can only learn what it is once they have been disabused of their false opinion of what it is.

Hence, there are three main justifications of the Socratic practice of elenchus. The first two are educational in an intellectual sense. They are designed to generate knowledge by arousing the desire for knowledge and removing the barrier to knowledge of falsely believing that we already know. The third is educational in a moral sense. It is designed to shame people into putting the virtue of the soul first. All three justifications in no way eschew the destructive and negative characteristic of elenchus. Indeed, leaving victims with less 'knowledge' than they had to start with is essential to elenchus.

²⁵ *ibid*, p.13

²⁶ *Apology*, 20d-21c

²⁷ *Apology*, 21d

²⁸ *Apology*, 29 d-30a

Dialectic

The greatest difference between elenchus and dialectic is that dialectic is constructive, although the destructive movement of elenchus is part of dialectic's constructive process. What dialectic aims at is not exposing false claims to knowledge as elenchus does, and, thus, in effect, ignorance, but rather knowledge in a very strong sense. It is through dialectic that we can gain positive knowledge of what each thing is, that is, the essence or form of each thing. And, indeed, dialectic was not merely one of many tools that one could use for philosophy. Rather for Plato, '*it [dialectic] was philosophy itself*, the very search for the essences, only considered in its methodical aspect. The method occurred only in the search, and the search only by means of the method'²⁹ (my emphasis). Also, this method of dialectic was not prescribed mechanically, 'dialectic was not a substitute for thinking but a *way of thinking*'³⁰ (my emphasis).

The perfect dialectician's certainty would be an internal certainty of intuition, not the external kind we feel after using an adding machine; and it could not be communicated to any sort of man, but only to another perfect dialectician.³¹

Dialectic can be characterised further in contrast to two degenerative forms of dialectic: antilogic and eristic. Eristic is the art of quarrelling, and Plato indicates 'the aim of this procedure is to win the argument, whereas the aim of dialectic is to discover truth.'³² Antilogic is the art of contradiction. This is 'a tendency to contradict, to maintain aggressively whatever position is opposite to that of one's interlocutor.'³³ Dialecticians tend to be friendly and gentle with each other and try to say the truth. Whereas eristic is a childish contentiousness that does not care about the truth but employs every device to give the appearance of winning the argument. So, 'the appropriate picture for dialectic is the road or the search, that for eristic is the fight.'³⁴

²⁹ *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, p.71.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.73.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.73.

³² *Ibid.*, p.85.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.85.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.85.

Hypothesis

Hypothesis is an element of dialectic that is only prominent in the middle dialogues including the *Republic*. It is, roughly speaking, a kind of believing or positing.

Positing is only that kind of believing in which we deliberately and consciously adopt a proposition with the knowledge that after all it may be false...What is posited is always provisional and tentative. It is posited only 'until further notice'. We are aware that we may have to withdraw it and posit something else or suspend judgement.³⁵

Robinson draws out four aspects of Plato's hypothetical method. First, even though Plato is not explicit it seems unavoidably implicit that 'we should adopt our opinions deliberately rather than slide into them unconsciously, and also that we should adopt opinions rather than suspend judgement.'³⁶ Second, it is deductive in that it draws out the consequences of hypotheses, carefully distinguishing premises from conclusions, rather than appealing to intuition. Third, inconsistency must be avoided at all costs. Robinson observes that 'Plato's portrait of Hippias clinging to common sense in spite of the inconsistencies Socrates reveals therein shows the sort of thing to which the ideal of consistency is opposed.'³⁷ And Socratic elenchus is the process whereby we can explore our beliefs in order to bring to light indirect contradictions. Fourth, opinions must be held provisionally and not dogmatically, although while no contradiction has been found they should be held with vigour and acted upon with confidence. But we must be ready to abandon them if consistency demands.

However, one major problem arises with the hypothetical dialectical method. Even if we have a consistent and harmonious system of beliefs we may nevertheless not have truth. Since, consistency does not necessarily give us truth. Plato's response to this problem is the 'intuition-theory' of the upward path. Robinson describes it as follows:

³⁵ Ibid., p.94.

³⁶ Ibid., p.105.

³⁷ Ibid., p.106.

He [Plato] conceives that the dialectician takes a hypothesis and deduces its consequences, trying his hardest to discover some contradiction in those consequences. If he does discover one, the hypothesis is thereby refuted. He then takes another hypothesis, usually a modification of the first one designed to avoid the contradiction which refuted that. He then deduces the consequences of this second hypothesis, again trying his hardest to make it lead to a contradiction. He continues this process for a long time, making a great effort to be patient and thorough. Some day, after months or years of labour, he reflects that he has now been attempting to refute the same hypothesis for many weeks, and that this last hypothesis has endured every test and stood consistent in all its consequences, which he has deduced on every side as far as it seems possible to go. With this reflection (if he ever gets so far) it dawns on him that this hypothesis is certainly true, that it is no longer a hypothesis but an anhypotheton.³⁸

In other words, this ‘intuition-theory’ of the upward path does not produce a proof or demonstration of the beginning or unhypothesised, even though it arrives at certain knowledge. This beginning is in fact the Good and ‘Plato’s view seems to be that the Good, far from being proved, is the presupposition of all proof that is not hypothetical.’³⁹

However, there is a darker side to the hypothetical method that emerges in the *Parmenides*. That dialogue prescribes that we should draw the consequences of not merely the hypothesis but also its contrary, and the dialogue seems to expect that *both* will contain inconsistencies. This suggests that a consistent position does not exist and, therefore, cannot be found. Further, the dialogue does not suggest what the next step beyond drawing consequences should be, but merely says that we should draw the consequences of both contradictories if we are ‘to come upon the true and possess intelligence.’⁴⁰

Thus, for Robinson ‘the methodological aspect of the *Parmenides* thus seems to be, like its other aspects, bewildering, sceptical, and depressing’ and to generate ‘apathy and despair.’⁴¹ Since the

³⁸ Ibid., p.173.

³⁹ Ibid., p.173.

⁴⁰ *Parmenides*, 136e.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.280.

great method of hypothesis is ‘severely lamed by the discovery that an hypothesis and its contradictory may both lead to absurdities.’⁴² This problem was so significant that F. M. Cornford felt that, if this were Plato’s view he ‘should have burnt his books and relapsed into unbroken silence.’⁴³

We can see then, that even though the overall justification of the hypothetical dialectic of the middle dialogues is the search for truth, two dangers exist that might be destructive to this process. Firstly, the constructive search for truth can only take place hand-in-hand with the destructive process of elenchus. Hence, the danger continuously exists of dialectical degenerating into eristic and antilogic. Secondly, the *Parmenides* suggests that it is possible that elenchus will always ultimately triumph over dialectic. In this case we would be left in ‘apathy and despair’ and with Cornford’s desire to burn Plato’s books.

