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Thinking through religious education: Haslingden High School

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Brief description

This example shows how religious education (RE) at Haslingden High School encourages students to think critically about a wide range of religious, ethical and philosophical questions. In doing this it demonstrates how many of the challenges facing RE reported in the 2013 Ofsted report *Religious education: realising the potential* can be addressed successfully.

Overview – the school's message

'At Haslingden High School we are passionate about our students developing into caring, confident, successful adults. This means not only striving for the highest standards of academic success for all our students and equipping them with the key skills for further learning and the world of work, but also providing them with the opportunities to formulate their own sets of values and beliefs about the world we live in. RE plays a key role in securing all the above.'

Ben Wood, Head of RE

'As part of a proudly comprehensive school, the RE department aims to ensure that all students are taught to the highest standards and given the opportunities to think deeply about the topics and issues studied in the subject. The department makes a significant contribution to the education of our students, both in terms of high levels of attainment and progress, but also in promoting a range of important skills. RE requires students to develop an enquiring, critical mind in response to the world around them and the many complex issues they will face as members of our society. Consequently, the students at our school value RE highly as a key part of their learning.'

Mark Jackson, Headteacher

The good practice in detail

RE at Haslingden High School is an excellent example of the way the subject can make a contribution to students' lives that is both intellectually challenging and personally enriching. All students at the school take the full course in GCSE where results are impressive, and there is strong recruitment at A level. One particular success is that there is little difference in attainment between boys and girls.

What do students at Haslingden say about RE?

When asked to explain the popularity of RE, students themselves articulated the following:

- The questions posed in RE really challenge how they think; they are often 'mind-boggling'. They know that they will have something fresh to discuss. RE often gets their brain working and changes the way they look at the world.
- They are given the opportunity to get inside issues and discuss things properly. The teachers keep issues open and provide students with the time to think for themselves.
- In RE they don't just find out about different beliefs, they get 'in the religion' and see how religions have a real impact on people's lives. It helps them understand about differences and make up their own minds.
- RE relates to their lives and deals with issues that affect them; they describe how it is a 'realistic' subject which often presents them with some of the harsh realities of life.
- RE builds skills that they can use in other subjects: the ability to debate and discuss, to develop informed opinions and to present arguments.
- The subject is taught well. Teachers are patient and spend time explaining things carefully; they get the students actively involved in discussion.

What makes RE successful at Haslingden?

Ben Wood, Head of RE, identifies the three key factors that make RE strong:

- complexity and challenge in teaching and learning
- coherence and continuity in curriculum planning
- strong leadership.

Complexity and challenge in teaching and learning

Ben explains how the subject has created a culture of 'building mastery of the subject' by challenging students to engage with the complexity of the world of religion, ethics and philosophy.

Teachers pose increasingly complex questions, giving time for the students to digest and grapple with ideas. Emphasis is placed on ensuring that the higher order questions which underlie each topic are made clear. For example:

A GCSE unit on vivisection

- Before they start to grapple with the obvious ethical issues, the students use a number of controversial statements to consider the more complex philosophical and theological questions about the relative value of human versus animal life.
- They consider what they already know about aspects of Christian theology might relate to those questions.
- Students quickly relate the topic back to other topics such as abortion which raise similar issues.
- The students already see that any ethical decisions will reflect broader assumptions being made about life and that there is no easy answer.
- From the start, students are beginning to build arguments using a range of sources; arguments that they will challenge, refine and develop over the course of the unit.

The 2013 Ofsted report *Religious education: realising the potential* notes that teaching in many GCSE lessons 'placed too much emphasis on ways of passing the examination rather than focusing on extending pupils' learning about religion and belief'. Ben ensures that RE goes beyond the limitations of the examination specifications so that students explore the complexity of religion and belief. For example:

Year 10 work in response to the classic design argument for the existence of God

- Students analyse quotes from thinkers such as Hume and Dawkins.
- They then apply them to the argument at hand.
- The teacher's questioning helps students grasp these ideas and develop their understanding.

