Discourse

Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies

Discourse:
Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies

Discourse:

Contents

Editorial—the Future of Philosophical and Religious Studies

Dr Clare Saunders
Senior Academic Co-ordinator,
Subject Centre for Philosophical
and Religious Studies

The past few months have been eventful ones in UK higher education, including the publication of both the long-awaited Government White Paper, and the assessment framework for the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework—the latter for the first time including an assessment of 'research impact… including on [higher education] teaching or students…'. Such developments will doubtless wield significant influence over 'the higher education experience' in the coming months and years.

Perhaps partly in response to these changes, the current issue of *Discourse* contains a number of articles reflecting critically on the nature of our disciplines. A collection of papers arising from the Subject Centre's January 2011 workshop on 'Teaching Religions of South Asian Origins' (Beckerlegge; Robinson & Cush; Salter; Takhar & Jacobs; Webster—see Russell for a helpful overview) explore the contested nature of boundaries, both between religions and disciplines, and the role of uncertainty in students' learning—themes that are also implicit in Bullivant's analysis of atheism and non-religion in the Religious Studies curriculum.

Other papers in this edition interrogate the notion of 'academic community' and explore how collaborative learning can be fostered in philosophy and theology curricula, whether in the classroom or online (Danka & Saatsi; Larvor, Lippitt & Weston; Williams). The issue also includes a number of papers which explicitly address the challenges currently facing our disciplines (with a focus on philosophy)—encompassing critical analyses of the role of philosophy in education, from the winner of the Subject Centre's 2011 student essay competition (Hancocks) and a

teacher of philosophy in schools (Harvey); plus a survey of the health of the discipline in newer universities (Addis). Other topics include fostering students' disciplinary skills in reading (Smith), and source criticism and research (Sumner).

Finally, a few words about the Subject Centre. It is with great sadness that we report the untimely death of our colleague Gabriel (Gaby) Vanhegan (1979-2011). Gaby was both an extremely talented 'techie', and an unfailingly kind and supportive colleague and friend—he is greatly missed.

As we enter 2011/12 the Subject Centre enters its 'transition period' in preparation for the handover of discipline-level support to the new Higher Education Academy (HEA) structure. The end of 2010/11 saw several colleagues leave the Subject Centre—Gary Bunt, Richard Gunn, Danielle Lamb, Amy Russell and Emma Tsoneva have collectively contributed over twenty years' invaluable experience to the Subject Centre, and many readers will have benefited directly from their expertise.

In 2011/12 the Subject Centre will continue to publish *Discourse*; run events such as our popular 'Aspiring Academics' workshop; and offer support for individual academics and departments. We will also continue to work closely with all of you, and with the HEA, to ensure continuity of support for our disciplines in the future.

With best wishes for the new academic year, Clare.

clare@prs.heacademy.ac.uk

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.

As of the end of the academic year 2010-2011, the Subject Centres no longer receive core funding from the central Higher Education Academy and most have closed, or will soon be closing, with activities being moved to the central HEA.

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

Supporting teachers and learners in Philosophical and Religious Studies in higher education across the UK.

Strategic Aims

- To identify, develop and disseminate appropriate enhancements in higher education practice.
- To actively support, encourage and participate in the sharing of relevant, diverse and effective practice and research.
- To support individuals and departments in enabling and managing change; and promote their needs and strengths through that change.
- To provide and develop an accessible and flexible repository of relevant knowledge, resources and expertise that adds value to student learning.
- To work effectively and collaboratively across the Higher Education Academy and the sector to add value to our activities.

Visit our website at **http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk**
or contact us directly:
Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies
Department of Theology and Religious Studies
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT
Tel: 0113 343 4184 Email: **enquiries@prs.heacademy.ac.uk**

'Origins' and 'Boundaries' in Teaching Religions of South Asian Origin

Amy Russell

Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies
University of Leeds

The five papers that follow in this section of *Discourse* are all the products of a conference organised by the Subject Centre for PRS held on the 13th January 2011.[1] The conference was titled 'Teaching Religions of South Asian Origin' in a deliberate twofold attempt; first, to capture a distinct group of discipline experts in HE; and second, to provoke a discussion about the usefulness of terms like 'origins' and the current curriculum preferences for teaching distinct modules based on one religion, or in contrast, teaching courses on 'world religions' or 'religions of South Asia'—each, featuring a week or two on each religion. This mode of teaching creates boundaries in

students' perceptions of where each religion begins and ends. This conference was designed to question the usefulness of those boundaries and what we can do in our teaching practice to destabilize them. These issues of 'academic 'colonialism' and 'pedagogical orientalism' (see Takhar and Jacobs, this edition) are raised in each paper, making us, as academics, question the ways in which we represent these traditions not only in our teaching but also in our curriculum design. Do we perpetuate false distinctions between religions? Do we allow students to gain easy answers so that as assessment approaches they feel comfortable that they have 'got' what Buddhism (for example) is and is not? Do we utilize confusion and discomfort as learning tools, knowing they produce a greater depth of knowledge, even if they may turn out not to have been well received when our feedback sheets are returned? These are questions each paper in turn engages with and makes suggestions toward. However, ultimately it is up to those of us who teach in religion to create an environment where concepts can be challenged and confusion can be used to bring further understanding.

The papers in this volume report multiple responses to these issues. Cush and Robinson's article, based on their keynote for the event, argues fieldwork can compel students to trouble the idea of 'British religions' and question whether the concept of 'diaspora religions' is useful and/or detrimental to understanding the place of religions in British society, especially those religions that are not perceived as having 'British' origins. The mere mention of origins in this context will immediately provoke unease in the reader, thus demonstrating how very important it is to question such concepts that imply a historically and territorially based understanding of religion—clearly this is a way of thinking that must be destabilised in order that students may understand lived religion.

Takhar and Jacobs suggest that confusion can be an excellent learning tool. While students may feel baffled or uneasy about not being able to place a tradition or locate an experience within a tradition this unease creates a vital kind of knowledge that stays with them far longer than information that is classified quickly and immediately put to the back of their minds. To do this, they argue, field trips should be

---

[1] Please see the Subject Centre's website for abstracts and presentations:
http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/477

challenging. Rather than teaching them what to expect at a place of worship and then taking them there to confirm their expectations, they equip students to recognise symbols and practices from different religions and then take them to spaces that amalgamate these symbols and defy easy classification. Rather than a critique of Cush and Robinson's use of fieldwork Takhar and Jacobs demonstrate how fieldwork can be used for multiple purposes and achieve multiple objectives. By physically displacing them from the learning environment they are also conceptually displaced as they encounter religious practices that defy simple classification. Sometimes we cannot predict what students will take away from these experiences but the evidence provided by Takhar and Jacobs suggests that students' reactions to physically being in these places provoke an embodied pedagogy that begins a process of boundary deconstruction through experience.

Webster's comment piece also engages with confusion and sees it as a fruitful place that he must lead students to because of the comfortable preconceptions they hold. Rather than teaching through confusion, he seeks to teach away from certainty and presumption. He explores the way Buddhism is taught and provides a challenging critique of its lack of problematization in contrast to Hinduism. He argues that students bring to Buddhism lectures and seminars a variety of cultural references that often shape their perceptions of Buddhism and remain unchallenged throughout their learning. He suggest this is often particular to Buddhism as it is seen as a 'non-threatening' religion, and that this disguises an inherent misconception of Buddhism's nature and the orientalist tendencies that go unrecognised. Certainly in our teaching we may often challenge the orientalist assumptions that certain religions are traditional, static or cruel; we are often less likely to devote time to correct assumptions of benevolence, or happiness/positivity.

Salter's paper illustrates a point that was raised very recently by Shaunaka Rishi Das, who argued that Hinduism should not be taught in isolation to philosophy as this is an artificial, European academic division of disciplines.[2] Once again this returns us to the suggestion that the disciplinary boundaries in place in our teaching are forms of

---

[2] Plenary Panel on Religion, Empowerment and Education at Empowerment and the Sacred, 24th June 2011, University of Leeds.

'academic orientalism.' To respond to this issue Salter suggests teaching about Vedic society can be done through *Purusa Sukta*, one of the later hymns of the *Rig Veda*. She argues that introducing *Purusa Sukta* through discussion of creation 'myths' and theories of ritual can be a way to engage students with method and theory and also to lead them from an unfamiliar text to an understanding of more familiar concepts. This stops them forming an opinion that could be seen as 'Hindus think this' and instead leads them to think of *Purusa Sukta* in more nuanced and complex terms, as a text that can widen their understanding of religion and philosophy.

Beckerlegge adds a further dimension to this debate. He explains the specific demands of teaching at the Open University in the current economic climate. How does one lead students through confusion if you are not in regular contact with them? How can fieldwork be possible with a cohort of over 500? He gives a practical overview of how these issues and challenges are borne out in different institutions with very different demands on teaching. Both Salter and Beckerlegge approach the issue of methodology and how to incorporate this into teaching rather than locating it in distinct methods modules. They argue this incorporation gives students the tools to approach other religions, helping them think across religions. Sixty credit OU modules allow the boundaries between religions to be blurred as these larger modules include teaching on several different religions. Bespoke films and other visual resources take students on 'virtual field trips' to places of worship yet they also enable comparisons to be drawn quickly between traditions they are associated with (through ideas of 'origins') in comparison with how they are practiced in other locations.

From this summary it is clear that dividing religions by their 'origins' is simultaneously useful and inherently problematic. Although we can use the concept of origins to group religions only to go on to blur the boundaries between them, rather than teaching them as discrete traditions; the idea of 'origins' still presents a linear and territorial conception of the development of some religions that reinforces assumptions about them. To explore 'origins' when looking at south Asia is often to neglect Islam, yet it is totally unreasonable to portray the religions of south Asia without Islam. This is why the Special Interest Group that has been launched as a result of this event has called itself 'Teaching Across Religions of South Asia', to emphasise the blurring

of boundaries.[3]

'Origins' as a starting point must be questioned, as Cush and Robinson argue, as they tie a religion to a territory, which is why the idea of diaspora religion must be interrogated. Once 'diaspora religions' as a concept is troubled we can help students move on to a place where they question their own conceptions about what a 'British religion' is. How we teach the boundaries of lived religion increases in complexity when origins are shown to be just one lens through which religion may be conceptualised. John Zavos and Jacqueline Suthren Hirst demonstrated their conception of 'Twisting the Wrist',[4] a multi-perspective approach to the study of religion at our event. Through this method each perspective is examined and layers of analysis are integrated into understanding—to the point that students may begin to realise that definitional boundaries are never neutral and that categories simultaneously exclude and include. What is seen as the 'real' religion or the 'truth' about a religion immediately excludes all other ways of thinking and experiencing that religion, often marginalising identities already on the periphery. Indeed, by troubling such categorizations we can endeavour to take the students we teach to a space where they may even begin to question if such boundaries are useful at all.

---

[3] This group has been initially funded by the Subject Centre and is being organised and run by Opinderjit Kaur Takhar, University of Wolverhampton, David Webster, University of Gloucestershire and John Zavos and Jacqueline Suthren Hirst, University of Manchester. Please contact the Subject Centre or the organisers for more information.

[4] See their forthcoming book; *Religious Traditions in Modern South Asia*, (Routledge, 2011).

When the Twain Meet:

Redefining 'British' Religions through Student Encounters with Religious Communities

Catherine Robinson and Denise Cush

Study of Religions/Philosophy and Ethics
Bath Spa University

Introduction

Religions of South Asian origin—by which we mean mostly the traditions of Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs, but also more rarely Jains (but not the traditions of Muslims and Christians on the grounds that Islam and Christianity, though South Asian religions, originated elsewhere)—may be encountered by undergraduate students within a variety of disciplines. Indeed, until the 1960s, it would be more likely for this to occur within 'departments of history, anthropol-

ogy, classics … and the like' (Sharpe, 2005:31) rather than theology, and may still today be found in such departments, with the addition of 'area studies' such as 'South Asian Studies'. Our argument is that to study Sikhism, Hinduism or Buddhism need not mean a sole focus on South Asia (and, in the case of Buddhism, East Asia) or even assuming a South Asian model or standard. Students can come to appreciate these religions as global phenomena rather than as only or definitively South Asian and, in so doing, have the opportunity to reflect upon the changing nature and values of their own society. Accordingly, our contention is that these religions need to be considered in their British context as 'British religions.'

The teaching of Religions of South Asian Origins in British universities

The academic study of religion, and of religions of South Asian origin in particular, in our current understanding of the words 'study' and 'religion', may be said to have begun in the second half of the nineteenth century when projects such as Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East* and T.W. Rhys David's Pali Text Society made the raw materials available. The University of Manchester made a pioneering move in 1904 by establishing a Department of Theology which included 'comparative religion' as a compulsory part of study. Rhys Davids was the first professor of comparative religion in this university (Sharpe, 1975:131-133). However, not until the 1960s was the study of religions able to establish itself as a discipline separate from both theology and the other subject areas within which the study of religions could be found. The (then) new University of Lancaster's department of religious studies, founded in 1967, was the first of several departments which either adopted non-confessional, multi-faith study of religions as their main task, or added an increasing variety of traditions and methods of study to existing Theology Departments.

There have been several suggestions as to why this occurred in the late 1960s, including increasing secularisation and disaffection from the traditional forms of Christianity, alongside immigration and increasing awareness of plurality (cf. Jackson, 2004: 1-5). There was also the general liberalisation of society reflected in gradually changing

views of sexuality and the role of women, in addition to changes in liberal Protestant theology which had for some time been arguing that divine revelation might not be confined to Christianity but might be found in all the world's traditions (cf. Bates, 1994 and 1996). Eric Sharpe (2005:39) points out the importance of the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) within the Roman Catholic Church and its new openness to dialogue with other religious traditions. As someone who lived through it, the elder of the two authors would argue for the importance of the revolutionary youth culture of the late 1960s and 1970s. Even those who were unable to follow the Beatles on the 'hippy trail' to India encountered the ideas and imagery of South Asian religions in particular, through music and popular culture. An obvious example is George Harrison's hit with 'My Sweet Lord', which brought the name of Krishna even to areas of Britain where it was unlikely that young people would meet Hindus. Hindu deities, Buddhist meditation, Sufi mystics and Sikh-derived new religious movements became part of youth culture from the late 1960s into the 1970s, or at least among the more 'alternative' sector (cf. Saunders, 1975). In schools and universities, students were asking their teachers why they were not studying these more appealing religions, a demand that was gradually met by the efforts of groups such as the SHAP Working Party for World Religions in Education, established in 1969, a year that also saw the start of non-confessional, multi-faith religious education in schools in Sweden. The point to note here is that the changes in the ways in which religions were studied, and which religions were studied, were not just imposed 'top-down' on the supply side by academics and educationalists, but actively sought from the 'bottom-up' demand side—by young people who wanted to explore a wider world of beliefs and lifestyles; especially those of South Asian origin.

Over the last four decades, the study of religions in Britain has not stood still. Among major influences have been feminism and other liberationist approaches, which have criticised the patriarchal and elitist forms of the study of religions, including claims to academic objectivity. Impacting particularly on the study of South Asian religions have been the critiques of 'orientalist' approaches and the greater awareness of the 'construction' of traditions by scholarship, so that the scholar finds it difficult to use the terms 'Hinduism', 'Buddhism' and 'Sikhism' without adding inverted commas. In addition, the study of

newer religious movements, paganism and other forms of alternative spirituality have taken up part of the time that might previously have been spent on religions of South Asian origin, and have to some extent played the role in 'alternative' youth culture taken by religions of South Asian origin two generations earlier. However, the theosophical roots of 'New Age' and the embracing of Hinduism in particular by Pagan protagonists (cf. York, 2003) have ensured that the religions of South Asian origin have not lost their currency. And of course, the innovations in communications technology have made it much easier to access a wide variety of sources of information.

Moving to the present, we confined our research to; undergraduate courses in the discipline called Theology and Religious Studies in British universities; the analysis of the 2008 AUDTRS Handbook; personal contacts updating this information; and a search of university websites. These searches reveal 27 universities offering units in Hinduism, 26 universities offering units in Buddhism, 10 mentioning the study of Sikhism, and three offering studies of Jainism, from a total of 37 universities offering undergraduate degrees in Theology and/or Religious Studies. This may not be entirely accurate as not all universities list all optional modules, and there are vaguer mentions of 'Indian religions'. Nevertheless, it gives a general indication of the prevalence of the study of religions of South Asian origin. Of these, six universities offer the study of Sanskrit and three the study of Pali at undergraduate level, with a few further possibilities at postgraduate level. In addition, some less formal opportunities for language study are offered by tutors as individuals at other universities. The University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies offers a much wider range of South Asian languages.

However, it remains a minority of students who will be studying these traditions via texts in the original languages at undergraduate level. The majority will find themselves studying texts in translation, introductory survey textbooks and more specialised books and articles from scholars from a variety of disciplines, including history and anthropology as well as theology and religious studies, or engaging in first hand fieldwork themselves.

Living Religion Project at Bath Spa University

At Bath Spa University we do study texts in translation and other scholarly sources, but we place a particular emphasis upon an experiential approach whereby students encounter living religion in natural settings. Thanks to 'mini-project' funding from the HEA Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, we have been engaged in a project to explore and enhance the use of fieldwork learning within our subject.

As well as the usual visits to places of worship, including Hindu temples, Sikh gurdwaras and Buddhist centres organised by tutors, all Study of Religions students undertake a compulsory one-week placement in a religious community as a part of a core module on studying religions in the contemporary world. Students act as ethnographers, studying people in their own communities on their own ground, participating in their daily lives as far as possible. Students must select a tradition that features neither in their current personal worldview nor their heritage tradition, in order to encounter something which is genuinely 'other', and also to experience being in a minority—sometimes of one—in a community whose beliefs, values and customs differ from their own. We value such fieldwork because first-hand interaction with adherents helps to remove stereotyped pictures of traditions and also because students have to interact with other human beings and reflect on their own responses to the situation they find themselves in. The students returning from such placements report both that the first hand encounters enable them to achieve understanding that other methods just don't reach, and that they have had a strong experience of 'otherness' while still in Britain. In the words of one recent student 'it was the strangest experience of my life but certainly one of the most interesting'.

Of the 23 communities which we have used recently, 14 are aligned or associated with religions of South Asian origin: 10 are Buddhist, three are Hindu or Hindu-related, and one is Sikh. The Buddhist placements are The Amida Trust (Pure Land and 'engaged' Buddhism), Amaravati and Hartridge monasteries (Theravada, Thai originated Forest Sangha tradition), Throssel Hole Priory (Soto Zen Serene Reflection Meditation tradition), Lam Rim and Jamyang (Gelugpa Tibetan Federation for the Preservation of the Mahayana

Tradition) Samye Ling (Tibetan Karma Kagyu), and Amitabha, Dharmavajra and Manjusri (three centres in the Tibetan New Kadampa Tradition). The Hindu-related placements are Bhaktivedanta Manor (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), Skandavale (The Community of the Many Names of God) and Shekinashram (Vaishnava Hindu). The Sikh Gurdwara is the Sri Guru Singh Sabha, a Khalsa-inspired community. In previous years we have also included placements with the Nichiren Buddhist Soka Gakkai and the Hindu-related Brahma Kumaris.

With the exception of the Sikh gurdwara, it is interesting to note that most of these communities could be viewed as 'New Religious Movements', or at least movements consciously relating the tradition to a Western context, though in most cases also accepted as authentic by most of their co-religionists with ethnic roots in the Asian countries of origin.