Conclusion and some practical implications

With this more detailed understanding of Plato’s philosophical methodology it seems that we can say that the danger of corrupting the youth lies in three areas. Firstly, the practice that Socrates identified as the real reason for being brought to trial, elenchus. Secondly, if dialectic degenerates into eristic and antilogic. Thirdly, in the belief that the consequences of all hypotheses lead inevitably to contradictions, as exemplified in the *Parmenides*.

However, all three areas of potential corruption ultimately arise as effects of one thing, elenchus. Elenchus is the explicit subject of the first; eristic and antilogic only arise because of the desire to refute embodied in the legitimate practice of elenchus during dialectic; and contradictions are only revealed by applying elenchus to hypotheses. Elenchus, then is the real culprit as far as corrupting the youth is concerned.

If this is an accurate description of the effects of philosophy on the youth (and in my experience the effects of elenchus can be observed to occur within the short space of a first year introductory

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.280.

⁴³ *Mind*, 1942, p.387.

course of philosophy), and undergraduate courses are not to lead students down the rocky road of nihilism and hedonism, a debt of responsibility hangs over undergraduate courses to provide students with the possibility of some kind of response. In other words, if undergraduate philosophy courses destroy the values and beliefs of students that would lead them through life tolerably well, but provide no alternatives or means to realising those alternatives, students would be merely led to nihilism and hedonism. In this case, Meletus' accusation of Socrates could indeed be levelled against undergraduate philosophy.

A response to such an accusation may be that the second and third years of undergraduate courses are constructed to suggest alternative values and beliefs. Studying philosophers who advocate particular values may lead students to adopt those values or to create their own set of values. However, this hope is groundless if students have been only trained in the art of elenchus, and not in the constructive side of dialectic, hypothesis. That is, hypothesis should not be neglected. And, indeed, elenchus should be put in its place as the handmaiden of the search for truth, the handmaiden of hypothesis. Only then does it seem possible to prevent elenchus from running away with students and leading to corruption.

This conclusion has some practical implication with regard to the nature of assignments set for students. Firstly, students should not be asked to explore their own hypothesis *only after* an accurate exegesis of the texts under study. Since, one must ask if we seriously expect many or most undergraduates to come up with a reasonable hypothesis after having gained a good understanding of an issue through the work of professional philosophers. What is more likely to happen is that having understood the complexities of the views of professional philosophers students produce a good exegesis and then become stuck for a hypothesis and merely make a few comments or statements of pre-existing beliefs or commitments. Such an exercise, then, does not even engage the student in elenchus and so any hypothesis will merely be unexamined beliefs. Secondly, students should not be merely asked to compare one text with another after an accurate exegesis of both. Since, in effect, students will merely practise elenchus from the perspective of one position with regard to another. And, far worse still, they *immediately* encounter the third area of potential corruption: that all hypotheses lead inevitably to contradictions.

In other words, students should not be encouraged to perform accurate exegesis as a separate and prior task to constructing their own hypothesis, but instead they should do both together. Or rather their hypothesis should lead the assignment, and exegesis should be given only insofar as it contributes to that hypothesis. This implies that their hypothesis will only be possible by virtue of a misunderstanding of a text, but the tutor can correct this and, thereby, become the interlocutor in the process of dialectic that follows the student's hypothesis. That is, even though, in a sense, they may only arrive at an accurate understanding of a set text at a later stage, they should so arrive, and should also have practised their constructive powers of positing a hypothesis, drawing out its consequences and then applying elenchus to their own hypothesis. This clearly seems to be a much richer exercise and one that avoids the direct route to corruption that an exercise in pure elenchus (that a request for accurate exegesis and comparison practically becomes) is likely to generate. But most importantly the student develops their skill of using hypotheses and so will be more able to adopt values of others or create their own set of values.

In this way Plato's philosophy and all philosophy that challenges fundamental beliefs and assumptions that ground Western culture can be genuinely taught. Yet students are provided with the tools necessary to overcome the 'corrupting' effects that teaching undergraduate philosophy can have.

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Comparing Student Learning and Attitudes in Traditional and Distance Sections of Introduction to Philosophy

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Outline

This study compared students in traditional and distance sections of *PHIL 101: Introduction to Philosophy* in terms of both objective learning outcomes and student attitudes in the form of students' anticipated and perceived learning and course satisfaction. It

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was hypothesized that while students in the two types of classes would not differ in their academic performance or in their anticipated learning and course satisfaction, students in the traditional classes would perceive that they had learned more and report being more satisfied with their learning experience than students in the distance classes. The results of the study indicated that the traditional and distance students did not differ significantly in their in performance on graded assignments, their expectations for learning at the start of the course, their perception of what they had learned at the end of the course, and their willingness to take another philosophy course. Distance students anticipated enjoying specific course activities more than traditional students, but at the end of the semester, reported enjoyment of these activities did not differ. Students in the traditional classes, however, rated the lectures as more interesting and rated the course, overall, as more enjoyable than students in the distance classes. The implications of these findings for philosophy instructors considering the use of the distance format are discussed.

Introduction

Distance courses provide a way for colleges and universities to increase enrollments without necessarily having to expand infrastructure or personnel (Howell, Williams, and Lindsay, 2003). There is a demand for such courses especially from non-traditional students whose work and family responsibilities prevent them from attending traditional courses and from students who do not live near a university (Dutton, Dutton, and Perry, 2000; Howell, Williams, and Lindsay, 2003; Jones, 2003, Minton and Willett, 2003). We have no doubt that in many cases distance courses fill a need and are an effective means of teaching and learning. If anything, distance courses provide access to education to those who might not otherwise have it so long as they can cross the so-called ‘digital divide’ (Latanich, Nonis, and Hudson, 2001; Minton and Willett, 2003) and could also be used to supplement more traditional university courses (Jones, 2003). Moreover, today’s distance courses are not the simple correspondence courses of the past. Online courses can be packaged in multidimensional platforms such as Blackboard and WebCT and present material in a multitude of mediums—both syn-

chronous and asynchronous—including PowerPoint presentations with attached audio overlays, online video lectures, learning modules, discussion boards, chat rooms, and white boards. It seems that as the technology has improved over the last decade, many of the objections faculty have had to online teaching have lost their force. A number of studies have shown, and it is the accepted view among ‘teaching with technology’ personnel, that there is ‘no significant difference’ in learning outcomes between students in traditional, ‘on-ground’ courses and those in distance courses (Russell, 1999; Shinaberger, 2006).