Crucially, the approach adopted emphasises the 'study of religion(s)' as the means by which students look more deeply into philosophical and ethical issues. For example:

GCSE unit on 'The end of life'

- Hinduism is studied as the means to extend students' understanding of this philosophical topic.
- The study of 'religious perspectives' is not an 'add-on' but lies at the heart of each topic.
- Religious material is used as the stimulus to go deeper into a topic, to appreciate its complexity and explore questions that might not be immediately obvious.

RE is about posing increasingly challenging questions, giving time for the students to allow the complexity of issues to develop. Throughout there is a focus on developing what Ben refers to as 'epistemological coherence'. Students are encouraged throughout to work with a range of ideas and apply these to their own thinking. Through this process they see connections between ideas and develop greater depth in their arguments. Students learn that, while they are entitled to their own opinions, those views need to be well supported, have coherence and reflect their own understanding of the complexity of the issues.

Lessons are planned to support this increasing challenge and complexity. For example:

Year 8 study of the 'Big Story in the Bible'

- This is designed to help the students to extend their factual knowledge about different biblical stories and see how some of the underlying theological complexity of Christian belief is expressed through the text.
- Similarly at A level a unit of Religion in Contemporary Society enables students to revisit previous learning to understand more complex issues about the place of religion in the modern world.

The approach to homework in Years 7 and 8, which follows the wider school policy, echoes the focus on challenge. Students work through homework booklets that extend and enrich the curriculum. Ben explains: 'The department is very positive about what can be achieved by students in the homework booklets. Each booklet is designed to offer an extension to what is studied in the classroom, offering some links to work in school, but often exploring topics and issues which we do not have time to cover. The booklets themselves follow a similar pattern. They are focused around a key question which forms the basis for the final essay. First, students are given a range of research and thinking tasks in order to prepare them for the final task, which will ask students to explain a variety of views and offer their own conclusion.'

For example:

Year 7

- Religion in Rossendale
- [What is pilgrimage?](#)
- Religion in Japan

Year 8

- What is the 'Wheel of life'?
- Can we end suffering?
- Should the 'Ground Zero' mosque be built?

Coherence and continuity in curriculum planning

Ben also identifies the importance of a coherent curriculum. The locally agreed Lancashire syllabus with its emphasis on 'fields of enquiry' has proved a good basis for developing that coherence. The statutory RE curriculum from Years 7 to 11 is planned as a whole to ensure that there is genuine continuity and progression in students' learning; the [2013/14 curriculum plan for RE](#) illustrates this.



The intentions behind the choice of content are securing a broad and balanced approach to the study of religion and belief, and providing a good basis for work at GCSE. Work on individual religions is structured not just around extending their factual knowledge but around developing greater mastery of some of the key concepts and questions at the heart of the subject.

At Key Stage 3 the approach adopted provides for the development of the 'ways of thinking and questioning' that will become the heart of learning at GCSE. It is based around three key concepts and questions:

- Where do we belong? (Year 7)
- Where can we find guidance? (Year 8)
- How can humans seek the truth and find meaning in life?

The success of this approach is reflected in the students' comments that in RE, 'we don't just find out about different beliefs we get **in** the religion'.

Much of the 'content' at Key Stage 3 is selected and sequenced, in part, to provide a basis for work at GCSE. For example:

- The units on Bible (Year 8) and Jesus (Year 9) are chosen to provide students with the theological grasp of key Christian ideas and beliefs which is needed when applying religious perspectives to ethical and philosophical issues. There is a similar rationale behind the focus on Islam at Key Stage 3.
- The Year 9 unit 'How do we make ethical decisions?' is intended to provide a broad understanding of the notion of ethical thinking before the students start to tackle individual moral issues. It includes a focus on how different religious communities go about forming moral judgements – the students study diversity within Judaism and how this affects decisions about such things as diet and dress.