Religions of South Asian Origin in diaspora

Religions of South Asian origin or the adherents of such religions are often described as being in diaspora when in Britain. Yet this concept, its meaning and implications, merits more critical scrutiny than it is generally accorded. At its most basic, diaspora is defined as dispersion, deriving from the Greek '*dia*' (through) and '*speirein*' (to sow or scatter) and originating in Deuteronomy 28.25 of the *Septuagint* (Oxford English Dictionary, 2010). Diaspora was used to denote the experience of Jews living outside Israel in the post-exilic period while awaiting God's gathering of the Chosen People and 'his' returning of them to the Promised Land (Bauman, 2000: 317). Diaspora was also used by Christians, whereby it denoted the presence of Christians throughout the world and their proclamation of the Good News to all nations (Bauman, 2000: 319). Subsequently, the meaning of diaspora has continued to change and be applied to an ever-growing variety of phenomena (Tölölyan, 1996: 8).

However, there are perhaps certain general implications of disapora that should be dealt with at the outset. Despite some neutral and even favourable aspects, the implications of diaspora are frequently negative with connotations of loss, misery and oppression. If these

connotations do reflect the tragic sense of diaspora as exile, especially forced exile, they do not represent the full spectrum of diaspora or, indeed, the many possible responses to the attendant risks and opportunities, among which are positive responses such as enterprise and creativity that, in turn, facilitate integration and innovation. Among the other implications of diaspora, at least where non-Western religions are practised in Western settings, is that adaptations to the West are not merely forms of Westernisation but at the same time forms of modernisation. This assumption is reminiscent of Orientalist stereotypes of Western progress and Eastern tradition, ignoring both the combination of continuity and change that characterises acculturation and the multiple trajectories of modernity in a global context in a simplistic equation of the Western and the modern. On this line of interpretation, it is important to approach diaspora without prejudging it as problematic, either because it is informed by adversity or it concedes an age-old heritage.

Notably the role of religion in diaspora has tended to receive rather short shrift (Vertovec, 2000b: 7-8). One reason for this may be that the role of religion in diaspora is a point of contention. In order to consider this, the foregoing account begins with Robin Cohen's views on diaspora, specifically the first edition of his magisterial work, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. In this book, he works with a set of characteristics of diaspora that includes the following: dispersion from the homeland, forced or voluntary; a common awareness of and allegiance to the homeland, often combined with a drive for repatriation; a shared ethnic identity and a feeling of unity with others of the same ethnicity; and tensions with host societies though also the potential for flourishing (Cohen, 1997: 26). Admittedly, this style of definition has been attacked by social constructionists as narrow and inflexible in the attempt to reinterpret and reevaluate the classic reference points of ethnicity and homeland (Cohen, 2008: 8-11). Yet we can set aside to what extent these allegations of essentialism are warranted, because there are areas of agreement insofar as certain features are still foundational to most discourses on diaspora and because there must be some limit to the protean possibilities of the concept (Brubaker, 2005: 3, 5-7), such a model can serve as a springboard for further investigation of religions of South Asian origin. In addition, that Cohen remains hugely influential in the field, acting as editor for the prestigious

Global Diasporas series, and that his prominence has been reflected in the Religious Studies literature, make his views especially relevant to this investigation.

Clearly, Cohen's understanding of diaspora privileges ethnicity and, its corollary, a homeland. This explains why, in the first edition of *Global Diasporas*, he was reticent about religion since most religions are multiethnic in composition and lack the longing for a homeland:

> In general, I would argue that religions can provide additional cement to bind a diasporic consciousness, but they do not constitute diasporas in and of themselves…. On the other hand … spiritual affinity may generate a bond analogous to that of a diaspora. (Cohen, 1997: 189)

The second edition seems to have taken on board some of the criticisms generated by the first edition in this as in other respects. Notwithstanding, Cohen remains reluctant to analyse the relationship between religion and diaspora given the comparative paucity of research on this subject and the close connection between religion and ethnicity (Cohen, 2008: 153).

In complete contrast to Cohen, John Hinnells concentrates on religion and, when reviewing the first edition of *Global Diasporas*, criticises the failure to treat the theme of religion. Substantiating his assertion that religion requires serious and sustained attention, he comments on its importance for diasporic groups evident in their greater observancy post-migration, the centrality of religion to group identity particularly in subsequent generations and the variety of religious reactions to diverse diasporic experiences (Hinnells, 1997: 157). Consistent with this, his approach utilizes what he calls 'diaspora religion':

> '[D]iaspora religion' indicates a religion practised by a minority group, conscious of living in a culturally and religiously different, possibly hostile, environment, away from the old country of the religion. (Hinnells, 1997: 686)

In the course of his argument, Hinnells describes Christianity as a 'diaspora religion' in certain respects even if the feeling for a Holy Land is extremely attenuated (Hinnells, 1997: 686). Yet Britain can be

regarded, albeit with reservations, as a Christian country, just as Pakistan and Bangladesh are Muslim countries, and, consequently, neither Christianity in Britain nor Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh are in diaspora (Hinnells, 1997: 686). It is his stress on minority status that enables him to differentiate between South Asian and Western Muslims, the latter living in an ethnic diaspora, despite the fact that Islam's orientation to Mecca might suggest that South Asian Islam is also diasporic (Hinnells, 1997: 686). Whether this position is theoretically consistent and coherent in its introduction of the minority criterion is questionable (Vertovec, 2000b: 11). More generally,

> this concept of 'diaspora religion' as the religion of a minority community resident in a setting other than the religion's place of origin, does not adequately examine the issue of religion and ethnicity nor fully acknowledge the significance of a homeland, both of which are basic to the debate both in Religious Studies and beyond.

Steven Vertovec agrees with Cohen that adherents of some religions form diasporas on the grounds that membership of these religions is ethnically demarcated and the members have a powerful sense of a homeland (Vertovec, 2000a: 2). Consistent with his view that ethnicity and with it a homeland is the determining factor, he is critical of the extension of diaspora to encompass adherents of other religions:

> It broadens the term far too much to talk—as many scholars do—about the 'Muslim diaspora', 'Catholic diaspora', 'Methodist diaspora' and so forth. These are of course world traditions that span many ethnic groups and nationalities that have been spread by many other means than migration and displacement. (Vertovec, 2000b: 11)

The distinction drawn here is between proselytising religions to which Vertovec regards the concept of diaspora as inapplicable and non-proselytising religions to which the concept is applicable (Vertovec, 2000a: 2).

Drawing upon the work of various Religious Studies scholars, Séan McLoughlin develops Vertovec's thesis in terms of 'ethnic' and 'universal' religions, proposing that diaspora be reserved for 'ethnic' religions:

> 'Ethnic' religions may properly represent 'diasporas'. However, for other, more 'universal' and missionary religions, less obviously tied to particular peoples or places, for example Christianity [and] Islam…, the relationship with ethnicity can be very different. (McLoughlin, 2005: 541)

If this distinction between 'ethnic' and 'universal' religions is accepted, where the former can be labelled diasporic and the latter can not, even though under certain conditions 'ethnic' religions can be universalised and 'universal' religions can be ethnicised (McLoughlin, 2005: 541), then where does this leave religions of South Asian origin and their adherents in Britain?

There are innumerable instances of references to Sikhism/Sikhs, Hinduism/Hindus and Buddhism/Buddhists in diaspora. Even so, the relevance of diaspora still needs to be established with respect to each religion/religious group. Continuing to use the criteria of ethnicity and homeland established above, the case for Sikhism is probably clearest as Cohen compares Sikhs to Jews in their being both an ethnic and religious group wedded to the idea of a homeland (Cohen, 2008: 112, 116). Thus Darshan Singh Tatla's account of the Sikh diaspora discusses the prototypical example of Judaism linking ethnicity and homeland, and demonstrates that Sikhs have a common ethnic identity and an attachment to the Punjab as their homeland expressed in a nationalist movement (Tatla, 1999: 2, 8). It is by analogy with Judaism and Sikhism that Vertovec argues for the existence of a Hindu diaspora, asserting that Hinduism does not try to make converts, but does evince a deep attachment to India as sacred, thereby satisfying the criteria of ethnicity and homeland (Vertovec, 2000a: 2-4). Buddhism is rather different as McLoughlin's bracketing of Buddhism with Christianity and Islam as 'universal' religions indicates (McLoughlin, 2005: 541). After all, Buddhism has expanded through conversion and has not sacralised a specific locality so that Buddhists may be Chinese, Tibetan, Newar, Sinhalese, etc., and do not look to a homeland. If diaspora is of dubious relevance to Buddhism, at least in these terms, the next question that arises is whether it is helpful in understanding Sikhism or Hinduism either. At this point, it is possible to venture an analysis that may be of broader application to other defintions of diaspora.

A spotlight on such religions in diaspora is intended to challenge hegemonic views of religions associated with the old country and

perhaps old times, countering suggestions that religions in diaspora lack authenticity as deviations from South Asian norms, and frequently also from supposed classical forms of centuries past. Such a spotlight also encourages a recognition of the distinctive aspects of specific settings, including Britain, and attendant processes of adaptation and appropriation, thereby underlining the heterogeneity and eclecticism of these religions. Nevertheless, there is a danger that the concept of diaspora reinscribes difference where British and other non-South Asian forms of these religions are treated as distinct from, instead of integral to, their principal manifestations. Another danger is that the concept reinscribes difference from British society in which diasporic status stresses these religions' South Asian origins at the cost of distancing them from their current location. In any event, these religions have a longer history in Britain than is often supposed and therefore stronger claims to Britishness than is often allowed. Certainly, the diverse and dynamic nature of these religions in contemporary Britain includes the ability to make Western converts, thus compromising the part played by ethnicity and hence a homeland, and the rise of new movements, often attractive to if not aimed at Western converts, illustrates how religions of South Asian origin develop outside their original location.

Religions of South Asian Origin in Britain

The Sikh presence in Britain has been traced to the mid-nineteenth century with the arrival of the deposed Maharajah Duleep Singh (Singh & Tatla, 2006: 44). The first gurdwara is dated to 1911 in Putney (Knott, 1997: 758). Encounters with Hinduism occurred as early as the first half of the nineteenth century when Ram Mohan Roy visited Britain to be succeeded by members of the Ramakrishna Mission and the Gaudiya Vaishnava Math during the 1930s (Knott, 1997: 758). However, what is believed to be the first temple was not established until 1967 in Coventry even if many other places of worship have been established in the following decades (Vertovec, 2000a: 97). One of the first Westerners to be ordained as a Buddhist monk was Allan Bennett ordained in Burma in 1902, and the first Buddhist Society in Britain was formed in 1907 to welcome his return in 1908 (Oliver,1979: 43-

45). The Sri Lankan Anagarika Dharmapala, following an earlier visit in the late 1890s as a guest of Edwin Arnold (Oliver, 1979: 65), came to Britain in 1925 and established a small group of Sinhalese monks as the London Buddhist Vihara in 1928. Surely, then, with this century of history, it is not unreasonable to treat Sikhism, Hinduism and Buddhism as British religions?

Before proceeding, it is necessary to note that the terms Sikhism, Hinduism and Buddhism are used here as convenient shorthand for what are understood to be complex and contested realities and not reified entities with impermeable boundaries that can be defined easily in terms of essences and distinguished unambiguously one from another. Besides, just as the notion of religion has been problematised, in part because of its place in the Western history of ideas, so too the notion of Britishness has been disputed, especially in the light of plurality. Indeed, Sikhs, Hindus and Buddhists should be seen as active contributors to shaping British religion while practising their traditions and negotiating their relationships with their fellow citizens.

The profile of Sikhism in contemporary Britain features a small but significant proportion of white Sikhs at just over two per cent of the Sikh population (Singh & Tatla, 2006: 66). In all likelihood these *gora* (white) Sikhs will be associated with the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere founded by a Punjabi Sikh called Harbhajan Singh Puri, better known as Yogi Bhajan, in the United States of America (Takhar, 2003: 158-160). In many respects they are consistent with the Khalsa-inspired orthodoxy that dominates much of modern Sikhism and are resistant to any suggestion that they are very different from other Sikhs. Members of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere present a Khalsa appearance and follow Sikh spiritual and ethical principles (Takhar, 2003: 158, 161-162). However, they hail Yogi Bhajan through whom the Sikh way of life was made accessible to Westerners (Takhar, 2003: 162). Of course, as of yet, members of the Sikh Dharma of the Western Hemisphere constitute a tiny minority of Sikhs alongside a wealth of other groups and movements such as the Namdhari and Nanaksar as well as what might be termed more mainstream worshipping communities. Their importance lies in challenging dominant notions of Sikh identity and its tie with a Punjabi background.

Similarly, Hinduism in contemporary Britain has western members, contentiously in Transcendental Meditation, formed by

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, given its disavowal of its religious roots in favour of an appeal to science (Barrett, 2001: 276) and prominently in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness which was established by Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in New York in 1966 and in London in 1968 (Cole, 2007: 29-30). Both Transcendental Meditation and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness have roots in the counterculture of the 1960s, and indeed the interest shown by the Beatles, initially proving attractive to young people fascinated by Eastern mysticism. Since then they have developed in different directions with Transcendental Meditation approximating more closely to a 'New Age' paradigm and clientèle (Barrett, 2001: 278-280) whereas the International Society for Krishna Consciousness has gained much support from the wider Hindu community and has positioned itself as Hinduism *per se* (Cole, 2007: 48). Again, if in the minority, they have broadened Hinduism's ethnic composition in contrast to a dominant Gujarati profile with, for example, Gujarati-based Swaminarayan and Jalaram Bapa traditions.

Western Buddhists have tended to dominate many of the Buddhist groups in Britain. Robert Bluck (2006:3) identifies the seven largest groups as follows: the Forest Sangha (a Thai Theravada tradition specifically directed towards Westerners); the Serene Reflection Meditation Tradition (a form of Soto Zen started by an American female roshi); Soka Gakkai (a Nichiren Buddhist lay movement originating in Japan but with many British converts); The New Kadampa Tradition (a development of Tibetan Buddhism formed in 1991 by a Tibetan teacher but aimed at a Western following), the Karma Kagyu tradition based at Samye Ling, again with many Western monks, nuns and lay followers although the founders, including the current Abbot, are Tibetan; the Samatha Trust, a Western Theravada lay movement; and finally the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (now renamed the Triratna Buddhist Community to emphasise its worldwide presence), established in 1967 to present Buddhism in a form which made sense in Western culture. Recently, Phra Nicholas Thanissaro, researching Buddhist families of Thai, Nepali and Bengali origins, has argued that since the 1990s there has been 'a significant influx of migrant Buddhists to Britain so that the migrant Buddhist community have now replaced "convert" Buddhists as the majority' (Thanissaro,

2011: 62). Clearly, then, albeit to a greater or lesser extent, each of these religions in Britain is multiethnic in membership, querying the applicability of the concept of diaspora as commonly defined. They are also thriving, and forming new groups and movements, underlining the creative potential inherent in the practice of these religions in the West.

Conclusion

Our argument is that to study Sikhism, Hinduism or Buddhism need not mean a sole focus on South Asia (and, in the case of Buddhism, East Asia) or even assuming a South Asian model or standard (cf. Vertovec, 2000b: 1-2). Further, enriching as it is to travel to the South and East Asian countries where these religions are majority traditions, students unable to do this can have first hand experience of religions of South Asian origin on their own doorstep, in forms that are both authentic and innovative, but perhaps also demystified in their combination of the familiar with the unfamiliar. Moreover, to study Sikhism, Hinduism and Buddhism in the West is to study both these religions and the West (cf. Hinnells, 1997: 682). This is because students can come to appreciate these religions as global phenomena rather than as only or definitively South Asian and, in so doing, have the opportunity to reflect upon the changing nature and values of their own society. Accordingly, our contention is that these religions need to be considered in their British context as British religions with over a hundred years of history behind them and, consequently, that British students need to study them as part of their own heritage rather than as fascinating but remote from their experience in both time and space.

In conclusion, we regard first-hand encounters with religions of South Asian origin in a British context as extremely valuable for students. This is not merely a concession to practicality. On the contrary, it raises questions about the relationship of religion, culture and ethnicity and how far the concept of diaspora assists our understanding of the processes involved. Thus 'the Twain'—East and West—do meet, and they meet in Britain everyday.

Bibliography

Association of University Departments of Theology and Religious Studies AUDTRS Handbook, (Leeds: Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, 2008).

Barrett, D.V., *The New Believers: Sects, 'Cults' and Alternative Religions*, (London: Cassell, 2001).

Bates, D., 'Christianity, Culture and Other Religions (Part 1): The Origins of the Study of World Religions in English Education', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 17 (1), (1994), pp.5-18.

Bates, D.,'Christianity, Culture and Other Religions (Part 2): F.H. Hilliard, Ninian Smart, and the 1988 Education Reform Act', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 18 (2), (1996), pp.85-102.

Bauman, M., 'Diaspora: Genealogies of Semantics and Transcultural Comparison', *Numen*, 47, (2000), pp.313-337.

Bluck, R., *British Buddhism*, (London: Routledge, 2006).

Brubaker, R. 'The "Diaspora" Diaspora.', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28 (1) (2005), pp.1-19.

Cohen, R., *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, (London & New York: Routledge, 1997).

Cohen, R., *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, Second edition (London & New York: Routledge, 2008).

Cole, R.J., (Radha Mohan Das) 'Forty Years of Chanting: A Study of the Hare Krishna Movement from its Foundation to the Present Day,' in Dwyer, G. & Cole, R.J. eds. *The Hare Krishna Movement: Forty Years of Chant and Change*, (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 26-53.

Hinnells, J.R., 'The Study of Diaspora,' in Hinnells, J.R., (ed.) *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, (London: Penguin Books, 1997) pp. 682-689.

Hinnells, J.R., '[Review of] *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. By Robin Cohen', *International Affairs*, 75 (1), (1999) pp.156-157.

Jackson, R., *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality: Issues in Diversity and Pedagogy*, (London: Routledge Falmer, 2004).

Knott, K., 'South Asian Religions in Britain' in Hinnells, J.R. (ed.) *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, (London: Penguin Books, 1997). pp. 756-774.

McLoughlin, S., 'Migration, Diaspora and Transnationalism: Transformations of Religion and Culture in a Globalising Age,' in Hinnells, J.R., (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 525-549.

Oliver, I.P., *Buddhism in Britain*, (London: Rider, 1979).

Oxford English Dictionary, (2010) 'Diaspora.' [Online] available from: **http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/ 52085**.

Saunders, N., *Alternative England and Wales*, (London: Nicholas Saunders, 1975).

Sharpe, E. J., *Comparative Religion, a History*, (London: Duckworth, 1975).

Sharpe, E. J., 'The Study of Religions in Historical Perspective,' in Hinnells, J.R., (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 21-45.

Singh, G. & Tatla, D.S., *Sikhs in Britain: The Making of a Community*, (London & New York: Zed Books, 2006).

Takhar, O.K., *Sikh Identity: An Exploration of Groups among Sikhs*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

Tatla, D.S., *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood*, (London: UCL Press, 1999).

Thanissaro, N., 'A Preliminary Assessment of Buddhism's Contextualisation to the English RE Classroom', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 33 (1), (2011) pp.61-74.

Tölölyan, K., 'Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Movement', *Diaspora*, 5 (1), (1996) pp.3-36.

Vertovec, S., *The Hindu Diaspora: Comparative Patterns*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2000a).