Criticism of distance education seems to center around a different divide—that between administration and faculty, specifically the divide between their goals (Feenberg, 1999). Administrations have economic goals for the university that sometimes seem to conflict with the teaching and learning goals of the faculty. The administration may have an idealized vision of increased enrollments at minimal cost to the university, but there have been lingering questions from the faculty about teaching distance courses: Should teaching be automated at all? Can real learning take place in a distance classroom? Is some essential component of learning lost in the distance format?

It would seem that the pros outweigh the cons when it comes to distance education, at least if one accepts the ‘no significant difference’ research, and new technologies continue to fill much of the gap that seemed so worrisome to faculty. In the field of philosophy, however, there seems to be a unique set of arguments opposed to teaching philosophy in a distance format.¹ Despite any layperson’s stereotype of the philosopher sage dispensing wisdom from a mountaintop or living as a reclusive bookworm, an essential component to doing philosophy is engaging in philosophical discourse. Nowhere does this seem more important than when one is developing one’s philosophical skills. Socrates had his interlocutors, and one could argue that our students need their classmates and their professors to learn the basics of philosophy (for example, see Sadler, 2004; Lugenbehl, 2003; and Nehmias 2005). Only in real-time, face-to-face interchanges can one learn to raise questions, propose answers to those questions, give, object to and modify arguments, draw distinctions, and propose analyses. One could attempt this

¹ Analogous arguments can be made, *mutatis mutandis*, for other disciplines, for example, fine arts and theater.

via email, on a discussion board or even in a chat room, but we think one would be hard-pressed to find a philosophy teacher who thinks that such discourse comes close to what can be achieved in the classroom.²

This conflict between the economic and social goals of the university and the methodology of doing and teaching philosophy was the impetus behind the present study. While one of the authors had a vested personal interest in teaching a distance course³, there seemed to be a legitimate question raised by these conflicting views of distance education: are there significant differences between a traditional ‘on ground’ philosophy course and a wholly distance course?

A number of studies have focused on distance courses and comparing distance and traditional courses and students. The aforementioned ‘no significant difference’ research tends to show that, objectively, distance students learn just as well as traditional students. However, the overwhelming trend right now seems to be to measure students’ perceptions and attitudes concerning the course delivery methods themselves, namely, the course *qua* distance course. Several such studies measure students’ perceptions of their ‘learning environment’ (Teh, 1999), their perceptions of the benefits of online learning (O’Malley and McCraw, 1999), their expectations concerning content delivery via online sources (Jurczyk, Kushner Benson, and Savery, 2004), their attitudes toward ‘distinct facets of network-based instruction’ (Federico, 2000), their anxiety about learning in a distance course (Katz and Yablon, 2002), and their satisfaction with things like ‘course management,’ ‘support services,’ and ‘out-of-class communication with the instructor’ (Biner, Dean, and Mellinger, 1994). There are also studies that examine students’ perceptions of how they learn best (for example, Pérez-Prado and Thirunarayanan, 2002). Moreover, while some researchers claim to have measured students’ learning experiences, their research seems to report students’ attitudes toward how they learned and how they used the technology rather than their perceptions that they learned (Pérez-Prado and Thirunarayanan, 2002).

² A notable exception is Ron Barnette who has been a champion of teaching philosophy in a distance format for the last decade. See Barnette 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003 and 2006.

³ It gave her flexibility in teaching the semester her child was born in the absence of any university supported maternity leave.

In the present study, we aimed to measure both actual and anticipated and perceived learning outcomes of students enrolled in traditional and distance sections of *Introduction to Philosophy*. Many philosophers are skeptical about teaching philosophy in a distance format since they believe some essential aspect of doing philosophy, something not necessarily reflected in students' performance on exams, is lost in that medium. This *je ne sais quoi* is a very difficult thing to measure. It occurred to us that what one thinks of one's learning experience insofar as that one has in fact learned something is just as important as how one actually performs in the class. We did not focus on students' experience of using a particular technology, but instead on their experience of learning and doing philosophy. We focused on students' expectations for the course at the beginning of the semester and their perceptions of having satisfied these expectations at the end of the semester. There is some evidence that children who perceive themselves to be good decision makers actually make better decisions (Grier and Firestone, 1998). It is plausible that students of philosophy who believe they learned something about what philosophy is and how it is done and believe they have improved their critical thinking skills will go on to use these acquired skills more effectively. Moreover, beyond the intrinsic value that might come from believing that one has been successful, this sense of accomplishment coupled with students enjoying the content and delivery of the course could lead to a second course in philosophy—an appealing prospect in a department like ours looking to increase enrollments. Thus the goals of this study were to compare (1) academic performance, (2) anticipated learning outcomes and course satisfaction, and (3) perceived learning outcomes and course satisfaction of students in traditional and distance formats of the course. Three hypotheses were evaluated:

1. Students in the traditional and distance course formats will not differ in their performance on graded assignments.
2. Students in the traditional and distance course formats will not differ in their anticipated learning outcomes and course satisfaction.
3. Students in the traditional course format course would perceive that they had learned better and be more satisfied with their learning experience than students in the distance format.

Very simply, we expected that the students who had the experience of coming to class, being involved in and observing classroom discussions, and hearing the lectures ‘live’ would feel that they got more out of the class than those students who took the class online. This would show that, while there may be certain benefits of distance education generally speaking, there are also certain drawbacks that may be discipline-specific.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 141 students who enrolled in *Introduction to Philosophy* during the fall semester of 2005 or the spring semester of 2006. The sample consisted of 56 men and 85 women. The mean age of the students was 20.77 ($SD = 4.55$). During the fall semester, 59 students enrolled in traditional sections and 27 students enrolled in the distance section of the course. During the spring semester, 27 students enrolled in the traditional section and 28 students enrolled in the distance section of the course.