Careful decisions have also been made about the ordering of content at GCSE:

- The more philosophical topics such as 'The end of life', 'Beliefs about deity' and 'Religion and science' come early. These enable students to grasp concepts about the nature of God and the interpretation of scripture which underpin the later ethical and social issues.
- Units on more social topics such as 'War and peace' and 'Poverty and wealth' come in Year 10, leaving issues around medical ethics to Year 11 when students have the maturity of experience and expertise to deal with arguments about the more personal aspects of the learning.
- Starting with philosophical units that the school has found that boys particularly enjoy contributes to the good level of engagement from boys.

Strong leadership

Lying behind the success of RE at Haslingden is strong subject leadership at all levels. The subject has the active support of the senior leadership team. Mark Jackson, the Headteacher, is clear that RE makes an impressive contribution to the wider life of the school. As well as being intellectually challenging, RE supports the wider development of students' attitudes and outlook. So it is worth giving it the time and resources to ensure that it is valued by students. As he says: 'if RE is worth doing, it is worth doing well'.

The commitment to RE is reflected in the overall provision made for the subject:

- There are six members of staff with expertise in RE, five of whom are core members of the teaching team.
- A number of the RE staff have senior roles in the school.
- The subject benefits strongly from the wider context of the humanities faculty where there is much informal sharing of good practice across subjects including, for example, Kagan approaches to learning in the history team.

All students take the OCR full course at GCSE and two periods a week (100 minutes in total) are allocated to RE throughout Years 9–11. The subject is well-resourced with an emphasis on producing [high-quality challenging learning materials](#).

Jude Ramsdale, the senior leader with responsibility for teaching and learning is clear that RE represents 'good practice' in the school with strengths in different approaches to teaching and learning including the use of cooperative learning, effective questioning and high-quality assessment. The department is innovative, hosting new research and development work such as the 'flipped classroom' and using YouTube to support assessment. As a result, RE often takes the lead in whole-school professional development, providing sessions on topics such as higher order thinking skills and effective subject leadership.

The department encourages teachers to use a variety of approaches to learning, echoing one of the themes in the [Ofsted Annual Report 2012/13](#) that there is no set Ofsted view about 'a good lesson'. While there is a clear shared view about the purpose and aims of the subject within the department, each of the teachers is encouraged to adopt their own ways of teaching that achieve the best outcomes for their students.

Where does RE at Haslingden High go from here?

Ben is under no illusion that RE is the 'finished' product. As he says: 'we are constantly reviewing our work within the context of our overall philosophy and aims for RE. We try to keep that statement of aims brief and straightforward'. The department handbook states:

In RE at Haslingden we are aiming:

- to encourage students to critically consider many important philosophical and ethical questions, using religious teaching and attitudes as a means by which these questions can be thought through in depth
- to provide students with a valuable understanding of religious teaching and the role of religion in the world, both historically and now
- to encourage independence in thought and action.

We take an academic, theological and philosophical approach to RE. We pride ourselves on the academic nature of the courses we provide that seek to inform students of the theology at the heart of religion while promoting the use of philosophical questions in response to this theology. Students undertake an in-depth study of the teachings and attitudes of religions and then consider and express their own views in the light of this study.

The priorities for the further development of the subject are:

- to look again at the Year 7 curriculum to explore how best to ensure that it provides a coherent starting point for the students
- to look more closely at the idea of 'religious literacy' and ensure that the curriculum reflects wider aspects of what it means to 'be religious' – the department recognises the dangers of reducing religion to its philosophical and ethical aspects, neglecting its more spiritual, experiential and sacred dimensions
- to extend further the level of challenge for the most able enabling them to apply the questions and concepts they have studied into other subject areas.

The school's background

[Haslingden High School](#) is located in Rossendale, Lancashire. The school places great value on an education in its widest sense and all students, including those in the sixth form, are given a wide range of experiences to promote their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, which has been recognised as an outstanding aspect of the school's work.

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The case studies do not recommend a single particular approach to teaching and learning. Ofsted has no preferred lesson structure or teaching style. We showcase and share a wide range of approaches that providers have found work well for them in achieving good outcomes for children, young people and learners.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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