Vertovec, S., 'Religion and Diaspora.' Paper presented at the conference on 'New Landscapes of Religion in the West', School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford, 27-29 September 2000b. [Online] available from: **http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/workingpapers.htm**.

York, M., *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion*, (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

Confusing the Issue:

Field Visits as a Strategy for Deconstructing Religious Boundaries

Opinderjit Kaur Takhar and Stephen Jacobs

School of Law, Social Sciences and Communications
University of Wolverhampton

Introduction

This paper discusses the pedagogical concerns that relate to the fact that the diverse nature of South Asian religious traditions ensures that boundaries between these religions do not necessarily correspond with the clearly delineated ways in which we teach them. We question whether or not the teaching of 'Hinduism' and 'Sikhism' as discrete modules excludes or marginalises particular South Asian traditions in the academy which are already socially, politically and economically marginalised. In other words are we, in the higher education sector,

complicit in perpetuating hegemonic discourses that further exclude already disempowered groups? One strategy we feel that we can adopt in addressing this is through the use of field visits to groups such as the *Ravidassias* and *Ek Niwas*—neither of which fit neatly into the Sikh or Hindu folds (see Takhar, 2005: 115-9 and Jacobs, 2010: 115).

This paper addresses three particular pedagogical issues:

1. The use of field visits as integral to teaching about South Asian Traditions.
2. The concept of confusion, and how confusion can be an important aspect of the learning experience.
3. How to enable students to comprehend the diversity of South Asian traditions and the permeability of boundaries between apparently distinct religious traditions.

The context

We take Religious Studies students to a wide variety of places of worship as part of their learning experience. For the purposes of this paper we will focus on two particular religious places of worship, which directly address the issues outlined above.

The first of these is called *Ek Niwas*, which literally translates as 'One Place'. *Ek Niwas* is the inspiration of Baba Tarlochan Singh Bhoparai, affectionately referred to as Babaji, and a woman referred to as Mataji. It ostensibly falls into the Baba Balaknath Tradition. Baba Balaknath is the Punjabi form of Œiva's son, also known as Murugan, Skanda, Subramaniyan and Kartikeya (see Geaves, 2007). Consequently it would seem to fall clearly within the 'Hindu Tradition'. Begun in 1995, and according to Babaji inspired by a vision of Baba Balaknath, on first glance *Ek Niwas* does appear to be a Hindu place of worship, with images (*murtis*) of Baba Balaknath and deities of the Œaivite traditions installed against the backdrop of fibreglass mountains and artificial waterfalls.

However, a man who appears to be a *khalsa*[1] Sikh, who is the husband of Mataji, greets us at the door. *Kirtan* on a Tuesday evening

---

[1] A Sikh who is formally initiated and bears the *pañj kakke*, commonly called the 5 Ks namely: a wooden comb (*kangha*), a steel bracelet (*kara*), undershorts (*kachh*), uncut hair (*kes*) and a sword or dagger (*kirpan*).

or Saturday also sees many apparent Sikhs in attendance. Babaji identifies himself as a Sikh by birth. A closer look at the abundant and colourful iconography at *Ek Niwas* reveals images and symbols more commonly equated with Sikhism. There are, for example, large pictures of Guru Gobind Singh and Baba Deep Singh on one wall. Babaji did have a Guru Granth Sahib installed in a small room up a short flight of stairs. However, because of tension with some Sikhs from a nearby Gurdwara he uninstalled the Guru Granth Sahib.[2] Nonetheless, there is still the raised platform (*mañji sahib*) and canopy (*palki*) traditionally used for the installation of the Guru Granth Sahib, which are obviously signifiers of the Sikh tradition. As Geaves (1999: 38) observes, *Ek Niwas* reflects the religious life of the Punjab which is frequently characterised by 'the eclecticism of overlapping folk traditions where the borders of Hinduism, Sikhism and even Islam are considerably blurred'.

The *Ravidassias* are the followers of Guru Ravidass, whose forty-one hymns are found in the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib. The majority, if not all, of *Ravidassias* are from the *chamar zat* (caste). Traditionally, the *chamars* were assigned the occupation of working with the *chumuri* (the hide of animals), hence the term *chamar* (literally 'leather-workers') and thus positioned in the 'untouchable' or *achut* strata of Indian society. As a result of the egalitarian outlook of the Sikh Gurus, masses of *chamars* (along with *chuhras*[3]) adopted the Sikh faith in an endeavour to leave behind the stigma of Untouchability. However, the lower caste position assigned to the Dalits remained upon their adoption of Sikhism. They were represented as different from the higher caste Sikhs through labelling them as 'Mazhabi Sikhs' and 'Adivasi Sikhs'.

Dalit consciousness, especially with the efforts of movements such as *Ad Dharm,* promoted a distinct identity amongst the lower castes as followers of Guru Ravidass. Events in Vienna in 2009 with the assassination of an influential Ravidassia Sant caused uproar

---

[2] Many Sikhs objected to the *Guru Granth Sahib* being installed in a place of worship in which images from other religious traditions are installed.

[3] This caste were traditionally known as the 'sweepers'. They prefer to be referred to as the *Valmikis* since both the terms *chamar* and *chuhra* tend to be used derogatorily by non-Dalit Sikhs and Hindus. For further details about the *Valmiki* community see Takhar (2005: 124-57).

between Sikhs and the followers of Guru Ravidass (see Takhar, 2011). In January 2010, the 'Ravidassia' religion was proclaimed and all *Ravidassias* are encouraged to record their religion as 'Other' in the forthcoming UK Census. Further tension has been caused as a result of many *Ravidassia Sabhas* across the globe having removed their copies of the Guru Granth Sahib in favour of Amritbani Sri Guru Ravidass (see Takhar, 2011). This contains the writings of Guru Ravidass alone, taken from the Guru Granth Sahib and other texts such as the Pac-Vani. Interestingly however, there are currently no cases of any *Ravidassia Sabhas* having done this in the United Kingdom. It is a question of when rather than if all Sabhas will install the Amritbani Sri Guru Ravidass as the only scripture to be housed in a Ravidassia place of worship.

Field visits and pedagogy

Field visits are integral to learning and teaching Religious Studies at Wolverhampton. It is important that students both hear the insider's perspective and experience the sacred space of particular religious traditions. It is important that students understand that religions are vibrant and lived experiences, and not simply phenomena that have been superseded by the processes of modernity, secularism and confined to dusty tomes. The lived reality of people's religious lives can appear to be 'messy, paradoxical and chaotic (Chryssides and Geaves, 2007: 241) in comparison to the necessarily overly neat presentations of these traditions in the classroom.

Students evaluate the extensive use of field visits in Religious Studies very positively:

> Field visits are an essential component in the study of religion.

> Coming on the visits I have got to see first hand, not just reading from the books. I feel that I have a better understanding now.

The use of field visits is firmly founded in an experiential learning tradition where 'the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied…It involves direct encounter with the phenomenon being

studied rather than merely thinking about the encounter'. (Keeton & Tate cited in Kolb, 1984: 5)

Confusion and discomfort

However, these direct encounters can also be confusing and discomforting:

> [on visiting *Ek Niwas*] I was not sure that it was a place to pray. There was confusion in my mind. I liked the way that it was completely different to what was in my mind about a gurdwara, a mosque or a temple.

> [on visiting the *Ravidass Sabha*] I personally felt very awkward, very uncomfortable… I cannot really explain why.

There are a number of reasons why field visits might cause confusion and discomfort. First, the unfamiliar can be disturbing. Coupled with this is that, despite extensive preparation prior to field visits, students are not necessarily conversant or comfortable with the cultural and religious protocols of unfamiliar traditions. Furthermore, informants at places of worship may use unfamiliar terminology. The discomfort of the unfamiliar might be exacerbated if the student has a strong commitment to a different religious tradition. For example, some Christian students have on occasion expressed conflicting feelings about taking *prasad*[4] in Hindu or Sikh places of worship. On one hand they do not wish to insult the hospitality of the host, yet on the other feel that it might compromise their own religious commitment. A sense of discomfort can be further exacerbated if there is tension between the student's own religious community and that of the place of worship, for example a khalsa Sikh visiting either the *Ravidass Sabha* or *Ek Niwas*:

---

[4] In Hinduism this refers to sweets or other food items that have been offered to an image of a deity (*murti*) and distributed to devotees at the end of worship (*puja*). In Sikhism this is more commonly referred to as *karah prasad*, which is a sweet made from ghee, flour and sugar prepared in an iron pan, and which is offered in all Sikh places of worship (*gurdwara*).

> [on visiting *Ek Niwas*] If I were an observant Orthodox Jew, I would not be permitted to visit other places of worship where there is idolatrous worship taking place.

Confusion can also manifest in a more constructive way that can make a significant contribution to students' understanding of South Asian traditions. This confusion primarily arises because field visits have the potential for students to encounter conflicting accounts, and thereby act as potential for stimulating deep learning. Informant testimony can, potentially, be inconsistent with not only what students read and what they hear from us as teachers, but also at odds with other informants from ostensibly the same religious tradition. Furthermore, places such as *Ek Niwas* and the *Ravidass Sabha* do not fit into the neatly defined categories of either 'Hinduism' or 'Sikhism'.

This confusion can be instrumental in disabusing students of overly simplistic understandings, such as: 'Sikhs believe in this' whereas 'Hindus believe in that'. Nonetheless, we still teach discrete modules on Sikhism and Hinduism, which not only may perpetuate these simplified understandings, but may also be potentially complicit in presenting hegemonic accounts that exclude marginalised voices, downplay diversity and are blind to the permeability of boundaries.

The permeability of boundaries

Roger Ballard (1999) and Harjot Oberoi (1994) have cogently argued that current clearly defined boundaries between Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism are problematic, particularly in the Punjabi context. Oberoi (1994: 1), for example observes:

> I was constantly struck by the brittleness of our textbook classifications. There simply wasn't any one-to-one correspondence between the categories that were supposed to govern social and religious behaviour on the one hand, and the way people actually experienced their everyday lives on the other.

Thus within the same Punjabi family, members might variously identify themselves as either Sikh or Hindu, despite the efforts of the *Singh Sabha*[5] to articulate a distinctive Sikh identity. Many Punjabi

Hindus wear a *kara* for its Sikh significance and have images of Guru Nanak in their homes. This permeability of boundaries is further highlighted by the fact that many Sikhs may attend Hindu mandirs as well as gurdwaras.

The question raised by Ballard and Oberoi is: by teaching Hinduism and Sikhism as distinct modules are we imposing and/or reifying boundaries that actually have little meaning to the lived experience of those we teach about? To couch this question in two other forms:

1. Is the way that we teach religions of a South Asian origin simply a form of academic colonialism?
2. Is there too much discrepancy between emic and etic accounts of these religious traditions?

Delineating boundaries is primarily about categorization. As George Lakoff (1990) points out categorization is fundamental to how we think about the world. Lakoff suggests that the way we categorize things is, at least in part, cultural. Since the work of Wittgenstein, we can no longer accept that categories are objective and neutral conceptual containers with clearly delineated boundaries, in which various phenomena are deemed to belong, or not. Wittgenstein's thinking also challenged the classical theory which suggests that all members of a particular category are equal members of that category. The cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch, building on Wittgenstein's thought, developed what has come to be referred to as prototype theory. This theory suggests that all categories have best (prototypical) and less representative members. In other words we can think of core and peripheral members.

Abandoning the categories of Hinduism and Sikhism.

Wittgenstein's and Rosch's challenge to classical category raises two questions in regard to teaching religions of a South Asian origin. First,

---

[5] The *Singh Sabha* movement in the late nineteenth century was very much at the forefront of legislative definitions which were later to be adopted, to some degree, in the definitions of a Sikh as stated in the *Rehat Maryada* (see Jhutti-Johal, 2011: 89).

do we need to abandon the idea that these rich and complex traditions are religions? If so, should they be taught in Cultural Studies, History and Anthropology departments and not in Religious Studies? Secondly are the boundaries between these traditions so indeterminate as to be meaningless? If so should we abandon discrete modules on Hinduism and Sikhism? If categories are cultural, then imposing the Western categories of religion on a culture, where quite different modes of categorization are utilized, could be considered as a form of pedagogical orientalism. Furthermore, by teaching Hinduism and Sikhism as discrete modules, we risk presenting prototypical types, and neglecting less representative, but nonetheless important, types that inhabit the twilight zones of the boundaries.

It is an oft cited observation that there is no word that is semantically equivalent to religion in any of the Indian languages. The sort of functional differentiation, which suggests a clear distinction between politics, religion, jurisprudence and so on, of Western societies is not so readily identifiable in the South Asian context. There is a very noticeable discourse, traceable back to the Hindu reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which suggests that Hinduism is not a religion, but a way of life. This is also true of Sikhism, which is also referred to as the Sikh *Dharm*, a way of life based on the teachings of the Sikh Gurus.

The famous cultural commentator Raymond Williams in many of his writings suggests that one of the primary understandings of culture is that culture is 'a way of life'. By teaching Hinduism and Sikhism as religions it could be argued that we misrepresent their place in the everyday lives of Hindus and Sikhs and therefore it would be more appropriate to teach South Asian traditions in Cultural Studies departments. However, the study of the various dimensions of Hindu and Sikh worldviews (Smart, 1995) involves more than culture.

The idea that Hinduism and Sikhism are distinct religions is deeply problematic. Roger Ballard (1999) has argued that in the Punjabi context, religion is characterized by four dimensions: the mystical and spiritual dimension (*panth*), the moral and social aspect (*dharm*), the concept of fate (*kismet*), and loyalty as a vehicle for ethno-political mobilization (*qaum*). In the pre-British period Punjabi religion was almost exclusively focused on the panthic and kismetic but 'religion as a qaumic phenomenon was almost non existent'

(Ballard 1999: 11). Furthermore religious affiliation, in terms of Sikh or Hindu, cuts across these dimensions. Ballard argues that the impact of British rule created a context in which Hinduism and Sikhism were constructed in qaumic terms. This has not only led to the marginalization of panthic and qaumic aspects of religiosity in hegemonic discourses, despite being significant aspects of the lived religious life of Punjabis, but has also contributed to tension and violent conflict between Hindus and Sikhs.

Ballard's and Oberoi's observations suggest that teaching Hinduism and Sikhism as discrete modules not only fails to be consistent with the lived reality of people's lives, but also perpetuates a discourse which marginalizes non-prototypical groups, such as the Ravidassias and those who attend *Ek Niwas*. Perhaps we need to rethink the boundaries between modules and offer modules, such as Soteriology in the Religions of South Asian Origins, Social Aspects of Religion in South Asia and so on, where the boundaries do not promote prototypical types, gloss over lived practices, simplify the complex and exclude the subaltern.

The risk in this strategy is that if we taught a generic module on South Asian religions, then of course there is a danger that Sikhism is perceived as derivative and secondary to the Hindu traditions, and this would be consistent with the Hindu nationalist discourse which represents Sikhism as a form of Hinduism. This denies autonomy to the Sikh tradition and would indeed be unfortunate, bearing in mind that Sikh scholars have successfully defended the 'right' for the Study of Sikhism/Sikh Studies as an academic subject. This being the case, it is not unusual to find Sikhism within the 'Hinduism' section of many pre-1970's books. This denies Sikhism the right to be addressed as the youngest of the six major world faiths.

The Constitution of India, however, to an extent denies this 'separatism' by labelling a Sikh as 'a type of Hindu'. This will present the teacher with a huge dilemma in relation to how they choose to teach Hinduism and Sikhism. It is actually quite arguable as to whether Guru Nanak intended to lay the foundations of a wholly new faith. His being a Punjabi Hindu also has implications when discussing the issue of 'Sikh' identity. However, the pioneering work of Kahn Singh Nabha '*Ham Hindu Nahin*', *We are not Hindus*, and the efforts of the *Singh Sabha* have been paramount in encouraging Sikhs to define themselves

as non-Hindus. This also needs to be taken into consideration when bearing in mind that Sikh students of Religious Studies may have a *Singh Sabha* or *khalsa* background.

Hindu and Sikh, for whatever complex reasons, have become significant focal points of identity, and therefore difference. In Sikhism, *khalsa* Sikhism is the prototypical exemplar and in Hinduism what might be broadly be called *Sanatana Dharma* may be regarded as prototypical. These prototypical forms have become ideologically, economically and socially dominant. It is important that prototypical exemplars are not presented as metonyms for complex and diverse traditions. The challenge for us in the academy is to acknowledge these prototypical forms, and at the same time ensure that these forms are not presented as the normative benchmark, by which all other groups are evaluated as somehow 'less authentic'. In other words we have to take into account, not only the indeterminacy of boundaries, but also the diversity of these traditions.

The challenge of diversity

The challenges faced in raising the issue of diversity are somewhat different for teaching Hinduism than for the teaching of Sikhism. Those who teach Hinduism frequently trot out the mantra that Hinduism has no founder, no universally accepted canon of texts, no creedal statement and no overarching institution. It is often pointed out that there is no single reference point that is applicable to all Hindus. Students are directed to authors, such as von Stietencron (2001), who argue that we should understand Hinduism as a plurality of distinct religions, rather than a single religious tradition. This radical diversity is itself quite a challenge to many students, who often want simplified accounts of Hindu beliefs and practices. There are of course various strategies to address this radical diversity. Field visits to places like as *Ek Niwas* and the *Ravidass Sabha*, as well as to the local *Shree Krishnan Mandir* and a nearby *Venkateswara* temple enable students to encounter this diversity first hand.

On the other hand, for those who teach Sikhism, the challenge is almost the reverse. How can we disabuse students of stereotypical characterisations of Sikhs only in terms of the five Ks? Students who

have some prior understanding of Sikhism are very often surprised to hear that there are numerous divisions and sects within Sikhism. Very often, some students have difficulty in visualizing a non-turban wearing Sikh, especially a male, as being a 'true' Sikh. Here, the implications of Guru Nanak's teachings against outward symbols[6] become important but need to be dealt with utmost sensitivity.

It is important to bear in mind the complexity of Sikh Identity and to get away from notions of the *khalsa* Sikh constituting so called 'orthodoxy' within the Sikh faith. The five Ks do not necessarily symbolize that the wearer is an initiated Sikh. Moreover, the term 'baptized' Sikh has strong Christian overtones and should be avoided when referring to Sikhs who have undergone the *amrit* (initiation into the *khalsa* ceremony). However, the issues of definition surrounding the *Sahajdharis*, the 'slow adopters', also need addressing. According to the historian Khushwant Singh, a *Sahajdhari* Sikh (one who cuts the hair and beard) is actually a Hindu. So where does this leave a highly significant proportion of the Sikh community (*Panth*) of *Sahajdhari* Sikhs? In terms of the *Ravidassias* (and *Valmikis*) the confusion carries on in terms of the identity of the community. Confusingly some are Sikh/*Ravidassia*, some are Hindu/*Ravidassia*, others are neither Hindu nor Sikh but *Ravidassia*. If a student were to gather informant testimonies about identity, these would be very varied in terms of Hindu, Sikh and distinct identities.

Conclusion

We conclude that overall, the best way forward in teaching South Asian traditions is to both retain the teaching within Religious Studies departments and to continue to teach modules on Sikhism and Hinduism.[7] We suggest this for three basic reasons. First, turning the clock back is always challenging. Secondly, moving the teaching of South Asian reli-

---

[6] Guru Nanak, for example, refused to undergo the *Upanayam*, sacred thread ceremony.