Table 1 provides a comparison of demographic information, including age, class rank, gender, and race, that was collected via the university’s Office of Institutional Research for the 86 students enrolled in the traditional format and the 55 students enrolled in the distance format of the course. Statistical analyses using the chi square (χ^2) test for independence indicated no significant difference between the traditional and distance classes in terms of gender, class rank, and racial composition. However, a significant relationship was found between course format and age, with the traditional classes having a higher percentage of students under the age of 24 than the distance classes. The average age of the students in the traditional classes was 19.63 ($SD = 1.65$) while the average age in the distance classes was 22.55 ($SD = 6.64$).

Procedure

PHIL 101 Introduction to Philosophy satisfies a core (general education) requirement at Coastal Carolina University. The philosophy department offers 10-12 sections of the course during each of the

	Course Format				
	Traditional		Distance		
Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	χ^2
Age					16.03**
18-23 years	84	97.7	42	76.4	
24 years or older	2	2.3	13	23.6	
Class Rank					8.02
Freshman	40	46.5	15	27.3	
Sophomore	26	30.2	19	34.5	
Junior	14	16.3	14	25.5	
Senior	3	3.5	6	10.9	
Non-degree Seeking	3	3.5	1	1.8	
Gender					0.42
Male	36	41.9	20	36.4	
Female	50	58.1	35	63.3	
Race					0.28
White	74	86.0	49	89.1	
Black/Hispanic/Asian	12	14.0	6	10.9	

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Students in the Traditional and Distance Classes

16-week fall and spring semesters, and enrollment in each section is usually capped at 27 students. Data for this study were gathered over two semesters. In the fall of 2005, Smith taught two sections of PHIL 101 in the traditional format (one of these was an accelerated 8-week course) and one section in the distance format. In the spring of 2006, she taught one section in the traditional format and one section in the distance format. The instructor teaches a traditional ‘problem-based’ course focusing on five areas in philosophy: logic, philosophy of religion, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and ethics.

Smith designed the traditional and distance versions of the course to be as similar as possible. Both formats used WebCT, a web-based course platform, and all students were required to have an internet connection to access course materials. The instructor demonstrated how to use WebCT on the first class meeting. Students in both formats used the same anthology⁴ and were provided with the instructor’s lecture notes. Each of the thirty lectures, one for each class meeting, was available as a PowerPoint presentation with audio on WebCT. PowerPoint presentations were not used during class in the traditional sections, but the PowerPoint lectures were available online after the topic had been covered in class. Students also had WebCT access to ungraded ‘self-tests’ corresponding to each day’s lecture material. Smith held four ‘on-ground’ office hours and four ‘virtual’ office hours in a WebCT chat room each week. While students in both course formats corresponded with the instructor by email, students rarely attended office hours.

Students in the traditional sections of the course were required to attend class, and attendance was taken for approximately 50% of the class meetings. Five of the class meetings involved planned group discussion or group activities, five of the class meetings (one at the start of each of the five topics) were directed ‘brainstorming’ activities about the philosophical problem at hand, and one class meeting was devoted to watching a video.⁵ The other class meetings involved an ‘interactive lecture’ in which there was a planned lecture that included student participation. Students earned participation points based on attendance. Students in the distance sections of the course were required to meet in person only on the

⁴ Rauhut, Nils and Smith, Renée, *Readings on the Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Longman, 2005).

⁵ *Peaceable Kingdom*, Tribe of Heart Ltd, (New York: Ithaca, 2004).

first day of class and at the end of the semester to watch the video⁶. The first class meeting was used to demonstrate WebCT and to go over the course materials and requirements. Whereas the traditional students earned participation points for class attendance, the distance students earned participation points for posting to the discussion board in WebCT. Five postings were required, one for each course topic.

Students in both course formats were given the same tests and written assignments. At the completion of each of the five course topics, an objective 25-question multiple-choice test was administered. A cumulative final exam containing 50 multiple-choice, true/false, and matching questions was given at the end of the semester. Testing for students in both the traditional and distance formats was conducted via WebCT. Additionally, two short (2-3 page) papers were assigned. Students in the traditional sections submitted these written assignments in class, while the distance students were permitted to email their papers to the instructor.

Students in both course formats were asked to complete an anonymous Starting Survey and Ending Survey during the first and last week of the semester, respectively. The surveys were administered on WebCT and each contained 53 questions. Responses to the following 16 questions on the Starting Survey and 17 questions on the Ending Survey were examined in this study. Responses to Questions 38-53 on the surveys were given on a 4-point Likert scale with 1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *disagree*, 4 = *strongly disagree*. Students were given a text box to give an answer for Question 6 on the Ending Survey.

Starting Survey Questions:

38. My only goal is to pass the class.
39. I anticipate satisfying the learning goals/objectives in this course.
40. I intend to get a high grade in this class.
41. I do not care what grade I earn as long as I learn something about philosophy.
42. I hope to earn a good grade and learn something about philosophy.

⁶ Exceptions were made for students taking the course from out of state.

43. I hope to engage in philosophical thinking myself in this course.
44. I hope to engage in philosophical discussions in this course.
45. I expect that overall this class will be enjoyable.
46. I expect that the readings in this class will be interesting.
47. I expect that the lectures in this class will be interesting.
48. I expect that the videos in this class will be interesting.
49. I expect that the discussions (in class or on WebCT) will be interesting.
50. I will feel a sense of accomplishment upon completing this course.
51. My critical thinking skills will be improved upon completing this course.
52. I will have a better understanding of what philosophy is upon completing this course.
53. I will have a better understanding of how philosophy is done upon completing this course.

Ending Survey Questions:

6. Will you take another philosophy course in the future?
38. I am satisfied with the grade I earned in this class.
39. I satisfied the learning goals/objectives in this course.
40. The grade I earned in this course reflects the effort I put into the course.
41. Despite the grade I earned, I learned something about philosophy.
42. I am satisfied with the grade I earned and I learned something about philosophy.
43. I engaged in philosophical thinking myself in this course.
44. I engaged in philosophical discussions in this course.
45. Overall, this class was enjoyable
46. The readings in this class were interesting.
47. The lectures in this class were interesting.
48. The videos in this class were interesting.
49. The discussions (in class or on WebCT) were interesting
50. I feel a sense of accomplishment having completed this course.

51. My critical thinking skills have improved having completed this course.
52. I have a better understanding of what philosophy is having completed this course.
53. I have a better understanding of how philosophy is done having completed this course.

Results

Academic Performance

Students' scores were recorded for the following eight assignments: Tests 1-6, Paper 1, and Paper 2. Scores on each assignment were recorded as a percentage based on a 100-point scale. Table 2 summarizes students' performance on these assignments and reflects scores of students who completed at least one of the eight assignments. For each course format, the table shows the mean percentage score for each assignment, the standard deviation, and the number of students completing the assignment. The last row in the table shows students' mean performance on all completed assignments. The independent t test was used to compare the academic performance of students in the two course formats. No significant differences were found between the traditional and distance students in mean scores on the five topic tests or the two papers. However, a significant difference was found between the two course formats on the final exam. Traditional students scored 7.16% higher, on average, than the distance students on this exam. A comparison of students' mean performance on all completed assignments revealed no significant difference between the two course formats.

Survey Results

Starting Survey: Table 3 provides a comparison of responses of students in the traditional and distance classes to Questions 38-53 on the Starting Survey. The table shows the mean response, standard deviation, and number of students who responded to each question. The independent t test was used to compare mean responses of students in

	Course Format						
	Traditional			Distance			
Assignment	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>t</i>
Test 1: Logic	80.70	11.27	64	75.70	15.96	40	1.87
Test 2: God	70.98	13.98	64	71.89	16.70	35	-0.29
Test 3: Knowledge	69.87	13.16	57	64.53	13.91	34	1.83
Test 4: Mind	65.24	16.35	55	61.86	14.69	31	0.95
Test 5: Ethics	67.61	13.13	54	69.55	13.96	31	-0.64
Test 6: Final Exam	74.04	10.76	44	66.88	14.52	24	2.31*
Paper 1	70.50	18.48	45	76.00	20.66	26	-1.16
Paper 2	85.18	18.28	28	87.73	6.94	22	-0.62
Students' Mean on All Completed Assignments	71.46	9.87	71	68.22	13.76	44	1.48
* $p < .05$							

Table 2: Mean Percentage Scores on Academic Work in the Traditional and Distance Classes

the two course formats. Mean responses to Questions 46, 48, and 49 were significantly higher for students in the traditional classes. That is, traditional students agreed less strongly than distance students that the course readings, videos, and discussions would be interesting. No other significant differences were found between responses of distance and traditional students on the remaining Starting Survey questions.

	Course Format						
	Traditional			Distance			
Question	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>t</i>
38	2.76	0.85	68	2.85	0.95	45	-0.526
39	1.59	0.49	68	1.58	0.54	45	0.102
40	1.45	0.5	67	1.36	0.49	45	0.941
41	3.24	0.76	68	3.28	0.79	43	-0.266
42	1.32	0.56	68	1.22	0.42	45	1.022
43	1.68	0.58	67	1.56	0.5	46	1.142
44	1.75	0.66	68	1.72	0.55	43	0.248
45	1.55	0.53	66	1.68	0.52	46	-1.287
46	2.17	0.58	65	1.7	0.47	46	4.54*
47	1.81	0.58	68	1.78	0.61	32	0.237
48	2.08	0.55	63	1.81	0.58	36	2.304**
49	2.01	0.59	67	1.76	0.48	46	2.382**
50	1.61	0.55	68	1.48	0.5	46	1.284
51	1.61	0.55	67	1.51	0.51	45	0.971
52	1.43	0.5	67	1.3	0.47	46	1.391
53	1.46	0.53	67	1.42	0.5	46	0.403
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$							

Table 3: Starting Survey: Comparison of Traditional and Distance Classes

	Course Format			
	Traditional		Distance	
Response	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Yes/Maybe	16	42.1	7	31.8
No	22	57.9	15	68.2

Table 4: Comparison of Students' Willingness to Take Another Philosophy Course

Ending Survey: Table 4 compares the response of traditional and distance students to Question 6 on the Ending Survey which asked 'Will you take another philosophy course in the future?' Thirty-eight students in the traditional classes and 22 students in the distance classes responded to this question. The table shows the number and percentage of students in each course format who answered *yes/maybe* or *no*. A chi square test of independence indicated that there was no significant difference between the traditional and distance formats in the distribution of *yes/maybe* and *no* answers, $\chi^2(1, n = 60) = 0.62, p > .05$.

Table 5 provides a comparison of responses of students in the traditional and distance classes to Questions 38-53 on the Ending Survey. The table shows the mean response, standard deviation, and number of students who responded to each question. The independent *t* test was used to compare mean responses of students in the two course formats. Mean responses to Questions 45 and 47 were significantly lower for students in the traditional classes. That is, traditional students agreed more strongly than distance students that the class was overall enjoyable and that the lectures were interesting. No other significant differences were found between responses of distance and traditional students on the remaining Ending Survey questions.

	Course Format						
	Traditional			Distance			
Question	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>t</i>
38	2.64	0.92	31	2.53	0.77	19	0.436
39	2.21	0.67	38	2.05	0.62	19	0.871
40	2.36	0.89	33	2.3	1.03	20	0.224
41	1.75	0.73	36	1.67	0.58	21	0.429
42	2.5	0.98	32	2.35	0.86	17	0.531
43	1.85	0.78	39	1.57	0.6	21	1.431
44	1.89	0.77	38	2	0.67	19	-0.53
45	1.95	0.89	39	2.47	0.87	21	-2.175*
46	2.39	1.02	39	2.46	0.8	22	-0.277
47	1.72	0.72	39	2.3	1.08	13	-2.206*
48	2.21	0.83	24	2.07	1.21	14	0.423
49	1.85	0.75	34	2.19	0.82	21	-1.576
50	1.97	0.93	37	2.14	1.01	21	-0.649
51	1.95	0.73	38	2.19	0.87	21	-1.129
52	1.62	0.71	39	1.57	0.75	21	0.255
53	1.72	0.73	39	1.62	0.59	21	0.539
* $p < .05$							

Table 5: Ending Survey: Comparison of Traditional and Distance Classes

Discussion

Three hypotheses were tested in the present study. The first hypothesis was that students in the two course formats would not differ in their academic performance. The findings comparing the scores of traditional and distance students on graded assignments, for the most part, were consistent with this hypothesis and lend support to the ‘no significant difference’ research (Russell, 1999; Shinaberger, 2006). The only difference found on the graded assignments was that the traditional students scored higher on the final exam than the distance students. This difference appears to have been the result of several extremely low final exam scores in one of the two distance sections of the course. The average final exam score for this class was 59% compared to an average of 76% in the other distance class. One possible explanation for this discrepancy may relate to the fact that students were allowed to drop their lowest score on any of the eight assignments. Given that the final exam was the last assignment, it may be that students not needing the final exam score to improve their overall grade did not prepare for, complete, or put much thought into the final. A cursory examination of the students’ scores for this particular distance section revealed that of the thirteen students who took the final exam, only six students needed to do so. And, of those students not needing to take the final exam, or taking it to attempt to raise their overall average, seven received a lower score on the final exam than their average score going into the final. Several of these students may have ‘given up’ on the final once they realized it would not boost their overall grade. This explanation for the difference in mean final exam scores is supported by the finding of no significant difference between traditional and distance students’ mean scores on all completed assignments or letter grades earned in the course.