[7] This does not mean that facets of Hinduism and Sikhism should not be taught in different departments, such as History, Anthropology or Cultural Studies. Nor does it exclude the possibility of some generic modules that compare and contrast aspects of the various South Asian traditions.

gions to other subject areas will inevitably leave lacunae. Thirdly, teaching generic modules that include Hinduism and Sikhism (and Jainism and Buddhism etc.) raises more problems than it solves. However, this means that we must raise awareness amongst students of non-paradigmatic groups, which exist in the fuzzy boundaries between 'Hinduism' and 'Sikhism'. This raises the perennial pedagogical dilemma for teaching South Asian traditions, which is how to achieve the balance between complexity and comprehensibility. We suggest two possible models to this pedagogical challenge, which we have called the *lila*[8] model and the *samsara*[9] model. The *lila* model suggests that the pedagogical strategy is to build a simple and even simplistic picture and then deconstruct it to build a more complex picture. In many ways, this is built on a linear understanding of learning. The *samsara* model is built on a more cyclical conception of learning. The strategy is that you begin with complexity and anticipate a degree of confusion at the beginning, clarity only emerging after completing teaching a cycle of interlocking concepts.

We do not advocate either model as being better, but do suggest that no matter which model is adopted confusion is inevitable. However confusion can facilitate deep learning. We are convinced that field visits, particularly to places like *Ek Niwas* and the *Ravidass Sabha*, are vital in creating confusion necessary for a deep understanding of the complexities and permeability of boundaries of religions of South Asian origin. In many ways our advocacy of field visits and the constructive fostering of confusion can be summarised by the follow-

---

[8] The term *lila* means a 'game or sport'. It is often used to explain the notion of a joyful creation in which the playful Krishna alternately creates and destroys the cosmos, just as a child builds and then demolishes a sandcastle in order to build another.

[9] This is the cycle of life, death and re-birth. This model is based on one of the author's experience of learning *Vedanta* at an ashram in India. After studying for several weeks the author still had not managed to make much sense of what was being taught, and so approached the swami and asked him if he could explain the teaching in a different way. The swami looked at the author imperiously and said 'just wait'. While this was not quite the answer that was hoped for, the swami was (of course) correct. We cannot, for example, understand the notion of *samsara*, without understanding the concepts of *karma*, *yoga* and *moksa*. It does not matter where in the cycle that you begin, but confusion is inevitable until you complete the cycle.

ing student comments after visiting *Ek Niwas* and the *Ravidass Sabha*:

> That is what I was trying to figure out. Where do they belong? The more I thought about it—Hinduism and Sikhism are so broad and diverse. Does it need to be like a clear distinction?

> If I'm confused then I want to research more about it. This challenges you to understand or try to understand the complexities.

References

Ballard, Roger, 'Panth, Kismet, Dharm te Qaum' in Singh, Pritam & Thandi, *Shinder Punjabi Identity in a Global Context* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.7-37.

Chryssides, George & Geaves, Ron, *The Study of Religion: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods* (London: Continuum, 2007).

Geaves, Ron, 'The Authentication of a Punjabi Regional Folk Cult in the English West Midlands', *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 20/1, (1999), pp.37-50.

Geaves, Ron, *Saivism in the Diaspora: Contemporary Forms of Skanda Worship,* (London: Equinox, 2007).

Jacobs, Stephen, *Hinduism Today,* (London: Continuum, 2010).

Jhutti-Johal, Jagbir, *Sikhism Today* (London: Continuum, 2011).

Kolb, David, A., *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*.(Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1984), pp.xiii + 256.

Lakoff, George, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*, paperback edition (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), pp xvii + 614.

Oberoi, Harjot, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, Oxford India Paperbacks (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.xi-494.

Smart, Ninian, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 2nd edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1995), pp.178.

Stietencron, Heinrich von, 'Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a Deceptive Term' in Sontheimer, G. & Kulke., H, *Hinduism*

Reconsidered, paperback edition (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), pp.359.

Takhar, Opinderjit Kaur, 'The Transmission of Tradition and Self Representation amongst the Valmiki, Ravidasi and Namdhari Communities in Britain' in Jacobsen, K. and Myrvold, K., *Sikhs in Europe*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011 forthcoming).

Takhar, Opinderjit Kaur, *Sikh Identity: An Exploration of Groups Among Sikhs*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp.v-215.

What Buddhism is Not:

Presenting Buddhism to Students in the Twenty-first Century

David Webster

Religion, Philosophy & Ethics
University of Gloucestershire

Buddhism suffers from a peculiar crisis. It is a crisis that is peculiar in that it is strange, interesting and fascinating. It is also peculiar in that it is rather unique to Buddhism. This is a crisis of representation: Buddhism is widely portrayed in ways that introduce misconceptions and that obscure its complexity. So far, though, we might consider that many religious traditions suffer from this. So what is unusual in the widespread, cultural representation of Buddhism?

What is peculiar here is that misrepresentation is often due to, or overlooked due to, its benign nature. It is a crisis in that an unquestioned account of Buddhism can blind us to genuine and troubling

issues regarding the tradition—say in regard to ethical and socio-political engagement, or its political implications. Contemporary western culture often regards (and presents) Buddhism as 'gentle', and tends to look upon it with a sunny, but simplifying gaze of patronising approval. This obscures the tradition's diversity and complexity in a way that is a substantive obstacle to the educator.

Is this true? My assertion that Buddhism suffers from this benign oversimplification in widespread culture is supported through my discussions with students prior to their academic engagement with the tradition at university level. I also ran, recently, a google-news search on UK media mentions on Buddhism—which resulted in stories about meditation, music, more meditation (mindfulness, mostly), spirituality, and various cultural events. An identical search where 'Buddhism' was replaced by 'Islam' brought results focused on; Jihad, violence, extremism, veils & death threats, and more. The more you look at the cultural representations of Buddhism, the more a specific stereotype is reinforced. Buddhism is gentle, peaceful, non-exclusive, cheerful and more a spiritual path than a religion.[1] The BBC religions guide on the web calls Buddhism 'a tradition that focuses on personal spiritual development'[2]—thereby privileging the aspects of Buddhism that match this stereotype.

I am not suggesting that Buddhists are somehow not, on occasion, gentle and peaceful people—or that they are all miserable. However, this benign but orientalist and patronising view is clearly only a very partial view.

I want to briefly step away from Buddhism, and think about how we might characterise the teaching of another religion of South-Asian origin—Hinduism. As is widely noted, Hinduism is a tradition where books for the general reader, and for students, tend to open with some attempt at articulating the complexity within Hinduism. It is seen as something that is problematic to the student. Julius Lipner opens *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* by problematising what would seem an innocent question: What is 'Hinduism?':

> A provocative response would be to say that there is no such thing.

---

[1] Though it's wise not to get me started on the whole 'spiritual, not religious' trope…

[2] **http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/** Accessed 01/05/2011.

> The term itself is a Western abstraction of fairly recent coinage, giving the impression that Hinduism is a block reality, a homogeneous system, easily defined, which all Hindus acknowledge in more or less the same way. But as we shall see, this is not the case. Whatever else it may be, Hinduism is not a seamless system of belief in the way that many imagine or expect 'isms' to be. [3]

Of course, many attempts at dealing with this issue have not been spectacularly successful, as was noted back in the 1970s:

> It is remarkable how many modern treatises on 'Hinduism' have as their opening sentence some such reflection as 'Hinduism is very difficult to define', and then proceed to try to define it. This is to systematize and congeal the spontaneous; to insist on abstractions, a common core amidst the luxuriant welter of the faith of Hindus. [4]

But what seems undeniable is that when people begin to teach Hinduism, they begin by trying to sensitize students to a variety of issues. Hinduism is represented as a problematic term, its plurality is emphasised, we are warned of the dangers of overly abstracting it as a concept divorced from its practice. While the issues may vary from those challenges facing people teaching about Buddhism, it is notable that approaches to Hinduism are characterised by an initial articulation of methodological troubles and an untangling of preconceptions.

Returning to Buddhism, I thought about how we, those of us who write and teach about it, introduce it to new students. I looked at some old syllabi—mine and others—and found evidence of a collective guilt. I am sure there are those who do better than this, but the convention seems to be—begin with a blend of history and Buddhist sutra: start with the life of the Buddha, and move from there to his first sermon, and we're off… Here come the Four Noble Truths, followed by Conditioned Arising, Nirvana and then the early monastic tradition. After that, we may begin to get into the disputatious diversity that characterises much Buddhist tradition, but by then it may be too late for our

---

[3] Lipner, Julius, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, (Routledge, London, 1994), p.6.

[4] Smith, Wilfred Cantwell, *The Meaning and End of Religion,* (SPCK, London 1978), p66.

students. We have run the risk of fixing in students' minds that Buddhism is a trans-cultural unity, where monastic practice is normative, and that it is only later that diversity is an issue.

Irrespective of the general problems we may attribute to such an approach, my question here is quite specific. How does the teaching of Buddhism through these topics address the preconceptions of Buddhism that students bring, from their experiences of wider culture, into the classroom with them? My view is that it fails to address them very well at all. Students arrive with a set of cultural ephemera as influence (be it Buddha Bars,[5] Zen-styled document templates, Mindfulness as just another session at your local new-age holistic practice centre, meditation kits, Buddha Lounge[6] CDs, or just a general sense of Buddhism as something to do with laughing, cheery, non-threatening monks on the TV)—and my feeling is that we tend just to ignore this aspect of their prior acquaintance with the idea of Buddhism.

What I like to do is to think though how we can initiate our teaching on Buddhism in such a way that it engages with where our students currently are: that it begins in the midst of their preconceptions and then works out from there to unpick some of the notions they arrive with. How to do this seems more uncertain, and I am keen to hear from *Discourse* readers as to how we might achieve this. While the means may yet be unclear, what is clear is that if we begin with what Buddhism is not—then we might get somewhere in dealing with the aforementioned crisis of benign representation.

To this end I would like to set up a blog to address questions around Buddhism and stereotypes in teaching. Contact **dwebster@glos.ac.uk** for details.

---

[5] A range of eating and drinking establishments, not a type of chocolate snack like a Mars Bar.

[6] A faintly 'Eastern' sub-genre of dance/chill-out music, linked to a type known as 'Buddha Bar'. The BBC Asian Network Review for a compilation of Buddha Lounge tracks reads 'light your joss-sticks, get your 'Om' on and set your temperature to Buddha Chill' Accessed 10/6/11. See **http://amzn.to/jObd5L**

Purusa Sukta:

Creating the Cosmos and Mapping the Methods

Emma Salter

School of Education and Professional Development
University of Huddersfield

This paper examines how *Purusa Sukta* can be used to encourage students to develop an academic approach to their study of religion by explaining how the hymn can be interpreted to model different methodological approaches in religious studies. Information presented here is drawn from my observations of teaching *Purusa Sukta* to first year undergraduates in the context of an introductory module on Hinduism. Themes addressed in the paper include curriculum design, constructivist pedagogy, phenomenology, Smart's 'salient features' with particular emphasis on myth and ritual, and functionalism with particular emphasis on sacralisation as a mechanism of social stability. Brief expositions of different aspects of the hymn are also included. The paper does not offer a critique of different methodologies

in religious studies, but rather illustrates how they can be introduced to the novice scholar of religion in a classroom situation, using *Purusa Sukta* as an exemplar.

Some of the analysis of *Purusa Sukta* in this paper was originally included in my MA thesis *Purusa Sukta as a model of Vedic Structure* presented at Cardiff University in 1997. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies conference, Teaching Religions of South Asian Origin in January 2011. Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's 1981 translation of *Purusa Sukta* published by Penguin in *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* is referred to in the paper.

Purusa Sukta is thought to be one of the later hymns of the *Rig Veda*. Some scholars date it at about 900 BCE (Lincoln 1986:3). It explains how gods and *rishis* conduct the first, primordial sacrifice of *Purusa*, the original Man, to create Vedic cosmic, social and ritual systems. Vedic literature is *shruti*, divinely revealed. This means *Purusa Sukta* provides divine origin, and therefore divine endorsement, of Vedic cultural identity which is located in society, ritual and cosmology. Implicit in the hymn is the requirement for ritual re-enactment of the primordial sacrifice resulting in the continuous reinforcement of Vedic cultural identity (Flood, 1996:36). Like a prism, from whichever angle it is viewed *Purusa Sukta* reflects all the colours of Vedic belief and culture. For this reason the hymn is an excellent resource for consolidating students' learning about Vedic society. Its combination of myth, ritual and society also makes it a useful model for the application of different methodologies in the study of religion. For many undergraduate students Vedic society is a new and potentially obscure area of study. This distance is advantageous in the early stages of teaching and learning about methodological approaches to the study of religion because students are less likely to be affected by close personal or cultural associations that can, sometimes, hinder their understanding of critical distance in academic study.

Prior to being introduced to *Purusa Sukta* in their Hinduism class students learn about key features of the Veda and Vedic society, for example Veda as divinely revealed, social hierarchy and the prominence of ritual. Therefore an analysis of the hymn in class serves to reify and consolidate these themes. With regard to methodology in the study of religion, students are introduced to emic, eitc, reflexive and

phenomenological perspectives. Sociological and psychological approaches via Durkheim and Jung respectively are considered, as well as Smart's 'salient features' approach.

Curriculum design is a key concern in religious studies courses. My experience working with undergraduates indicates that the modular system preferred by the university where I teach, as well as at many UK universities, can be a barrier to students adopting a holistic approach to learning about their chosen academic subject (in this instance religious studies) because the ability to apply knowledge across modules does not always come easily to some students. Few religious studies courses would deny the importance of including methods in the study of religion in their curriculum (Chryssides and Geaves, 2007:2-5). However, this poses the question of whether it is better to teach methods as a stand alone module or to integrate it across the curriculum by embedding it in other subject areas. Both approaches have their benefits and disadvantages. This paper argues that methods, as well as being an important subject in its own right, is helpful in bridging different subject areas in the student's mind. Observant students notice that our analysis of *Purusa Sukta* reveals pan-religious themes that can be applied to more familiar religions in more familiar contexts. For example, it is hoped that students would notice that the close association between myth and ritual observed in *Purusa Sukta* is also apparent in the Jewish celebration of Pesach and the Christian celebration of Eucharist, to name but two examples. The overall aim is for students to cultivate a holistic approach to their learning and sidestep the false notion that knowledge is boxed into individual modules. Therefore, learning outcomes for students' study of *Purusa Sukta* fall into two main categories; knowledge about Vedic religion and society, and to develop a growing confidence and ability in the academic study of religion. Beginning with *Purusa Sukta*, students' growing proficiency in dealing academically with the study of religion filters into the other religions they study, encouraging them to transpose knowledge and skills between modules.

As Vedic society is historically and culturally distant, students respond to the hymn instinctively as critical outsiders. I take a phenomenological stance in my discussion of *Purusa Sukta* with students in class by attempting to imagine its meaning and significance according to the world view of Vedic society. This demonstrates to them that

studying a religion academically does not mean it has to be viewed cynically. My phenomenological approach leads students to inevitably question; how do we really know about the Vedic world-view? This leads us neatly into a critical evaluation of phenomenology as a method, and, by extension, of methods and orientalism in general.

Purusa Sukta is essentially a creation myth. It explains the origins and structure of the cosmos and the origins of all the creatures therein.

> [line 2] It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and whatever is to be. He is the ruler of immortality, when he grows beyond everything through food.

> [line 3] Such is his greatness, and the Man is yet more than this. All creatures are a quarter of him; three quarters are what is immortal in heaven.

> [line 4] With three quarters the Man rose upwards, and one quarter of him still remains here. From this he spread out in all directions, into that which eats and that which does not eat.

The centrality of Vedic social hierarchy is explained and endorsed by the division of *Purusa* into the different social strata.

> [line 11] When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?

> [line 12] His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born.

Students are introduced to *Purusa Sukta* with straight forward constructivist pedagogy. This refers to finding ways for students to acquire new knowledge by building on their existing knowledge and understanding. Students' study of *Purusa Sukta* begins with a class discussion about the meaning and purpose of creation mythology. Prior to class students are asked to research briefly a creation myth of their

choosing, but that is unfamiliar to them. This, along with familiarity with their 'own' creation myth, provides stimulus for the discussion. Students tend to engage well with this activity, which invariably produces energetic debate and deep level thinking. Students' thoughts are recorded and displayed on flipchart posters. Their conclusions in response to the question 'what's the point of creation mythology' can be summarised as 'existential reassurance' to include the following points: where have I come from, what's my purpose, how should I behave, what happens when I die? Many students are able to extend their evaluation of the purpose of creation mythology to include cultural identity and social inclusion through a shared world-view. Recognition of these themes helps to inform discussions about religious pluralism, secularisation and community cohesion later on in their degree. Therefore, the introduction to *Purusa Sukta* begins with a gentle constructivist approach as students discuss their own thoughts and ideas about creation mythology. Confidence in their own independent thinking skills is reinforced through our analysis of *Purusa Sukta*, as their conclusions about existential reassurance and cultural identity are justified.

The term 'mythology' can be an early stumbling block in the study of religion. In colloquial use the word 'myth' often introduces pejorative or undermining connotations to a narrative. To describe religious narratives that some students might believe to be true and sacred as 'myth', without redefining the term, could easily disengage them. Similarly, it could diminish the significance of religious beliefs that are unfamiliar to them. Neither of these positions is desirable, but at the same time fruitful academic study of religion requires exposition of mythology and its relationship to other aspects of religious belief and practice. In the context of religious studies, students are taught to redefine 'myth' to mean a narrative that may be supernatural in origin, but, most significantly, that communicates a truth or truths of vital importance to society; namely the society observing the religion from which the myth originates (Eliade, 1961:59).

*Purusa Sukta*exemplifies this by revealing the intimate relationship between the cosmos and Vedic identity. Purusa's immolation not only creates the cosmos and natural world, but also creates the three markers of Vedic identity; the Vedas, social hierarchy and ritual:

[line 9] From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the verses and chants were born, the metres were born from it, and from it the formulas were born.

[line 7] They anointed the Man, the sacrifice born at the beginning, upon the sacred grass. With him the gods, Sadhyas, and sages sacrificed.

[line 15] There were seven enclosing-sticks for him, and thrice seven fuel-sticks, when the gods, spreading the sacrifice, bound the Man as the sacrificial beast.

[line 16] With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice. These were the first ritual laws. These very powers reached the dome of the sky where dwell the Sadyas, the ancient gods.

Through the creative process of divinely conducted ritual sacrifice, inter-relationships between these three markers of Vedic identity are forged. Further, Vedic cultural identity is endorsed by association with the divine process of creation and is clearly distinguished from other, unendorsed, cultures. Vedic cosmos, society and ritual are mutually bound through the first sacrifice described in *Purusa Sukta*, meaning that chaos in one aspect risks chaos in all three aspects (an analogy can be made with the physiological systems of the human body). This necessitates conformity to the prescribed social hierarchy and correct ritual practice in order to ensure cosmic stability; surely an important consideration of the time. Homologies between *Purusa*'s body-parts and social ranking define and assert an individual's place in the social hierarchy (Lincoln, 1986:20). Spiritual ontology is explained by the monistic overtones of the hymn. Created beings are rendered with a paradoxical ontology, being at the same time 'real'—having been divinely created—and 'unreal' due to the ephemeral nature of flesh and blood. *Purusa Sukta* addresses this paradox by explaining that when the cosmos is destroyed its parts reassemble as *Purusa*, who, reconstructed, is fit for sacrifice again; and so the cycle continues, reassuringly, for eternity.

[line 2] It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and

> whatever is to be. He is the ruler of immortality, when he grows beyond everything through food.

This brief exposition of *Purusa Sukta*'s role as a creation myth demonstrates very clearly that mythology cannot be dismissed merely as fallacy or pre-scientific attempts at explaining natural phenomenon. Instead it demonstrates that myth is important in defining and endorsing cultural identity and in providing existential reassurance—both themes that were identified by students in their preliminary discussions about creation mythology. *Purusa Sukta* functions aetiologically by revealing important truths about the origin and maintenance of Vedic society, and, by extension, the cosmos. It functions existentially by explaining temporal and spiritual ontology and by positioning the individual within the whole drama of creation (Mol, 1976:246). When viewed phenomenologically, if we reject mythology we disconnect from our pre-existent origins—in short, from our immortality. Therefore, as a creation myth, *Purusa Sukta* has direct and significant cultural and spiritual influence. By noticing these important functions of mythology in *Purusa Sukta* it is hoped that students will make similar observations across other religious contexts and therefore develop a sophisticated understanding of the meaning and purpose of myth in their wider study of religion.

Having considered mythology phenomenologically, attention turns to ritual. Students are introduced to the concept of ritual through a constructivist pedagogy similar to that adopted in approaching creation mythology. They are asked to think of a religious ritual with which they are familiar and identify the qualities that make the action ritualistic. Between them, the class usually achieves a comprehensive list that includes the following points: behaviour that is repeated, meaningful and has special significance. People have prescribed roles, wear special clothes and use special language. There is a sense of occasion and a set order of events. Something important is remembered and sometimes re-enacted. An individual's changing place in society is marked (for example weddings and other rites of passage). Ritual conforms to social expectations and so shapes behaviour. Rituals are usually compulsory rather than optional. Rituals are set apart from ordinary life and involve communication between human and the divine (see Bell in Segal, 2006:397-409). Two features that students

typically miss in their preliminary analysis of ritual are its restorative effects and its relationship with mythology. Nevertheless, students' understanding and evaluation of ritual theory is enhanced by this process of analysis because they can test the criteria of ritual action they have devised by applying it to practical examples of religious ritual.

Whilst *Purusa Sukta* does not meet all the criteria of ritual identified by students outlined above, it is a good example of many of the themes that typify ritual practice. It demonstrates how ritual is frequently underpinned by a mythic narrative that makes the ritual obligatory and laden with meaning. Ritual re-enactment of Purusa's immolation is necessary to maintain the cosmic harmony established at that first ritual sacrifice. As a re-enactment, or re-visitation, of a mythic event, ritual suspends temporal time and reduces the gap between human and divine realms, creating a chord between the temporal 'now' and the mythic 'then' that connects human and divine realms (Eliade, 1961:57-59). Linking sacred and temporal realms through ritual re-enactment of a divine event has a restorative effect. In the example of *Purusa Sukta* the cosmos and the *Yajamana*, the commissioning agent of the ritual, are restored. The *Yajamana* recreates the role of Purusa to symbolise both sacrificial victim and divine recipient of the offering. Therefore the *Yajamana* benefits from the regenerative effects of the ritual. As a sacred event, the ritual is an environment of spiritual purity so the *Yajamana* undergoes purification, or *diksa*, before being permitted at the ritual (Malamoud, 1996:44). The process of creation through destruction, at the core of *Purusa Sukta*, is ubiquitously observed in the natural world; seed–plant, egg–bird, day–night. Vedic ritual sacrifice replicates this creative destruction. A literal re-creation of the ritual would amount to homicide and deicide, therefore substitution is adopted as a side-stepping device (Smith and Doniger, 1989:200). The Brahmin, the religious specialist officiating at the ritual, has exclusive knowledge of the processes of substitution because it is revealed in the Veda to which only he has access. The Brahmin's gnosis of how mantras activate equivalencies that connect ritual words and actions with their cosmic outcomes is essential for ritual efficacy. To be successful the ritual must be performed correctly in accordance with a meticulously prescribed pattern that is known only to the Brahmin. Therefore the Brahmin and the *Yajmana* both have prescribed roles and

their combined presence at the ritual is essential. Their respective roles in the ritual influence their behaviour in wider society. It is essential that the Brahmin's spiritual purity remains in tact precluding him from tasks that may threaten this. The *Yajmana* has to be accepted in society, which is demonstrated by his wearing of the sacred thread and his married status (Olivelle, 1996:pxli). Therefore the roles undertaken by the ritual participants conform to, and arguably shape, social expectations of normative behaviour.

Ritual theory can appear complex to the novice student of religious studies. Cultural and philosophical distance may make Vedic ritual appear impenetrable. However a constructivist approach demonstrates this not to be the case. The brief explanation above of Vedic ritual informed by *Purusa Sukta*illustrates that it conforms closely to criteria for ritual identified by students based on rituals with which they are already familiar.

In our study of *Purusa Sukta*, students quickly pick up on how social order appears to be controlled by religious belief in the power of ritual and the divine endorsement of the social hierarchy. This evaluation, which is instinctive and typically requires minimal tutor input, introduces sociological theories about the function of religion, most obviously theories about the preservation of social order through the sacralisation of a shared worldview posited by scholars such as Durkheim and Mol. Security is found in groups, a lone individual is vulnerable. Social groupings depend on mutually accepted behaviour patterns. Mutually accepted and expected behaviour patterns are the social norms that constitute cultural identity that might also be described as social order (Mol 1976:9). Without general agreement and adherence to social order, society would not function and survival of the individual is jeopardised. Order is maintained by mutually accepted values arising from a shared perception of reality. A commonly accepted 'reality' is therefore essential to cultural identity. Reality is divinely generated and revealed in mythic narratives that serve to preserve social order by a process of sacralisation. Therefore, social order is religiously validated and secured as cultural identity (Mol, 1976:202). In the context of Vedic culture this equates to belief in the divine authority of the Veda that demands ritual action to maintain cosmic stability, which in turn demands adherence to the social hierarchy; all of which is encapsulated by the Vedic, and later Hindu, concept

of *dharma*, making morality a principal legislative force in society.

In *Purusa Sukta*the intermeshing structures of the universe and society are mythically sacralised to become part of the accepted Vedic worldview, or Vedic reality. Acceptance of cosmic and social order is congruent to accepting the authority of the Veda which is an essential marker of Vedic religious and cultural identity. The respective roles of the *brahmin*, *ksatriya*, *vaishya* and *shudra* are fixed by the divine authority of the Veda in which the hymn appears. These are further endorsed by the absolute necessity of correct ritual performance to ensure cosmic harmony. The brahmin's prominent role as the ritual's official fixes his social status because the efficacy of the ritual is dependent on his perpetual state of spiritual purity. It is essential that the *yajamana* commissioning the ritual is an included member of Vedic society. The necessity of the ritual therefore creates Vedic social hierarchy. *Purusa Sukta*further exemplifies the functional role of myth and ritual in sacralising society by accurately reflecting the four fold caste system and adapting the cosmic structure to mirror the social hierarchy. It achieves this through the inclusion of the cardinal points to create a quadripartite universe instead of the more familiar tripartite universe.

> [line 14] From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear. Thus they set the worlds in order.

The Veda deals with reality, so mythic or divine reality has to reflect what is empirically observed. Without becoming drawn into a discussion of Aryan migration theories, the Vedic cosmic structure had to accommodate the real presence of the *shudra* who, whilst kept outside of accepted Vedic society and so precluded from participating in ritual, were really there. Therefore the divine mythology that generates reality is adapted to accurately reflect social change (Smith, 1994:79-80; Tull, 1989:52). Here students observe a sharp contrast between phenomenological and functional approaches to the study of religion, even though both are etic perspectives. The functionalist approach to *Purusa Sukta* places historical precedence with the action of the ritual rather than the myth that validates it, whereas the phenomenological approach begins with the myth and seeks to understand ritual as a mechanism for re-enacting or re-visiting the divine truth of the mythic narrative.

In conclusion this paper has demonstrated that complex concepts

in the study of religion can be made accessible to students through constructivist pedagogies that encourages them build on their existing knowledge and experience. It has shown that *Purusa Sukta*, a fascinating piece of literature in its own right, can also effectively model different methodological approaches to the study of religion. Methods not examined in this paper can also be applied to *Purusa Sukta*. *Purusa Sukta* is by no means the only example on which to map methodologies in the study of religion; this is axiomatic. If the methods we use to study religion hold any validity, then there should be a range of appropriate methods for any of the topics that we teach and learn about. However, a fine balance needs to be struck so that methodology enhances students' academic study of religion and does not drown it (Chryssides and Geaves, 2007:3). Earlier in the paper I argued that learning about methods can effectively bridge subject silos in modular curricula and questioned whether methods should be integrated across the curriculum or housed in a dedicated module. In an ideal world (or university), my answer would be both. A dedicated module gives methods the space and status it deserves for religious studies students to realise that it is the lynch pin in successful academic study of religion. However, methods are meaningless unless applied to the practical examples of religion that students study across different subject areas. Until that ideal is realised, such decisions about curriculum design are more often than not dictated by timetable management than academic preference.

Bibliography

Bell, C., 'Ritual,' in Segal, R.A., (ed) *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) pp.397-412.

Chryssides, G.D. and Geaves, R., *The Study of Religion: An Introduction to Key Ideas and Methods*, (London: Continuum, 2007).

Doniger O'Flaherty, W., *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*, (London: Penguin, 1981).

Eliade, M., *Images and Symbols*, (London: Harvill, 1961).

Flood, G., *An Introduction to Hinduism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Lincoln, B., *Myth Cosmos and Society*, (London: Harvard University

Press, 1986).

Malamoud, C., *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Mol, H., *Identity and the Sacred,* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976).

Olivelle, P., *Upanishads*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Segal, R.A., (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

Smith, B.K., *Classifying the Universe: the Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Smith, B.K. and Doniger, W., 'Sacrifice and Substitution: Ritual Mystification and Mythical Demystification', *Numen*, Vol. 36:2, (1989) pp.189-224.

Tull, H.W., *The Vedic Origins of Karma: Cosmos as Man in Ancient Indian Myth and Ritual*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989).

Teaching About Religions of South Asian Origin at the Open University:

a Reflection on the Scope and Limitations of Flexible Learning

Gwilym Beckerlegge

Department of Religious Studies
Open University

How distinctive is the Open University's (OU) style of teaching today (see, for example, Alles 2007:25)? When created, the OU's policy of open access and reliance on flexible learning

(formerly referred to within the OU as 'distance learning') made it stand out to such an extent from other British universities that some conservative voices questioned whether it was indeed a 'university'. That battle for recognition has long been fought and won, but in the intervening period other universities have become more accepting of mature students, part-time students, and students with entry qualifications other than A-levels, and more involved in various aspects of distance learning. Like other universities, moreover, the OU, in spite of its mission, fails to realise fully its aspirations in terms of attracting students from the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups and, in certain areas, recruiting a diverse body of staff.[1] Yet, there are grounds for arguing that the OU's mission and consequently its style of teaching remain distinctive.

Where other universities have become more involved in forms of distance learning, such initiatives have been relatively modest, often involving specialist courses and thus relatively small numbers of students, many of whom are likely to be experienced students and competent in the use of ICT.[2] The OU's level 1 introductory Arts and Humanities module, Arts Past and Present, continues to attract in excess of 7,000 students per annum. Volume remains a distinctive feature of the OU's work and handling it constitutes our major pedagogical and pastoral challenge, not least supporting students unfamiliar with the use of personal computers, as the OU moves more online with blended forms of tuition (face-to-face and online).[3] Within large cohorts of students, it hardly needs to be said that the diversity of students' backgrounds, aspirations and needs will far exceed those

---

[1] The Religious Studies level 2 module Introducing Religions recruits, relative to other Arts modules, a significantly higher proportion of students from ethnic minorities.

[2] To return to the issue of widening student access, and leaving aside questions about deficiencies in the OU's curriculum and manner of delivery, its very scale and the success that the OU has enjoyed might suggest that flexible forms of study and open entry have not proved sufficient in themselves to address the intransigent problems of access to higher education in Britain.

[3] The speed at which the OU has adopted changing forms of technology to assist in the delivery of its courses, for example, from live transmission on the BBC to video and then DVD, and now increasingly from print to online digital formats, has always been governed by its access policy rather than its technological capacity at any one time.

found in the smaller groups that typically pass through other universities. Also, the OU continues to rely on its own published study packs (sometimes including items co-published with external publishing houses). These were originally designed as part of its mission to widen access so that, for example, the disabled or remote student would not be disadvantaged. We now distinguish informally between 'OU classic' and 'OU lite' packs—the former containing, in addition to study blocks, specially produced films, audio-tapes, illustrations booklets etc, while the latter might be a more basic wrap-around pack of a study guide built on existing, published texts produced outside the OU. Finally, the OU's modules are designed for part-time students and its systems are designed to support them. OU students can take on the workload of full-time students simply by registering for more modules in a year, but part-time study is primarily what we do, rather than adjusting provision designed for a majority of full-time students.

Religious Studies within the context of the OU

The Religious Studies (RS) department is located in the Faculty of Arts. In the early years of the OU, appointments to the section that would become the RS department were largely in religious history, and consistent with Faculty's inter-disciplinary focus at that time on Victorian Britain, which was reflected in the level 1 introductory module (then called the Arts 'foundation course'). In later versions (1970s/early 80s) of this introductory module, Ninian Smart contributed a unit on the study of religions and John Ferguson offered case studies on West African religions, before the focus reverted again to the mid Victorian period. The department continues its involvement in inter-disciplinary studies, to which the Arts Faculty remains committed. (For the most recent example and one that relates to a South Asian religious tradition, see Waterhouse with Richards, 2010). RS also offers a series of specialist modules at levels 2 and 3 (honours level) that enables students to follow a route leading effectively to a joint honours degree in Humanities with named subjects. Unlike the pattern commonly found in other British universities, all current RS undergraduate modules carry 60 credits, and are equivalent to an entire year's workload of a part-time student—a recommended minimum of 16 hrs study time per

week.[4]

The RS department as it is currently constituted has eight full-time members of staff and three colleagues on fixed and fractional contracts. Of these, three work almost entirely on religious traditions of South Asian origin (or South Asian traditions within Islam),[5] although with different levels of engagement with the presence of these traditions in South Asia and their transplantation to other regions,[6] including diasporic settings such as Britain. We have been able to augment our resources when it comes to course production through the use of academic consultants (for example, the authors of texts we use), and particularly in the production of audio resources.[7] We face the familiar problem of a relatively narrow staffing base imposing limits on the development of our curriculum. Having said that, we are all expected to leave our comfort zones and contribute to widening the curriculum when this is feasible.

A huge advantage of the scale of the OU student body for subjects like RS is that they have a chance of viability. For example, the three specialist courses currently offered by the RS department each typically recruit between approximately 350-500 students per annum. The largest of these is Introducing Religions (level 2), and that recruits a little under 500 students per annum at present. Its predecessors recruited far better than this, and we are uncertain whether this dip

---

[4] Offering a plethora of 10 and 15 credits modules to a more fragmented student population would not be cost effective within the OU's operation. Also, although student preferences do change, many students have found building a 360 credits degree by combining 60 credits modules easier to manage on a part-time basis. The OU more generally does offer modules with different ratings, and Arts is in the process of re-introducing some level 1 30 credits modules with a view to strengthening student progression to level 2.

[5] The question of whether Islam should be considered together with 'religions of South Asian origin' was raised at the PRS conference. An understanding of the context of South Asia was central to our recent and very popular course Islam in the West: the Politics of Co-existence, which ran from 2007 until 2010. See Herbert (2007).

[6] For example, our course materials have included case studies of Soka Gakkai (Waterhouse, 2002).

[7] Examples of this are audio discussions with Damien Keown, Kim Knott, and Eleanor Nesbitt, authors respectively of the volumes on Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism in the OUP *Very Short Introduction* series, which were adopted as set books in 2006.

mirrors current levels of interest in the study of religions, or more varied options within the OU Arts curriculum and the HE sector nationally.[8] A downside of the volume factor is that our recruitment levels are not judged against those that would usually be applied in other universities. Future recruitment to our recently introduced MA will cease after 2013, although it has recruited about 40 students per annum to date, a figure that would be a source of rejoicing in many universities, rather than grounds for closure.

In the remainder of this article, I shall refer exclusively to the experience of teaching about religious traditions of South Asian origin within the context of the OU's Religious Studies programme.[9] I shall begin by outlining our various courses because this is the medium, in the absence of departmental or campus based study, through which our students primarily experience their university. This is the RS department's 'teaching', which is mediated and enriched by part-time tutors to whom OU students are allocated.

The OU RS curriculum

A significant turning point in the development of the curriculum, which would have major implications for the future direction of the department and its staffing, came in 1978 with the launch of Man's Religious Quest (which soon became The Religious Quest!). This was a wide-ranging level 2 module on religions past and present, including units on the Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh traditions, which was produced largely by consultants. RS staffing at that time was limited to three (not yet a formal department) and, during the production of the module, a visiting fellow (John Hinnells). It followed the, by then, increasingly familiar OU format of units, a substantial reader, linked TV and radio broadcasts (later put on tape), and set books. The production of Man's

---

[8] The three current specialist RS modules to which this article refers all achieve very high ratings, in the region of 93% on average, in student satisfaction ratings. The relevant data is regularly and independently gathered and analysed by the university's Institute of Educational Technology.

[9] For a fairly recent overview of the RS department at the OU, see Beckerlegge (2005). Details of the department's current staffing and courses are available on the departmental website, **http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/religious-studies/index.shtml**

Religious Quest and its potential outreach were regarded as sufficiently significant for Religion to review its materials (Mews and Pye, 1979). The reviewers' judgement suggested materials of an uneven quality and the reviewers, although supportive, drew attention to the module's lack of coherence, a point to which I shall return later. Man's Religious Quest, which recruited very strongly and sometimes in excess of 1,000 students in some years, was later turned into a shortened version (The Religious Quest), which ran until 1992. It was subsequently revised and presented again (World Religions) from 1998 with new supporting materials, films and books, when it continued to recruit in the region of 650 students per annum. We have continued to incorporate in our most recent RS level 2 module two features of these earlier modules, which were less commonly found in comparable courses in other universities at that time; namely, a section on village practice and belief in our coverage of the Hindu tradition, and extended treatment of the Sikh tradition.

In 1993, the department launched The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain from 1945, a 30 credits module, written largely in-house with limited use of consultants. The materials produced for this module have been used extensively in other universities (Parsons, 1993, 1994; Wolffe, 1993), but it never recruited as well as we had hoped. It came out at a time when 30 credits modules were less popular. At much the same time, we also extended an existing module on Religion in Victorian Britain and included a study of the presence of religions of South Asian origin and Islam in Victorian Britain (Beckerlegge, 1997).

In 1998, the Faculty launched a new level 1 introductory module (Introduction to the Humanities), which was organised to show-case the disciplines represented in the Arts Faculty. This included an introduction to the study of religions, and a linked case study 'Looking for Hinduism in Calcutta' (Beckerlegge, 1998). These was supported by two films, 'What is Religion?' shot in Liverpool, and 'Looking for Hinduism in Calcutta', which was filmed around the celebration of Durga Puja in that city.[10] This went down well with tutors who had

---

[10] We are hoping to be able to provide open access to archived film and audio material relating to the study of South Asian religious traditions, although plans for this are still at an early stage.

some background and interest in RS and, I think, with students wishing to continue in the RS line, but less so with tutors and students whose interests were centred on European history and literature. Since the consolidation of the teaching of South Asian religious traditions within the RS curriculum during the late 1990s, the current, major Arts level 1 introductory module has re-adopted a more thematic, and less disciplinary, framework. RS makes several contributions to its different blocks, including a study of the Dalai Lama in the initial block on 'Reputations' (Waterhouse, 2008).