The second hypothesis predicted that students in the two course formats would not differ in their anticipated learning outcomes and course satisfaction. Analysis of the Starting Survey data revealed few differences between traditional and distance students in terms of their course expectations. There was no significant difference in the sorts of grades they expected to earn, their desire to engage in philosophical thought and discussions, their anticipated sense of accomplishment, their critical thinking skills, and their knowledge of philosophy and

philosophical methods that would be acquired by completing the course. However, there were significant differences in their expectations about how interesting various components of the course would be. While students in both the traditional and distance classes expressed the same expectations about the lectures being interesting, students in the traditional sections of the course expressed less agreement that the readings, videos, and discussions would be interesting. This difference could be attributed to responses of students who were repeating the class after previously failing the course. What may be more likely, however, is that the distance students, who were older, were more realistic about their role in the learning experience and more invested in getting something out of the class compared to those who enrolled in the traditional format.

The third hypothesis predicted that students in the traditional course format would perceive that they had learned better and be more satisfied with their learning experience than students in the distance format. As on the Starting Survey, there were very few differences in mean scores between students in the two course formats on the Ending Survey. Again, there was no significant difference between students' perceptions of their grades and satisfaction of course goals, their perception of having engaged in philosophical thought and discussions, their sense of accomplishment and their perceived understanding of philosophy and its methodology. Whereas the distance students had begun the semester agreeing more strongly than the traditional students that the readings, videos, and discussions would be interesting, at the end of the semester there was no significant difference between the two groups in how interesting students found these components of the course to be. There was a difference in the mean responses to how enjoyable, overall, they found the class to be and how interesting they thought the lectures were. The mean response of traditional students was solid within the 'agree' range whereas the distance students were leaning toward 'disagree' with regard to the overall enjoyableness of the course. And while the term 'lecture,' at least for the traditional students, is ambiguous between the PowerPoint lectures available online to both the traditional and distance students and the 'live' lectures given in class, we can assume that the traditional students found the in-class lectures more interesting than the distance students found the online PowerPoint lectures. This supports the idea that there

is some essential component to learning philosophy that takes place in the traditional classroom that the instructor did not duplicate in the PowerPoint lectures prepared for her distance courses. Croy's (2004) comparison of student learning and attitudes between three sections of a deductive logic course, one traditional, one distance, and one a hybrid of the two formats suggests that the latter may capture the best of both worlds. Students in his hybrid course had the most favorable attitudes towards the instructor, the course, themselves, computers, and other students. Thus, even if there is no significant difference in academic performance between distance and traditional students, the face-to-face interaction between students and instructors may provide that missing ingredient essential to a positive learning experience.

If there is some aspect to learning philosophy that goes beyond what is measurable on objective exams, and we believe there is, this study did not specifically reveal it. Instead, for the most part, the data collected tend to support the 'no significant difference' research that, when coupled with arguments for distance education in general, seems to justify offering philosophy courses in a distance format. Since distance students were no less likely to believe they would take another philosophy course than the traditional students, a department wanting to increase enrollments should not rule out offering distance courses. In addition to seeking better, more revealing ways to measure student learning in philosophy courses in general, this study made it clear that it is important not only to help students satisfy the course goals, but to help them recognize that they have satisfied these goals. Moreover, we should continue to look for more engaging methods for teaching philosophy to distance students.

Finally, some general observations about teaching a distance course are in order. There are unique characteristics of teaching a distance course that should be kept in mind by those who wish to teach such courses and by those administrators who want to support their faculty who do so. Preparing a distance course is particularly time consuming as one could spend six months to a year planning and organizing such a course depending on how one intends to deliver the content of the course. Students benefit from and appreciate a detailed schedule and outline of the course materials and requirements to help them stay on track. It is easy to find oneself too available to students by constantly monitoring their progress online, sending reminders to complete

assignments, and responding to email throughout the day, every day. Technology used to deliver the course content is sometimes complicated and is constantly changing which means that faculty must be trained in using the technology and have an accessible support staff. Since distance courses provide access to education to those who might not otherwise have it, distance courses play an important role in society. By extension, faculty who take on the challenge of teaching such courses make a unique contribution to student learning in today's society.

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Why Shouldn't Philosophers Teach Medical Ethics?

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In a recent article Christopher Cowley argues that medical ethics should not be taught by philosophers.¹ I disagree with just about everything that Cowley writes. In fact I suggest that the transferable skills that the philosopher can teach are precisely the ones that will best equip the medic in their ethically overwhelming workplace. Cowley's arguments are often unclear, ambiguous and self-contradictory. However, rather than getting bogged down in all the problems, let's look at what I take to be his central argument.

The central argument

- 1) Ethics has a double-aspect: a legislative process and a dramatic process (52).
- 2) The legislative involves 'discussion' about ethical issues (52).
- 3) The dramatic involves the 'cultivation of appropriate behavioural dispositions' (53).
- 4) The philosopher teaches the legislative (52).
- 5) The dramatic aspect is of primary importance over the legislative aspect in medical ethics (53).
- 6) If the philosopher teaches students medical ethics she will be teaching them something of secondary importance (from (4) and (5)).

How good is this argument? Well, it is valid. However, the premises are all false or trivial and the argument isn't justified.

Before proceeding I want to 'lay my cards on the table'. I think that medical ethics should be taught with both the traditional didactic style and interactively—by using Problem Based Learning, case studies, role plays etc. Moreover, given the amount and variety of medical ethical decisions students will have to face, I suspect that it may even be true that in medical ethics rather than say, business ethics or engineering ethics, there should be a greater emphasis on such interactive teaching methods. I myself have found that case study is often the best way to get the students thinking about how various ethical issues 'play out' in the real world.

However, the observation that it is beneficial to teach ethics in interactive ways seems like an overstated and obvious point. So, if this is Cowley's claim then his position would be true but uninteresting. But it isn't; he is claiming that 'philosophers qua philosophers should not

¹ 'Why Medical Ethics Should Not be Taught by Philosophers', *Discourse* (2006), vol. 5, no.1. All references are to this article unless stated otherwise.

teach medical ethics'. And I for one see absolutely no reason why this should be the case. We had better consider Cowley's justification.