The replacement of our level 2 module in 2006 with Introducing Religions illustrates the changing style of OU study packs, moving towards a more compact format, which is attractive to students who might have to study while on the move and grab time for study as and when they can. The design of this course has also been very much informed by lessons learnt from teaching Man's Religious Quest, and its accumulated revised versions. The lack of coherence identified by Religion's reviewers of this module was in part a consequence of it having been produced largely by consultant academics who were not wholly immersed in the internal course production process. For example, attention to addressing specified themes is more likely to waver when the authors are not working constantly as a team. Similarly, when selecting set books we have found that individual volumes often address the declared themes of the series to different degrees and can vary quite dramatically in style and format, even though part of a series. This preoccupation with uniformity might sound almost to run against the individuality of academic insight and argument, but for students working remotely and in a more isolated manner, any idiosyncrasy in the teaching materials can be potentially disruptive. It can cost time as a student wrestles with the unfamiliar. It can prove highly frustrating when a text fails to address a stated theme or provides such a limited treatment of it as to make it impossible for the student to use it as a starting point from which to develop a discussion. When planning Introducing Religions, we adopted a 'template' design in order to maximise consistency of coverage throughout, and sought a series of set books that combined authoritative scholarship with a reliable series format.

Introducing Religions is a wrap-round study pack, a mixture of 'OU classic' and 'OU lite', which uses the *OUP Very Short*

Introduction (VSI) series, but with substantial study guides and audio and DVD material produced by the department. The Hindu and Buddhist traditions were covered in existing volumes in the VSI series, and we were fortunate that Eleanor Nesbitt (and OUP) agreed to produce an additional VSI volume to cover the Sikh tradition, for which we produced a study guide (Beattie, 2006). Introducing Religions also makes some connections to religious communities of South Asian descent in Britain, as does our MA foundation module. Mindful of the needs of British RE teachers, we try as a general principle to ensure that the six religions widely taught in schools are covered throughout our programme. In concentrating our resources on enriching the set books with additional commentary and readings and particularly through the production of audio-visual resources, we have been able to create a DVD that includes extensive visual material on Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism, with sections on India and the UK. We do not routinely assess students' oral skills through presentations. Attendance at face-to-face study sessions with tutors is optional in the OU because a mandatory requirement could constitute a barrier to study for the disabled, shift-workers, and others. We are able, however, via the DVD, to set assignments that require students to examine iconography and other aspects of material culture. Website analysis now provides a further alternative basis for assessment.[11]

Course renewal has been accompanied by a degree of rationalisation, as the Faculty has reviewed the balance of provision at levels 2 and 3. We are now working on one new 3rd level module to replace our two current 3rd level modules by 2013. It is clear, however, that whatever the strengths, distinctiveness and appeal of the new course, its advent will mark a reduction in choice and flexibility for RS students at the OU, and, therefore, probably the number of students overall who will study our modules. The two current third level modules consciously reflect the two dominant strands of interest within the department; namely, the multi-disciplinary exploration of recent and contemporary

---

[11] In general, the forms of assessment we use in RS remain heavily dependent on the essay format. This is partly because the outcome of the assessment has to be something than can be submitted (now electronically as a general rule) within a remote environment and does not assume attendance at group face-to-face or online study sessions. These considerations do limit our options, although the Faculty has introduced a course in 2011 in which online group-work will be assessed.

manifestations of religion and spirituality (Religion Today: Tradition, Modernity and Change, produced in 2002), and religious history (Religion in History: Conflict, Conversion and Co-existence, produced in 2005). The former conforms to the 'OU classic' style (see above), with co-published volumes of case studies grouped around themes, such as religion and social transformations and belief beyond boundaries. South Asian traditions are represented in case studies of popular Hindu devotional pictures (Beckerlegge, 2001), Buddhism in Britain (Waterhouse, 2001a), and Buddhist responses to environmental concerns (Waterhouse, 2001b). These studies are supported by film material on British Hindu centres (Bhaktivedanta Manor near Watford, the Swaminarayan Mandir at Neasden, and the Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre at Bourne End), and on 'Buddhism in Britain' (New Kadampa Tradition, Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, and Soka Gakkai). The latter, Religion in History, is 'OU lite' in style, and its treatment of South Asian traditions is limited, apart from relatively brief comparative references, to one case study on the Hindu Renaissance and notions of universal religion (Beckerlegge, 2005), linked to an audio discussion with William Radice of SOAS.

The new course is regarded as a 'flagship' course for the department and thus is closer to 'OU classic' in style, although compact and with a reduced provision for new film material. Increasingly, we are expected to direct our students to resources available on the Internet, but by their nature these cannot match the tailor-made and integrated film resources that were formerly central to OU study packs. This pressure is likely to increase during a period of financial stringency. The planning of the new course is at an early stage and 'controversy' is likely to be its unifying theme. It will follow the format of offering linked case studies within a teaching narrative. These will include studies drawn from the Hindu tradition and Islam in South Asia. The budget for this module is considerable, reflecting the multi-media nature of its design, predicted student volume over its life, and the OU's insistence on quality in the production of the study pack. We typically allow about three years for the production of a module, which is a highly time-consuming team effort, involving academics, specialist librarians, IT support, the publishing department, and a commissioned audio-visual production company etc. There are rarely modules produced by one individual in the Faculty's curriculum, unlike the

typical provision of specialist courses for senior undergraduates in other universities. This is largely because the complexity and costs of the course production process would make it impracticable to attempt in this way to accommodate the interests of individual academics within the curriculum. This significant commitment of financial and human resources explains why we have relatively few modules on offer at any one time and why they have to run for several years, with supplementary updating, to pay for their production. Although not every member of the department participates in the production of each module or to an equal degree, the ambitious nature of these multimedia projects would make most members of OU staff keen to play a full role in module production—our 'teaching'.

As this overview has shown, religions of South Asian origin feature in our curriculum as:

- major elements, given equal coverage as 3 of 6 traditions covered in our introductory 2nd level module
- case studies in our more specialist 3rd level modules
- more sporadically as limited case studies in inter-disciplinary modules, depending inevitably on the focus of these courses and indeed current Faculty interests.

Achievements and pitfalls

Having outlined the place of religions of South Asian origin within our modules, in the final part of this paper I shall highlight what I can consider to be some of the successes/advantages of our approach and some of its weaknesses in relation to teaching about religions of South Asian origin. As you will see, many of these factors stem from the same distinctive features and strategic advantages that the OU is able to exploit, which I mentioned at the outset.

Size of student body

We are able to introduce students to the study of South Asian religions in relatively large numbers, and this must surely be beneficial for society as a whole, fostering as it does a more informed, wider interest in matters South Asian, and, more specifically, for the support of RE

teachers.[12] Our reliance upon the case study approach, however, means that these case studies are embedded in much wider thematic or period based modules, and thus may not coincide with the student's main interest. The location of these case studies in these broader settings also suggests that we shall be unlikely to satisfy, and thus to attract, students who wish to pursue a specialist route in South Asian studies and to be members of an academic community (department or institution) bound together by this common interest.

Openness

The size of our student body is directly linked to our 'open' entry policy. Significantly, this 'openness' also applies to entry at modules at levels 1-3 (we do not deal in 'years' as students may move up and down between levels as they wish, as long as they meet the requirements of their chosen degree). In fact, Arts, and many other, OU students tend to favour breadth of study, and while some will gravitate towards a single honours route, where this is available, many prefer to balance two or more subjects during their progress towards a degree, or simply go for 'pick and mix'. Thus, many, conceivably even the majority of, students taking a particular module might not have followed the subject strand in which the module is located. Consequently, many will not have followed a route of progression from RS level 2 into RS level 3. This does create problems for the consolidation of knowledge and the inter-nalisation of the technical terms associated with the study of South Asian religions. Many of our students, who do not participate on a daily basis in an academic community with a common interest in South Asian studies, struggle with this. This problem, of course, is exacerbat-ed by the structure of our modules, which requires students to move between diverse regional and historical case studies. In the past we have produced pronunciation audio guides, but students have not found these very user-friendly. They do value aids such as glossaries and timelines. Based on our experience with a large and diverse student intake, we no longer use diacritical marks and tend to use the anglicised forms for common Indic terms and names. As texts books follow dif-

---

[12] The department was awarded the 2002 Shap Working Party's annual prize for its contribution through its courses to the teaching and study of World Religions.

ferent conventions in this respect, and these differences might be evident in the set books adopted for a study pack, even providing a glossary for less confident students, who are not immersed in the study of South Asia and do not have access to a tutor who specialises in South Asian religions, can be quite a challenge.

So, in theory, a current student could encounter, for example, Hinduism at level 2 and then cover more specialised case studies on popular Hindu iconography and on the Hindu Renaissance at a higher level, and then proceed to the MA and complete case studies on religion and the state in India and on the construction of Hindu identity in Britain—this would be the ideal pattern. Yet many students will dip into our offerings, rather than working progressively through the levels, building on the case studies, because following the RS strand is not their main or sole interest. Another problem relating to progression, which I shall deal with here, is that a student's year of entry (and the number of years taken to complete the degree) will govern what modules are on offer at any one time. As noted above, costs of production limit the range of modules on offer at any one time. Modules are approved for a specified length of time and are routinely withdrawn at the end of this term as part of our quality assurance process. OU departments do not as a rule replace modules simply with an updated version in the same area/on the same topic. The extended nature of curriculum development with its periodic design of new modules leads us to balance some continuity with change.

The 60 credits module

The substantial module has huge advantages in that a case study contained within it can be explored in some detail and at some depth. This does mean, however, that the typical part-time OU student will only take one such module in any given academic year. This makes for a rather rigid pathway, offering students limited choice between modules, and thus any flexibility and optional pathways have to be built into the modules and reflected in their assessment. In trying to ensure that students do have options within the module, we have used forms of assessment that offer a choice of tasks on different traditions, or tasks that leave the student to provide relevant examples. The route chosen by individual students consequently might not always favour

the South Asian elements and can allow students simply to seek out what is most familiar. We have also faced problems when attempting to cover what some students might regard as the 'drier' aspects of methodology and historiographical debates. Our response to this problem is to drip-feed such problems into the case studies in order to highlight specific problems of method. An OU student studying alone and wishing to get to grips, say, with the study of Buddhism, might well have limited patience, if confronted, say, with an extended introductory block on problems of method or orientalism. In other universities, where the student's year is broken into modules of 15-20 credits, a course on method can be taken alongside, for example, a course on a specific tradition, and such a pattern of study can be mutually illuminating.

The published course materials

Leaving aside the merits of individual academics' contributions, the OU published study pack brings huge benefits and scope for a structured integration of teaching material. The use of 'activities', for example, can direct students to consult readings from primary and secondary sources, possibly linked to interview material or film material on a related festival, ritual, a building such as a gurdwara and contextualise these within a given locality. The teaching of South Asian religions is immeasurably enriched by the integration of high quality film and audio material, in almost all cases commissioned and produced for that purpose. Control over the process enables us to be very specific about locations (within the constraints of funding) and to provide convenient access to visual material on manifestations of the same tradition both in South Asia and in the diaspora. For those without first-hand experience of the region of South Asia, this visual material may constitute something of a 'virtual field trip'. One example of this is the 1 hour film made in 1978 in the village of Soyepur near Varanasi. We revisited this village in 2005 and have made a film for our current Introducing Religions module, which includes a 'then and now' segment on this one village, catching up on the histories of some of those interviewed back in the 1970s, changes in village practices and values, and changes in employment and the local economy affected by the village's proximity to Varanasi. Both films were made with the assistance of Joseph Elder

(University of Wisconsin) and his research team. Another example is 'Sikh Identity', which was made in Amritsar in 1995 for Religion Today: Tradition, Modernity and Change. It explores different understandings of what it means to be a Sikh, and includes reflections on the events of the decade prior to 1995 in Panjab. Apart from the programmatic, integrated nature of our course materials, we are able to support these, as mentioned above, with chronologies, glossaries, links to relevant internet sites, and access to e-books, online reference works and data bases, and e-journals. Now that the tipping point has been reached in ownership of, or at least access to, personal computers, we are increasingly able to lead out from the core study pack through our electronic library and into the resources on the web.

I no longer feel apologetic when faced with the criticism that the published study pack and linked reader acts as a straight-jacket. In my experience, most undergraduate students in other universities follow core reading lists or increasingly rely, as library resources are squeezed, on readers produced by module tutors. Our students in the past have had less experience of independently locating and evaluating primary and secondary source material, but have not been confronted by empty library shelves when preparing assignments! The earlier access-based argument for reliance on the study pack has now been overtaken by the popular use of the Internet, and this will require a sea-change in the attitudes of some of our students to their studies. Our current and future students will be expected to gather and evaluate material more autonomously as we now take on the task of encouraging them to make full use routinely of our electronic library.

Conclusion

To say that we offer 'tasters' of the relatively specialised field of South Asian religions within the context of the 'open' nature of the OU degree would be to do less than justice to what we offer, although this will be true of the experience of those students who simply dip in and out of the RS programme. For students who follow the RS route and pick up cognate modules, substantial introductions to Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism occupy equal prominence in our introductory module's treatment of six religions. When the case studies in higher

level modules are added to this, students are able to build on this intro-ductory module in a coherent manner. Thus, currently students have an opportunity to look more closely at forms of Buddhism now practised in India, Britain and Europe, the Hindu tradition since the 19th century, and our work on Islam is now increasingly linked to South Asia.

In this article, I have tried to show that many of the opportunities we have in the OU bring with them significant pedagogical challenges. The very investment made by the OU in the quality of its study packs limits the range and flexibility of the curriculum. Many of the chal-lenges built into the OU form of delivery, which I have identified above, arguably present more difficult hurdles in the teaching about South Asian religions. This is partly because the majority of our students have little if any prior knowledge of this area, and partly because the very nature of our open, flexible learning approach does not require students to remain within one line of study and thus to con-solidate on a year-by-year basis.

As the reviewers of our first substantial venture into the study of religions noted in Religion, 'It is not usual for university teaching courses to be subject to public review…' (Mews and Pye 1979:116). The 'routine' teaching of the OU is very much a public matter through virtue of its publication and relative accessibility. This has given us an opportunity to grapple with the pedagogic implications of the power of our outreach. As this article has illustrated, some of the lessons we have learnt through this experience have been quite prosaic, but of consider-able value in trying to improve our teaching of religions of South Asian origin for a large and very diverse body of students.

Bibliography

Alles, Gregory, *Religious Studies – A Global View*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) xii + pp. 368.

Beattie, Hugh, *Sikhism Study Guide* (A217 Introducing Religions), (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2006) pp.173.

Beckerlegge, Gwilym, 'Followers of "Mohammed, Kalee and Dada Nanuk": The Presence of Islam and South Asian Religious in Victorian Britain' in Wolffe, J., (ed.) *Religion in Victorian Britain Vol.5 Culture and Empire*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with The Open University, 1997) pp 222-267.

Beckerlegge, Gwilym, 'Studying Religion' in *Religion and Science in Context* (Units 14 and15 of Block 4 A103 Introduction to the Humanities), (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1998) pp.9-82.

Beckerlegge, Gwilym, 'Hindu Sacred Images for the Mass Market' in Beckerlegge, G., (ed.) *From Sacred Text to Internet*, (Aldershot: Ashgate in association with The Open University, 2001) pp.57-116.

Beckerlegge, Gwilym, 'The Hindu Renaissance and Notions of Universal Religion' in Wolffe, J. (ed.) *Religion in History: Conflict, Conversion and Coexistence*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with The Open University, 2004) pp. 129-160.

Beckerlegge, Gwilym, 'Religious Studies in the UK: Studying Religions at the Open University', *Bulletin of the British Association for the Study of Religions* 106/November, (2005) pp.43-45.

Herbert, David, *Study Guide (AD252 Islam in the West: Politics of Co-existence)*, (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2007) pp. 260.

Mews, Stuart and Pye, Michael, *et al*., 'Man's Religious Quest: a Review of Open University Materials', *Religion*, 9/1, (1979) pp.116-139.

Parsons, Gerald (ed.),*The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain from 1945, Vol. 1 Traditions*, (London: Routledge in association with The Open University, 1993) pp.352.

Parsons, Gerald (ed.),*The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain from 1945, Vol. 2 Issues*, (London: Routledge in association with The Open University, 1994) pp.272.

Waterhouse, Helen, 'Representing Western Buddhism: a United Kingdom Focus' in Beckerlegge, G,. (ed.) *From Sacred Text to Internet*, (Aldershot: Ashgate in association with The Open University, 2001a) pp.117-160.

Waterhouse, Helen, 'Buddhist Responses to Environmental Crisis' in Herbert, D., (ed.) *Religion and Social Transformations*, (Aldershot: Ashgate in association with The Open University, 2001b) pp.155-191.

Waterhouse, Helen, 'Soka Gakkai Buddhism as a Global Religious Movement' in Wolffe, J. (ed.) *Global Religious Movements in Regional Context*, (Aldershot: Ashgate in association with The Open University, 2002) pp.109-155.

Waterhouse, Helen, 'The Dalai Lama' in *Reputations* (Book 1 A100 The Arts Past and Present), (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2008) pp.197-229.

Waterhouse, Helen with Richards, Fiona, 'Voices of Authority and Truth: the Metta Sutta' in *The Voices and Texts of Authority* (Book 1 A150 Voices and Texts), (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2010) pp.1-35.

Wolffe, John, (ed.) *The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain from 1945, Vol. 2 Issues*, (London: Routledge in association with The Open University, 1993) ix + pp.334.

What is a University Education For?

Thomas Hancocks

Department of Philosophy (3rd year undergraduate)
Manchester Metropolitan University

> If we were asked for what end, above all others, endowed universities exist, or ought to exist, we should answer—to keep alive philosophy. [1]

In the wake of recent political and economic moves it seems that the question of the purpose of a university education has gained a new sense of significance. It is by no means a new question and has no doubt been posed since the inception of the first university, that of Bologna, almost a millennium ago. The fact that it is so pressing a question means that many have tried to answer it and this is no bad

thing, for we can use their attempts to aid our own task of understanding the role of the university in our modern age. The answers of a few, due to the uniqueness and adroitness of their thought, are particularly apt for aiding our task, namely those of Montaigne, Schopenhauer, Emerson, Mill and Nietzsche. There is only room to consider minute fragments of their respective *oeuvres* but the potency of what they disclose is enough to justify their inclusion.

In my own opinion the role of university education is tripartite: first, to encourage free thought and critique, providing society with individuals that possess such skills; second, to provide knowledge in an impassioned yet non-dogmatic fashion; knowledge that primarily serves to edify and aid the life of the student and secondarily their career, and third, to further knowledge of science, in all its multifarious forms, and of culture, in terms of disciplines like humanities, social sciences, languages etc. (The two are in my opinion not mutually exclusive and in many ways the furtherance of one means the furtherance of the other.)

In times of economic or political hardship, it seems to be all too much the case that governments turn the focus of education towards the production of skilled individuals who, upon graduation, move immediately to positions in the economy where their role is to aid and support its growth. *Prima facie*, this may seem like the most commonsensical thing to do. Yet in this change of focus there is always the risk that governments may neglect the importance of those whose role is precisely not to be economically assimilated but to rather stand outside of the state and the economy and subject them to question and critique. This is arguably as important, if not more, than filling the economy with a skilled workforce, as these individuals can scrutinise the role of the workforce, putting it to better use.

The 18th Century conservative statesman Edmund Burke holds that the 'one sure symptom of an ill-conducted state is the propensity of its people to resort to theories.'[2]. But perhaps Burke's formulation can be turned on its head to read, 'the sign of a well-conducted state is

---

[1] Sedgewick, 'Discourse on the Studies of the University of Cambridge', in *Dissertations and Discussions*, Mill, J.S., (London: George Routledge & Sons) p.77.
[2] Edmund Burke cited in Hobbes, R. Peters, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), p.190

the freedom and ability of its people to offer theories.' This is one of the salient purposes of a university education, to offer to society individuals who are able to question the efficacy of aspects of the state. Indeed, the ability to critique is not only important in the political sphere but is an important skill for any student to have in general. As the 16th century humanist Charles de Montaigne states, 'Let him (the student) avoid... authoritative and unmannerly airs and that puerile ambition of trying to appear more clever, because he is different, and to gain a reputation for being critical and original.'[3].

Original thinking stems from the criticism of ideas, to put things to question is to will change which in turn is to seek new approaches through which change can be realised. If universities can train autonomous, free-thinking individuals then they can be put to work approaching the aspects of the state that are ill-functioning or outdated. Their role would be to keep things organic, advising politicians, presidents and diplomats, and by perpetually putting to question the functioning of the state they can strengthen it and ensure it responds well to the inevitable difficulties and obstacles that befall it. It would be the role of universities to equip such individuals with the critical skills needed, edifying them and providing the knowledge needed to aid their task. The question thus follows; what knowledge should universities be providing their students and what is the best means of teaching it? If universities are to cater for and promote individualism, which in many ways they should, it is difficult to know the best way of approaching the teaching of all. Different students require different information from their pedagogues, though perhaps it is possible to establish underlying episteme which may benefit all students, irrespective of their discipline. The 19th Century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer offers one such aspect of edification:

> Students and learned men of every kind and every age go as a rule in search of information, not insight. They make it a point of honour to have information about everything...When I see how much these well-informed people know, I sometime say to myself: Oh, how little such a one must have had to think about, since he had so much time for reading!'[4]

---

[3] Montaigne, M.,*The Essays of Montaigne* Vol. 1, (trans. Trechman, E.J.) (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p.153.

While the acquisition of knowledge is clearly important for every student and budding professional, less clear is the means by which such information should be provided.

Schopenhauer opposes education that is overly focused on promoting assiduous reading or ceaseless 'fact-acquiring' because it takes up time which a student could otherwise spend thinking for themselves. Universities should focus on providing 'insight' rather than heaps of information, and give the student the chance to gain the former by allowing them time for thinking and self-reflection amongst their busy university schedules. But what would such insight be like? Well, perhaps it could come through stressing the importance of a student's interpretation over the tutors didacticism, clarity of thought over the ability to recite information and the quality rather than the quantity of understanding. As Nietzsche states:

> 'the all too frequent exploitation of youth by the State, for its own purposes—that is to say, so that it may rear useful officials as quickly as possible and guarantee their unconditional obedience to it by any means of excessively severe examinations—had remained quite foreign to our education.'[5]

The worst approach to education, for Nietzsche at least, is that which provides students with information and then 'severely' examines their ability to retain it. While the knowledge that a university provides is important, so too is the disposition of the student being taught. Who is learning is perhaps as important as what they are learning and while students should not be the malleable tools of the state, it may be possible to find ways in which students can position themselves to better learn.

The 19th century American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson holds that:

> If the finest genius studies at one of our colleges and is not installed in an office within one year afterwards...he is right in being disheartened and in complaining the rest of his life. A sturdy lad... who in

---

[4] Schopenhauer, A.,*Essays and Aphorisms*, (trans. Hollingdale, R.J.) (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 227.

[5] Nietzsche, F., *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, (Milton Keynes: Lightning Source, 2010), Preface, p.25.

turn tries all the professions, who teams it, farms it, peddles, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper... and always like a cat lands on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls. He walks abreast with his days and feels no shame in not 'studying a profession,' for he does not postpone his life, but lives already.[6]

But how does this help us to understand what universities are for? Well, perhaps if universities focused less on achieving targets or improving research and more on their students learning experience then feedback would be more favourable and they would be under less scrutiny from the government. Though to improve the learning experience of the student is not only to ameliorate teaching standards; it is to provide students with the chance for a more rounded and humanistic education. As Emerson makes clear, students with a wealth of life experience who have worked in a plurality of trades are often more knowledgeable and receptive to learning than those who have been primed for one vocation.

There is an apt old phrase of Aristotle's, translated into Latin, which reads, '*primum vivere deinde philosophari*'—'first live then philosophise'—in terms of education we may translate this as 'first experience life, then undertake your studies.' For students to get the best out of their university education they should be given the chance to explore many avenues. If universities encourage students to pursue other paths concomitant to their books and studying (perhaps sports, artisanship or a trade), and actively include this in their curriculum, then the ramifications can only be beneficial. If the only end that knowledge serves is economic betterment or providing individuals with a plethora of *inter alia* historical, juridical, medical or scientific facts, then it is perhaps fair to say that knowledge is not serving the useful purpose that it potentially could.

So what, if anything, is knowledge useful for? Well, as made perspicuous above I believe knowledge, and its dispenser the university, can be usefully oriented towards the furtherance of science, in all its multifarious forms, and of culture. There is the tendency, and the current government is unequivocally guilty of this, to regard these two spheres as mutually exclusive. But this, I think, is a mistake. Culture,

---

[6] Emerson, R. W., 'Self- Reliance' in *Selected Essays, Lectures and Poems*, (ed. Richardson, R. D.), (New York: Bantam Books, 1990) p.164.

to mention but a few things, is comprised of elements such as the humanities, art, music, theatre and literature. Universities can aid a great deal in the improvements of these things and can moreover show people that 'cultural betterment' does not just mean improved art galleries, more concerts or more investment in theatres (which is not to detract from the importance of these things). Rather culture serves a more personal and profound purpose, granted not for all but for so many. As the 20th Century French playwright Antonin Artaud writes, 'We can begin to form an idea of culture (through) a protest...A protest against our idea of a separate culture, as if there were culture on the one hand and life on the other, as if true culture were not a rarefied way of understanding and exercising life.'[7]

Culture, be it music, painting, writing or films, can help us understand and deal with life; it can offer solace in times of difficulty and humble us in times of pride. As such, the propagation of culture through the disciplines of art, humanities, literature and music should be at the forefront of a university's agenda, as well as its concern with the progress of science. Nietzsche, in a series of lectures in 1872 aptly titled *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, opines, 'I see a time coming when serious men, working together in the service of a completely rejuvenated and purified culture, may again become the directors of a system of everyday instruction, calculated to promote that culture... but how remote this time seems!'[8]

Perhaps if equal emphasis is place on culture and on science then such an age, and all the humanistic benefits therein, will not seem so far away. Universities have existed in the West for close to a millennium. Throughout this time they have faced threats from the church, from foreign invaders, from persecutory laws and now from the government. They have proved themselves to be tenacious institutions, but this is not the point of their existence—it is instead to educate, advance learning and provide society with useful citizens. With governmental support, and not its apparent opposition, universities can serve their role of encouraging free thought and critique, providing knowledge in an impassioned way and furthering our knowledge of science and culture. Perhaps then the question of what a university education is for will be self-evident and not in need of scrutiny.

---

7 Artaud, A., *The Theatre and its Double*, (Surrey: Oneworld Classics, 2010), p.5.
8 Nietzsche, F. (ibid.) Preface, p.7.

Philosophy in Post-92 Universities

Mark Addis

School of English
Birmingham City University

Introduction

In general, philosophy is not thriving in post-92 universities, with several programmes having closed recently. The decline in provision raises the serious problem that those with lower A level grades will effectively be prevented from studying philosophy at university. This is damaging both for the general presence of the subject and equality of opportunity as there is clear evidence that the socio-economic circumstances of students can have a bearing on their A level grades. Philosophers in post-92 universities, especially those who are not part of a dedicated philosophy department, tend to face particular kinds of

difficulties related to lack of critical mass. A short questionnaire (see appendix) was issued to obtain an overview of philosophy in the sector and eleven responses were received. Overall, the findings give clear cause for concern and point towards the need for the philosophical community as a whole to think about ways to support the post-92 sector.

Institutional position and orientation

There are two philosophy departments and a research centre which serves a departmental type function but all are small. In eight other cases philosophy is in a general humanities setting of some kind, frequently in a school of humanities and/or social science. In terms of whether the general orientation of philosophy was analytic or continental considerable variability was evident. Three respondents indicated a primarily analytic orientation and three a primarily continental one. A further three claimed an equal balance between both and another refused to recognise the question. It is clear that for a good proportion of the universities the analytic and continental divide remains contentious. For this reason it might be advisable to use the term 'modern European' or 'post-Kantian European' instead of 'continental'. Only one university saw philosophy in a global way and accorded major significance to non-western thought.

There is a good deal of diversity in teaching and research. However, universities were keen to emphasize that they covered core philosophical subjects. The primary areas cited by eight respondents were aesthetics, moral and political philosophy, and the history of philosophy. Areas noted by six respondents were continental philosophy, Kant, metaphysics, philosophy of mind and philosophy of science. Other fields which were mentioned included environmental philosophy, feminist philosophy, and phenomenology. One respondent remarked: 'I suspect—there's proportionately much more going on in new universities by way of inter-/multidisciplinary work and therefore by way of—broadly—applied philosophy than in older ones, where the bulk of "single hons" is concentrated'. It is evident there is notable variation from what might be thought to be the traditional analytic canon of many highly regarded departments. This largely reflects the

kinds of courses which are (or are thought to be) appealing to students.

The average number of academics involved in philosophy teaching and research was only five (including those on temporary contracts). The largest philosophy grouping was a department with eleven staff. The potentially problematic implications of low staffing levels are obvious. Seven respondents reported that all philosophy staff were full-time whilst another two indicated almost all were. However, at one university less than 50% were and at another in the interdisciplinary humanities group it was just 25% (with the figure for the faculty as a whole being half that).

Undergraduates

Eight universities provide single and joint honours degrees whilst two others only offer the latter. One institution does not have undergraduate provision in philosophy. It is not always easy to calculate the numbers of undergraduate students on philosophy courses on a semester or term basis as those taking electives as well as single and joint honours students can be included. In the first year, philosophy student numbers ranged from 15 to 100 (with about half the universities being below 30). This is potentially troubling, but what is of additional concern is how they drop in the second and third years. For example, one respondent reported that figures of 80 fall to 30 for the last two years and in another case they go from 100 to 70 to 50 in the final year. In many universities 15 FTE is the viability threshold for courses/programmes and some of these figures are uncomfortably close to minimum levels of sustainability. Five respondents reported that numbers of undergraduates remained constant. One commented:

> Undergraduate numbers overall have remained steady over the past 20 years; the proportion of students taking philosophical options has somewhat increased and we expect this trend to continue (we're optimists!). Part of the point of disaggregating the two undergrad degrees we had and making four out of them was to increase the range of applicants.

Two universities indicated a downward trend in undergraduate numbers whilst another observed that numbers were 'slightly lower

than they should be for comfort'. However, more positively two respondents reported an increase in undergraduates and another remarked:

> Trend is towards single honours, which directly conflicts with pressures to provide more general courses. Our numbers are slightly up this year, and we tend to get Combined Honours students switching to Single Honours during their first year.

There was a general awareness of the difficulty of increasing undergraduate recruitment.

Postgraduates and research students

Five universities offer philosophy at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Three universities have a single MA whilst two have three different ones. Numbers are low with three of the five respondents reporting numbers of 15 or less (with three in single figures). This clearly raises issues of long term viability. Three respondents indicated that numbers were stable and one noting they were rising. However, one university remarked that taught postgraduate numbers were far less than eight years ago.

Three universities had no research degree students in philosophy at all. In five universities offering full-time study of this kind numbers were low (with eleven being the maximum) and three of these had a single student. In eight universities part-time research student numbers ranged from two to twelve. Students researched a substantial range of different topics with the most popular areas being European philosophy, aesthetics, and moral and political philosophy. In terms of trends, three respondents reported research student numbers were stable with two others indicating a slow rise and a decline respectively. As with taught postgraduate courses this is a mixed and not particularly positive picture.

Respondents described typical university support for research students such as research methods courses, supervisory teams, and workshops/conferences. Of the six respondents only two indicated that support was sufficient. The others thought it was adequate (in one case barely so). A recurrent problem was the lack of a critical mass of

research students and a philosophy research community. With the introduction of the AHRC Block Grant Partnership scheme opportunities for funded PhD research in the post-92 sector have declined further. Two respondents observed that due to the largely part-time character of research students in post-92 universities improving the situation would be hard. However, four respondents thought more co-operation with other universities would be beneficial. A respondent in the southeast commented: 'Certainly a regional grouping of some kind for doctoral training would be a help, on an informal level even more than in terms of specific training'.

Library and learning resources

For undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, with the odd exception, all the respondents used library textbooks, monographs, journals, electronic databases, student-owned textbooks, websites and online bibliographies. In one university library textbooks were not used and in three cases online bibliographies were not utilized. One respondent had to use monographs, journals and electronic databases at other institutions because the university did not have them.

Only four respondents thought library resources were wholly adequate. Two claimed they definitely were not and others had significant reservations about provision. One university reported that library coverage was adequate in terms of range but not quantity. Other problems were insufficient copies of core texts, outdated book stock, and an inadequate book purchasing budget. A lack of journals was a problem for at least three respondents. One university did not have access to Philosopher's Index. Six respondents denied that library resources affected the choice of courses offered. One cited the reason that they did not create new courses (which might well be thought to be unsatisfactory in itself) and another stated it was not a problem because students were referred to a major research library located nearby. Two others thought that library resources did not affect course choice but they certainly influenced the mode of delivery as ways of getting round the shortage of resources had to be found.

In terms of improving library resources three respondents stated that a large library budget was needed but none saw any way of obtain-

ing this. In the current climate the under-funding of university libraries is set to become an increasing challenge. There was overwhelming interest in joining other post-92 universities in consortium agreements with philosophy journal publishers. Only one respondent indicated that it would matter whether the journals were highly rated (according to ERIH classifications). However, trying to develop such consortium agreements is difficult because about the half the universities surveyed already had licences for philosophy journal content and the same content could not be taken again under different terms.

Appendix: questionnaire

1. Indicate:

a) where philosophy is situated at the institution

b) whether the general orientation is analytic or continental

c) the primary areas of focus in teaching and research

2. State the number of academics involved in philosophy teaching and research and the percentage which are full time

3. Title(s) and number of undergraduate and postgraduate course(s) on which philosophy is taught at the institution.

4. Estimate of students taking such courses on a semester/term basis.

5. Specify:

a) the number of research degree students in philosophy including whether they are full or part time

b) state the general area their studies fall into if possible

6. Please comment on current trends in undergraduate, postgraduate, and research student numbers.

7. State:

a) the kinds of support provided for research students

b) indicate whether the support is sufficient

c) if not suggest what could be done to improve this (such as starting a regional network for doctoral training)

8. Indicate which of the following are used for teaching (including graduate supervision) philosophy:

• library textbooks
• monographs
• journals
• electronic databases
• student owned textbooks
• websites
• online bibliographies

9. Indicate:

a) whether library resources are adequate and if not in what respect(s)

b) whether library resources affect the choices of courses offered and if so how

c) what could be done to improve library resources

10. Comment on whether there would be interest in joining other new universities in consortium agreements with philosophy journal publishers.

Teaching Atheism and Nonreligion:
Challenges and Opportunities

Stephen Bullivant

School of Theology, Philosophy and History
St Mary's University College, Twickenham

Introduction and context

Following decades of neglect, the serious academic study of atheism and nonreligion is undergoing something of a surge both in the UK and abroad (Lee & Bullivant 2010). A growing number of scholars from the disciplines which intersect at 'religious studies' (including sociology, history, psychology, and anthropology) have begun to recognize the value of exploring these areas, both in their own right, and as shedding light on wider issues in the study of religions and society. In part, this both parallels and reflects growing popular and media interest in contemporary unbelief, not least, though by no means

exclusively, in light of the recent and in many ways surprising rise of the New Atheism. Given both the practical and paedagogical importance of academics linking their research and teaching (e.g., Jenkins 2003; Donnelly 2006)—one of the Subject Centre's own emphases—atheism and nonreligion seem likely to be incorporated into more and more undergraduate RS syllabi in the coming years. A strong case (outlined below) can, moreover, be made for such inclusions.

In the UK, a small number of philosophy and theology programmes already offer dedicated modules on aspects of historical and contemporary atheistic thought. Notable among these are Lancaster University's 'Modern Religious and Atheistic Thought' (Level 2, 30 credit) and Heythrop College's 'Belief and Unbelief' (Level 2/3, 30 credit). While both well-established and successful modules are available to Religious Studies (Lancaster) or Abrahamic Religions (Heythrop) students, neither focuses in detail on unbelief as a concrete, lived phenomenon. In the United States I am aware of only two institutions offering modules on the sociology of modern atheism: Elon University in North Carolina, and the University of Santa Clara in California. Both of these have begun in the past two years.

This article[1] reflects upon the development and first presentation of a brand-new, Level 2 religious studies module entitled 'RT251 Atheism and nonreligion' (hereafter 'RT251') at St Mary's University College, Twickenham. In particular, I wish to focus upon the challenges and opportunities involved in integrating the subject within an existing, successful RS programme. It is hoped that the findings presented here will be of use to colleagues in other institutions interested in introducing elements of the study of atheism and related subjects

into their own curricula, whether in the form of a dedicated module, or as part of a wider course (such as, e.g., one on 'Religion in modern Britain'). Presently, there are no other resources available to help them to do this: no articles disseminating best practice, no bibliographies of useful print and online resources, and certainly nothing approaching either the Subject Centre's 'Faith Guides', or Oxford University Press' 'AAR Teaching Religious Studies Series'. My intention is that these reflections may serve an initial starting point for the development of others' own ideas and subsequent practice. Needless to say, I would be delighted to hear from anyone planning—or indeed, already teaching—modules in these and cognate areas.

The article will proceed in stages: i) a justification for teaching this subject as part of the RS curriculum; ii) a brief outline of the principles informing and guiding the design of RT251; iii) a discussion of the decisions made regarding content and assessment; and iv) an evaluation of the module's first presentation in Autumn 2010, drawing on both my own impressions and student feedback. The conclusion will offer some, necessarily preliminary, reflections on the challenges and opportunities engendered by exploring atheism and nonreligion as part of the RS curriculum. An appendix will present a short, annotated bibliography of the small but growing number of texts which are particularly useful for undergraduate-level study of atheism and nonreligion.