Premises 1-3: Does ethics have a double-aspect?

It just isn't clear what Cowley means when he says that there is a 'double-aspect nature of ethics'. He says that one aspect is legislative—which is about thinking and discussion; the other aspect is dramatic—which is about action, about 'cultivating the right dispositions'. But this then looks true but uncontroversial—ethics not only includes thinking about stuff, it includes doing stuff as well, and this is a two way interactive process. Does Cowley move beyond this empirical claim? Well, the article reads as if he means something more substantive. But what?

Maybe we can glean more by considering some quotations? Discussing the dramatic Cowley states it involves:

...the cultivation of *appropriate* behavioural dispositions (52).

And that the:

...*successful* cultivation of such dispositions and sensitivities will result in the adult knowing what to do in many situations *without* experiencing ethical perplexity (ibid).

Of course, this begs some important questions: 'What does 'appropriate' mean? 'How do we gauge 'success'? etc.' However, leaving this aside, does it help us to grasp the more substantive claim that Cowley is alluding to? Not really, it merely takes us to another seemingly uninteresting empirical claim.

For, given that Cowley talks in terms of 'cultivation' then it seems that what he means is that you can **teach** ethics either by **cultivating a disposition in people** or by getting them to think clearly in the classroom. This is surely true. We can either teach people by encouraging student-centered learning and the development of skills, or on the other hand just tell them stuff. But again, if this is the case then I don't see why ethics turns out to be 'unique' in the way described. Presumably we can teach engineering by either teaching

students in the traditional lecture style, or by cultivating dispositions about how to approach problems etc.

So, after considering premise one, we have it that either Cowley means that ethics is both about thinking and action which is trivial, or that ethics can be taught in two distinct ways which is also trivial. However, let's be charitable and interpret Cowley as meaning latter as this fits better with the emphasis of the article (it does appear in a learning and teaching journal after all).

Premise 4: The philosopher deals with the legislative.

So, we are now dealing with how ethics can be **taught**. However, even with the clarification above, this claim—that the philosopher deals with the legislative (52)—is ambiguous. It can either be read that philosophers as a matter of fact teach via the legislative process, or that philosophers *qua* philosophers have to teach via the legislative process. The former seems like an uncontroversial claim. The latter is the more interesting and the one I will ascribe to Cowley. But what justification is there for this? Well, Cowley doesn't give any explicit reasons and it is very hard to find anything that supports his claim. However, we can perhaps get some justification by considering the other premises.

Premises 5 & 6: The dramatic aspect should dominate over the legislative. The philosopher will teach something of secondary importance.

Let's grant that Cowley has shown that ethics can be taught in a both a legislative and dramatic fashion, and that he has shown that philosophers *qua* philosophers have to teach via the legislative process, why does he think that the dramatic aspect should predominate over the legislative? Again, he doesn't say explicitly but I think there are two related things he might be saying in support of this.

First, he says that the philosopher will be ethically overwhelmed in specific medical situations, in particular in a hospital. What does this

mean? I think the general idea is that in a hospital there are just too many ethical problems and situations. So whereas, for instance, the flight deck of a MIG fighter will be overwhelming *psychologically* to the philosopher (unless they have been in the Russian Airforce), the hospital will present the philosopher with so many ethical problems that they are ethically overwhelmed.

Second, Cowley attempts to show that there are limits to legislative discussion. For he claims that if a student has been taught by a philosopher then they will be more likely to be ethically overwhelmed. And being ethically overwhelmed is a disadvantage. What does Cowley say to back this up? Well it seems he thinks that teaching in a legislative way just won't help when overwhelmed with the real issues.

Until the student encounters a dying patient, until he really listens to the dying patient, all discussion of euthanasia are *little more than shrill posturing* stirred up by facile journalistic accounts. Whatever conclusions the students may reach in the debating club will have little effect on what he *feels* and *does* during this critical first encounter. (57. Emphasis mine)

There seems to be some obvious problems with this quotation. First, there seems to be an assumption that by 'dramatic' Cowley means 'real'. But this seems wrong, presumably one can teach dramatically and develop the correct dispositions, via case studies, role play without actually being faced with real patients.

Second, it isn't the case that the underlying principle here is obviously generally true and as such claiming its truth in this case seems arguably *ad hoc*. For example, it certainly isn't true that what the doctor learns in the classroom has little effect in practice. Nor, is it true that what the fighter pilot learns doesn't help him when faced with a ground-to-surface missile attack. Nor, what the vet learns about lambing doesn't help him in a field in the middle of the night. So why think that the ethical is any different? Cowley offers no reasons, and as such the suggestion seems like stipulation.

Third, Cowley is running two different things together: *feeling* and *thinking*. It is, as Cowley states, most probably true that what the student learns in the classroom will have little or no effect on what the student *feels* when faced with real world examples. Obviously how they feel will be dependent on a whole host of things, e.g. history,

culture, the actual situation, what they had for breakfast etc. However—and this is the key point—one would hope that what the student feels doesn't directly tie into what he does. After all, if what we feel is somehow hardwired into what we do then we've lost thinking and reflection altogether. Surely a bad thing.

As such, following on from this third point, the fact that the classroom doesn't directly impact on feeling seems irrelevant. Moreover—and contrary to what Cowley seems to be saying—it seems that it *is* teaching via the legislative process that is important in cases where we are ethically overwhelmed. Imagine a student entering a hospital and facing countless issues. What the classroom learning, in terms of the legislative, gives students is the critical thinking skills to know how to proceed. How to isolate what is and what is not important, whether to trust one's feelings, to judge what weight to give one's moral intuitions and dispositions, to 'stand back' from the situation etc. This suggests then that it is just false that the legislative teaching is limited in a way that makes it of secondary importance.

Fourth, to try and defend further the claim that the legislative is somehow restrictive, Cowley asserts an even more implausible view. He writes:

[The medic taught by the philosopher] will probably adopt words...without *really understanding what they mean*...'quality of life' only means something when it is used in the context of a discussion with a *real* patient making terrible decisions that will affect his quality of life. (58-9. Emphasis mine)

This seems very strange. Just think about what account of meaning Cowley must need for this to be true. What he seems to be saying is that unless you experience what you are talking about then you can never really understand the words you use.

Does Cowley seriously think that because the philosopher hasn't experienced, say, euthanasia first hand, he doesn't know what 'euthanasia' means? Well it seems that is exactly what Cowley does mean:

There is a very real sense in which [the philosopher] does not know what he is talking about. (Ibid)

This is wrong. Again, to think otherwise is to be committed to it either being the case that we need to give a unique account of meaning and knowledge concerning ethics or claim that there is a unified account of meaning and knowledge and accept the consequences that this brings. The first just seems *ad hoc* and completely unmotivated. The second just seems like a *reductio ad absurdum* of Cowley's position. For it would mean that claims about history, the majority of cosmology, the future, and lots and lots and lots of claims are literally meaningless. Consider one basic example: imagine a cosmologist's claim that 'at the beginning of the universe there was a big bang'. Presumably the cosmologist hasn't experienced this and as such Cowley is committed to saying that there is a 'very real sense in which he doesn't know what he is talking about'. Or more radically consider claims about other minds, presumably we can't experience them in the way that Cowley would require, but we don't want to reduce the ascription of mental states to others to meaningless talk. Anyway the basic point is that surely we don't want to accept this account of meaning and as such we should resist this defense of premises 5&6.

It is worth noting, to avoid any confusion, that there is of course a trivial and uninteresting claim lurking around here. Namely, that experience is often far richer than description. However many words we write we cannot capture what it is actually like to, say, fall in love, to face the cancer patient eye to eye etc. The phenomenology outstrips the description. However, this is one thing. But to assert, as Cowley seems to, that there is some link from this to meaning is another.

So let's recap. I have suggested that the truth in what Cowley has said amounts to this: ethics can be taught in a dramatic or a legislative way and that sometimes—perhaps more often than not—the philosopher teaches ethics in a legislative way.

Cowley's suggestions

There are a number of issues that I want to highlight before concluding. If Cowley is right then *how* should the dramatic process be implemented? And **who** should facilitate this process? Addressing the latter question Cowley states:

Ideally the facilitators [of the dramatic aspect of ethics] will have clinical experience, of course, but there may not be enough available, and notoriously, some who do volunteer may have strong didactic impulses. But the best facilitators might well be those with theatrical experience. (60)

Let's then see how Cowley address the former question; how do these theatrically experienced facilitators implement the dramatic process?

Cowley has a number of suggestions and I won't look at them all. His first suggestion runs as follows:

'A professional actor would play the patient, students would rotate playing the doctors, and the other students would observe and take notes, and then feed back. The ensuing *discussion* would cover not only communication skills but also ethics. (60. Emphasis mine)

Why can't the philosopher facilitate this? It's not clear to me that a philosopher *qua* philosopher is ruled out of this method.² Moreover, what is clear from this quotation is the central *role of discussion*. Now, it seems to me that this must be guided by the legislative.

Cowley's second suggestion is where:

...students could bring 'baggage' to unload in confidence among a small group of their peers, in the presence of two clinicians. The clinicians would *not be there to teach at all*, merely to help the students *articulate* their concerns....(61. Emphasis mine)

First, as Cowley says, this isn't about teaching, so it seems out of place in an article about teaching medical ethics. Second, again it is unclear what is stopping the philosopher *qua* philosopher being involved in this? Third, presumably when Cowley talks about 'articulating their concerns' this would be about finding the appropriate language, the right focus, and the right emphasis. Sounds like the legislative process is required.

It is worth picking up on one more of the suggestions. Under the title 'A central place for theology' Cowley writes:

² Oddly enough Cowley does state that the philosopher may be able to teach ethics via the dramatic process (60). But then if this is the case I am at even more of a loss as to what point Cowley is trying to make.

...the most sophisticated account of the *meaning* of suffering and death have been offered by the major world religions. At the very least, medical students should know something of these accounts in order to understand something of their patients religious beliefs. (61)

Why can't the philosopher teach this? Why is it relevant in medical ethics? Moreover, what Cowley is saying is that to understand the patient as a religious being we need to think in the classroom about the meaning of death presented by the world religions. This is, of course, legislative. Moreover, it seems like a good case where the students could come to understand what they are learning without actually being faced with issues.

The point I want to end with is rather more positive. After reading Cowley's analysis of the philosopher's disadvantage in teaching ethics, we may be left wondering what the philosopher actually teaches in terms of skills. What are the primary skills the philosopher teaches? Well strangely one of the most helpful accounts I've read about this comes from Cowley himself in an online article '*Cultivating transferable skills in philosophy undergraduates*.'³ He says that what a student learns from studying philosophy include: *problem solving, analysis of problems, justification of arguments, communication, practical judgements and wisdom*.⁴ I think this is spot on. So the philosopher teaching medical ethics would presumably be a very good starting point for any medic wanting to be able to problem solve, analyze, justify arguments, communicate and make practical wise decisions. The transferable skills the philosopher can teach are essential for ethics in practice. In his online article Cowley says it best:

In smaller doses, however, *I believe a philosophical training can provide the best sort of education and the best package of transferable skills a state's money can buy*. True, a philosopher might not be able to follow the intricacies of international politics or of the dot.com revolution like her more learned fellow-graduates in politics, finance and computer science. But, once the details of this or that problem

³ <http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/philosophy/articles/cowley/index.html> (accessed 28/11/06).

⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 2.

are acquired independently of any systematic training, it will be the *philosophically-developed* skills that allow her best to deal with such a problem—to her own and to society's overall benefit.⁵

It seems then that the suggestions that Cowley present are methods that are perfectly open to the philosopher to teach, and moreover with the skills highlighted, something that the philosopher probably *should* be encouraged to teach.

Conclusion

Christopher Cowley claims that 'Philosophers Should Not Teach Medical Ethics'. I have argued that Cowley is mistaken. It seems that on the most charitable interpretation, what Cowley wants to maintain is that philosophers *qua* philosophers are forced to teach in a traditional didactic style, a style that is ill equipped to train medical students for the ethically overwhelming jobs they will have to do. It seems to me that that the traditional style is a necessary but not sufficient method of teaching in medical ethics. I disagree that there is something about the discipline of philosophy which restricts it to the traditional style. In fact, using Cowley's own research, I suggest that the transferable skills that the philosopher can impart are taught via both the 'passive' and 'interactive' form of learning. Cowley is wrong. Philosophers should teach medical ethics, they are better equipped than most—they just need to do a good job of it.

⁵ *Ibid.*

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