Rationale

Studying atheism as part of a religious studies syllabus may seem counterintuitive, if not outrightly oxymoronic. Nevertheless there are strong reasons doing so, relevant to a range of understandings of 'the curriculum' (see Barnett & Coate 2005: 27-40). From the discipline-specific perspectives of the two I most value (i.e., 'curriculum as special' and 'curriculum as culture'), both atheism and nonreligion are significant (and increasing) aspects of global socio-religious culture. For example, one recent, conservative estimate suggests that there are between 500 and 750 million 'atheists, agnostics, and non-believers in God' worldwide. If so, then:

> [W]e can deduce that there are approximately 58 times as many

atheists as there are Mormons, 41 times as many atheists as there are Sikhs, and twice as many atheists as there are Buddhists. Finally, nonbelievers in God as a group come in fourth place after Christianity (2 billion), Islam (1.2 billion), and Hinduism (900 million) in terms of global ranking of commonly held belief systems. (Zuckerman 2007: 55)

Closer to home, the 2008 British Social Attitudes Survey reported that fully 43% of the population consider themselves as belonging to 'no religion' (a figure only 7% less than all the Christian categories combined). When asked if they believe in God, 18% replied that they did not, with a further 19% answering that they did not know if there was a God or not, and know no way of finding out.[2] That so many people do not believe in God, and do not consider themselves to be religious, should surely be of interest to students of religion(s)—as too, therefore, should their reasons, motivations, other belief and attitudes, and demographic characteristics. (In precisely the same way, political scientists take a great deal of interest in those who have no interest in politics, and/or who do not participate in elections.)

Related to this, is the fact that popular and media discourse surrounding atheism and unbelief tends to be overly simplistic and unhelpful, often focusing on the perceived 'arrogance' or 'aggressiveness' of unbelievers (depicted as a homogeneous group). Recent research from the United States, moreover, suggests that atheists are the country's least trusted social grouping, and are subject to various forms of discrimination (Edgell et al. 2006; Cragun, forthcoming). Just as other commonly misrepresented and misunderstood religious groupings, such as Muslims and members of NRMs (e.g., Bunt 2002; Richardson & Introvigne 2007), are rightly regarded as meriting rigorous and balanced treatment at undergraduate level, the same can be argued for contemporary atheists.

Finally, studying the lack of religion has the potential to shed considerable light on the direct study of religion itself. In the words of the American sociologist William Sims Bainbridge, 'Any wide-ranging theory of religion needs to be tested with evidence not only about religion itself, but also about its absence […] By learning more about

---

[2] Data available online at: **http://www.britsocat.com/Body.aspx?control= HomePage** Last accessed on 21 March 2011.

the lack of faith, we can understand better the role of faith in modern society' (2005: 22). A number of concrete examples, arising from RT251 itself, will be discussed below.

Teaching atheism and nonreligion is also desirable in light of two market considerations ('curriculum as consumption'). First, atheism appears to be a relatively attractive topic for RS undergraduates. Certainly, for a new and somewhat 'unusual' module, uptake for RT251 was notably—and surprisingly—high, with over two thirds of the year opting to take it (33 out of 46).[3] Unlike other specialist options, such a module seems a relatively safe bet in terms of the allocation of scarce resources (not least, the lecturer's time in planning and developing it). Given its (so far!) relatively *outré* status, a module dedicated to atheism and nonreligion may also help in 'setting apart' a department from its competitors. Secondly and relatedly, a significant proportion of RS students go on to train as teachers. The 2004 National Framework for Religious Education recommends that pupils have the opportunity to study 'secular philosophies such as humanism' (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2004: 12). Such provision may, therefore, play a part (however slight) in increasing employability.

Designing RT251: the principles

From the earliest stages of its development, RT251 was intended to be both student-centred, and to foster a 'deep' approach to the subjects covered (Biggs 1999). This is, of course, the intention behind all my teaching. However, given the close fit between the module's content and aspects of my own research expertise—something which, as an early career academic, is for me a relative (and luxurious) novelty—

---

[3] There are several possible explanations for this. Suggestions from the cohort itself include RT251 being 'something different' to the usual RS modules; a chance to learn about 'the other side of things'; and concerned with what students felt to be a timely topic, not least because of the high profile of the New Atheism. One might also speculate that since university is traditionally a time when young people are deciding what, if any, religious beliefs they have, a module exploring atheism might appeal, 'existentially' as it were. Certainly, in the classroom itself students were not shy of advancing their personal experiences and impressions of many of the topics discussed.

RT251 presented a significant opportunity to realize, at least in part, these lofty aspirations. Needless to say, from the students' perspective, clear paedagogical benefits accrue from being taught by someone who is interested in, enthusiastic for, and knowledgeable about the subject in question. This is especially useful in encouraging a deep approach to learning, since the teacher-researcher incarnates the same approach to the subject that s/he hopes to facilitate in the students:

> 'When using the deep approach in handling a task, students have a positive feeling: interest, a sense of importance, challenge, exhilaration. Learning is a pleasure. Students come with questions they want answered, and when the questions are unexpected, that is even better' (Biggs & Tang 2007: 24).

To further facilitate this, the decision was taken to incorporate, where possible, elements of Alan Jenkins' framework for 'a research-based approach to student learning', in pursuit of *greater*—even though not perfect—'alignment between the cultures and practices of the teacher-researcher and the learning experiences and processes of students' (2003: 2).[4]

A second key feature of the design of RT251 was the involvement of students themselves. Indeed, 'If education is to be truly student-centred, students should be consulted about the process of learning and teaching' (Lea et al. 2003: 1). Most significantly, a formal focus group was convened in April 2010, consisting of 13 then-Level 1 students all of whom would be taking RT251 the following semester. Since RT251 was brand new, this permitted a considerable degree of scope for students to *feed forward* into the module's development. This is not to demean the value of *feedback*: indeed, this will be a key element of RT251's continuing development. However, feedback

---

[4] A number of important issues, both pragmatic and paedagogical, prevented RT251 being conceived as a research-based module in the full sense (e.g., based solely around the production of a piece of original research, such as a long essay or a dissertation). These include, for example, the way it was timetabled (thirteen, weekly, two-hour teaching blocks), the students' lack of previous acquaintance with the subject matter and/or training in research methods, and a large class size preventing the kind of intensive, one-on-one support required. A further consideration was its position in Semester 1 of the second year: an important transitional point, representing a significant 'step-up' academically (Gahagan & Hunter 2006).

occurs only once major decisions have been made: while 'tweaking' is possible and worthwhile, more major changes require a considerable time commitment (leading, understandably, to an 'if it ain't *too* broken, don't fix it' mentality). Here, however, students were encouraged to give their views on a wide range of 'still-to-be-decided' issues relating to RT251's structure, content and assessment. These comments and criticisms were extremely helpful, and many formed part of the final module. That said, the focus group was intended as a *consultation*. Since a 'student-centred' lecturer is not a mere demagogue, I still exercised what Reynolds and Trehan refer to as the tutor's 'unilateral, intellectual authority by holding the power to make decisions' (2000: 269). This is particularly important to note given the admitted limits of focus groups, not least their obvious selection bias (i.e., the students interested enough to attend one are by no means necessarily representative of the cohort as a whole!).

Module content and assessment

RT251 is taught in semester 1 of Level 2. In the previous year, all students (with the exception of any international students) have taken the module 'Foundations in Religious Studies', introducing them to each of the 'big six' religions in the UK. One session had also been devoted, in a necessarily cursory way, to British nonreligion (exploring its various facets in light of Smart's 'seven dimensions'). No other acquaintance with the subject matter could be presumed. Rather than focus, in detail but narrowly, on one particular aspect of the study of atheism and nonreligion (e.g., the New Atheism, or humanism), it was decided instead to give an overview of different disciplinary approaches, with a particular focus on recent and emerging research. (Aside from solid pedagogical reasons for this, the general paucity of existing sources was also a factor here. Generally speaking, there are only a small number of resources on any specific topic that are suitable for the undergraduate classroom. A high proportion of these are, moreover, fairly recent.) In line with other St Mary's RS modules, it was further decided to focus primarily on the contemporary situation in Britain, albeit with scope for contrasting the (in many ways very different)

American scene.

With these basic decisions in place, the 12 week module was ultimately structured as below:

> **Introduction:**
> Week One: Studying atheism and nonreligion
> **Historical and intellectual roots:**
> Week Two: 'Science' vs. 'Religion'
> Week Three: Marx and his legacies
> Week Four: Introducing secularization (Guest lecturer: Dr Anthony Carroll, Heythrop College)
> [First Assignment set: 750-word article/chapter critique, due in on 2 November]
> **Contemporary atheism and nonreligion:**
> Week Five: Atheism/nonreligion in contemporary Britain (Guest lecturer: Lois Lee, Cambridge University)
> Week Six: Atheism/nonreligion in the contemporary USA
> Week Seven: Psychological perspectives
> [Second Assignment set: 1750-word essay, due in on 14 December]
> Week Eight: [No Lecture: time set aside for tutorials for individual feedback on Assignment 1]
> Week Nine: Fieldtrip: Humanism/Conway Hall (Guest lecturer: Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association)
> Week Ten: [No Lecture: time set aside for individual tutorials for planning Assignment 2]
> Week Eleven: The New Atheism as an Intellectual Phenomenon
> Week Twelve: The New Atheism as a Social Phenomenon

In structuring the module in this way, the intention was to lay a solid foundation in weeks one to four, exploring certain conceptual issues (not least, the various definitions and connotations of the key terms 'atheism' and 'nonreligion'), as well as providing necessary historical, social and intellectual background. This allowed weeks five to twelve to be primarily devoted to exploring specific contemporary manifestations of atheism and nonreligion. The initial draft of the module structure included more topics (e.g., 'Atheism/nonreligion in post-communist Russia'), but these were reduced to allow for two coursework planning and feedback sessions in weeks eight and ten (cf. Ramsden

1992: 71). The incorporation of the fieldtrip and guest lecturers was heavily influenced by the student focus group. These had been much-valued elements of their Level 1 module 'Foundations in Religious Studies', and in the words of one:

> it gives you an extra point of view. Because you [i.e., the lecturer] do your research, you know, about your bit, and then if you get someone who maybe works in the [British Humanist Association]... If you get someone like that, they can talk about another part of it.

Considerable thought went into the module's assessment, in particular, guided by the assumption that 'The trick is [...] to make sure the assessment tasks mirror what you intended them to learn' (Biggs 2003: 4). With this in mind I opted to assess RT251 by written coursework, encouraged by research suggesting that 'open, essay-type questions tend to encourage a deep approach' (Struyven et al. 2005, 330). Given the constraint of 2,500 words as the total for assessed work on a 15-credit Level 2 module, my initial inclination was to set a single essay. Two considerations persuaded me against this, however. The first is the value of giving students feedback on their work at a relatively early stage in the module. This allows students to gauge how well they are doing, and how they might improve, during the course—as opposed to how well they did, and what they should have done to improve, once it is too late (Ramsden 1992: 193). Importantly, it also allows the lecturer to appraise the quality of the students' learning (and hence, of his or her teaching), and if done early enough, to intervene. As Ramsden recommends: 'Learn from your students' mistakes. Use assessment to discover their misunderstandings, then modify teaching to address them' (ibid.: 211). This seemed particularly important given that the module comes at an important academic 'step-up': an early, short, assessed piece of work should help in 'acclimatizing' the students to Level 2. I decided, therefore, to set a 750-word article/chapter review, to be submitted in week 6, and which would count 30% towards the final grade. This offered a choice of three fairly short texts, each relevant to one of the first three 'foundational' sessions. Convinced of the value of one-on-one tutorial feedback from my own undergraduate studies—an impression supported by much of the literature (e.g., Struyven et al. 2005: 334; Palfreyman 2008)—time was set aside in week 8 for precisely this. The focus group agreed that even a five or ten

minute session would be worthwhile, for those willing to make use of it.

The main piece of assessment is a 1,750 word coursework essay, for 70% of the final mark. This is shorter than I would have preferred, but is a necessary trade-off in order to (hopefully) accrue the paedagogical benefits outlined above.[5] My enthusiasm for students to devise their own essay titles (just like researchers in the field typically do) was generally indulged by the focus group, and several were personally keen on the idea. Legitimate doubts were, however, raised against making this a requirement. In particular, several expressed insecurity regarding their own abilities to formulate a viable and 'proper' question (and hence project) for themselves. In the words of one focus group participant: 'Sometimes it panics me a bit more if I have to kind of think of it myself.' Some also pointed out that not everyone in the group is likely to put as much thought and effort into the process as might be desirable. Taking all this on board, a compromise was proposed which was unanimously agreed upon: while students would be actively encouraged to develop their own titles/questions, a list of pre-approved titles (e.g., one for each session) would also be provided. Students could choose whether to pick one from the list, or—perhaps emboldened by having the pre-approved as models of the 'kinds of titles' required—to devise their own, in consultation with me, and requiring my approval. For both sets of students, week 10 was set aside for coursework planning seminars and/or tutorials. This is just one example of how elements of a 'research-based approach' have been applied within the limits of a large, Level 2 group. That is, a certain amount of space was built into the module, to allow—but, importantly, not require—students sufficient autonomy to create (albeit short) projects, and perhaps even to conduct their own empirical research (an important theme in Healey and Jenkins 2009). While the latter may sound (and is!) ambitious, this may perhaps be possible for those also undertaking studies in, for example, history, psychology, or sociology.

---

[5] A different, attractive possibility—having students submit a draft version of their final essay (Ramsden 1992: 196-7) instead of a separate, though related, early task—was rejected on the grounds that, in order to be useful in terms of 'acclimatization' to Level 2 etc., students would need to have decided on their coursework topic at a very early stage of the module. Students were however encouraged to submit a draft of both pieces of coursework for formative assessment.

(In the latter subject at St Mary's, for example—as one student in the focus group pointed out—the creation and application of small, empirical projects is a key element in the Level 1 'Research Methods' course.)

Module evaluation

The first presentation of RT251, in Autumn 2010, was certainly encouraging. As previously mentioned, uptake was high (indeed, it proved to be the year's most popular option among all the Level 2 theology, RS and biblical studies options.) The standard of work submitted for assessment was, on the whole, fairly pleasing. No students failed the module, and there was a small number of well-deserved firsts. In the teaching sessions themselves, I was particularly pleased (and slightly surprised) at how naturally and spontaneously students drew links between the module content and current issues in wider British and American socio-religious life. A particularly fecund topic for discussion—and one to which we returned on several occasions—was the role of religion, or the lack of it, in politics. One key point of interest here was the seeming 'non-issue' of Nick Clegg's and Ed Miliband's lack of religious practice of belief for the British media and most voters, compared to—the students' own, unprompted examples—a) other politicians being viewed as being 'too' religious (e.g., Tony Blair or Ruth Kelly), b) the prominent role of overtly religious discourse in American politics, and c) the very different perception of atheism and nonreligion in Britain's not-too-distant past (e.g., with Holyoake and others in the Victorian era). The interest and insightful evident in such discussions lends support to Bainbridge's abovequoted assertion—which is itself a significant element of my rationale for studying these subjects as part of the RS curriculum—that 'By learning more about the lack of faith, we can understand better the role of faith in modern society' (2005: 22).

Not all went perfectly, however. A significant number of students clearly struggled with certain key conceptual issues. Chief among these was the varying definitions of atheism in both popular and academic discourse, and the importance of distinguishing between *positive* ('belief that there is no God') and *negative* ('lack of belief that there

is') varieties. Despite considerable class time being devoted to this topic, most obviously in the very first session, the fundamental points generally failed to stick. Clearly more attention needs to be given to this issue for future presentations of the module. (The attempt at clarity on this issue is not, of course, helped by the vagaries of definition and connotation used in scholarly literature. But while partially explaining the problem, this fact makes greater clarity on the part of students of atheism all the more urgent!) The notion of a religious studies module on atheism and nonreligion clearly also wrongfooted a number of students. The extent to which an atheistic system or worldview (ranging from Theravada Buddhism and Jainism, to Comtean positivism, Marxist-Leninism and secular humanism) might legitimately be considered as a 'religion' is, of course, an interesting question, and one which was touched upon in RT251. Indeed, one of the suggested titles for the 1750-word assignment was 'Is humanism a religion?'. A handful of the weaker students in the class, however, fixated on the misapprehension that atheism itself, as a 'belief', must *ipso facto* qualify as a religion. This perhaps implies that greater attention should be giving to exploring the nature and definition of 'religion' itself elsewhere in the RS curriculum.

The students' own evaluation of the module was also encouraging.[6] In particular, many students felt that they had gained a deeper awareness of the varying types and manifestations of atheism and nonreligion, and had had certain stereotypes about atheists (many seemingly patterned on media discourse surrounding the New Atheism) dispelled. Five of the eighteen respondents identified the fieldtrip to Conway Hall to be one of the most enjoyable aspects of the module; eleven mentioned classroom discussions and debates (usually linked to a set text). One student further cited 'Ability and confidence to speak freely in discussion in a controlled environment' as one of the main 'opportunities to develop key transferable skills' provided by the module.

Given the level of thought put into planning RT251's assessment tasks, it is ironic—and disappointing—that the students' dominant crit-

---

[6] Based on eighteen completed module evaluation forms, requiring the student to rate various aspects of the course on a 5-point Likert scale, and asking for brief comments.

icism of the module (aside from difficulties in finding a big enough room in the first few weeks) concerned the 750-word chapter/article critique. This was, it may be recalled, intended to be both a non-intimidating and 'acclimatizing' opportunity to do, and receive feedback on, Level 2 work. This is not, however, quite how it was perceived at the time. Having never apparently been asked to 'critique' something before, many students—especially, as they freely admitted, those who left it rather late—felt unsure of what was expected of them. These issues were openly discussed in class, though unfortunately not before the day the assignment was due in. (Students had been repeatedly encouraged to email or visit me if they had any questions or concerns about the tasks, or any other aspect of the module.) That said, no student did terribly badly on the task, and a large number were very pleasantly surprised by their grades. (One student came to my office to apologize for—as she supposed—having failed the assignment, only to be informed that she had received a very good First.) Furthermore, once the rationale behind the task had been explained in class, the group were unanimous that it was a good idea, and ought to be retained in next year's presentation. Evidently, however (and this was the point made most often on the evaluation forms) more guidance must be given, in order to prevent a repeat of this year's wholly avoidable panic.

Conclusion: challenges and opportunities

RT251 represents a 'first attempt' in two important ways. It is the *first attempt* of an early-career academic at developing his own module, on one of his own research areas, from scratch. It is, therefore, very much a work in progress—and one which, as a 'reflective practitioner' (cf. Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond 2005: 214-15), I shall be refining and improving as my experience and expertise gradually grows. But it is also, of course, a *first attempt* to construct a module on contemporary atheism and nonreligion, drawing on new and emerging research, to fit within a traditional undergraduate RS syllabus. As such, it is emphatically *not* presented here as a 'model' for others to follow. Rather, it is meant as an initial point of reference for those who are perhaps considering the introduction (or perhaps increase) of these and

related topics within their own curricula. If it helps colleagues only in deciding *how not* to design their own courses on atheism and nonreligion, then this article will have served its primary purpose. In the fullness of time, as more and more lecturers begin to teach atheism and nonreligion (in some cases, perhaps, having themselves studied it as undergraduates?) it is to be hoped that more useful and comprehensive resources will, through dialogue and collaboration, become available.

Nevertheless, the maiden presentation of RT251 does indeed indicate some (moderate) challenges and (conspicuous) opportunities. In terms of the former, there are difficulties regarding the preconceptions which students bring to the topic. Popular depictions of an 'atheist' as one who not only positively believes in God's non-existence, but who does so with a high degree of conviction (and perhaps also arrogance or intolerance), can be difficult to shake. Furthermore, the positioning of 'nonreligion' within religious studies—though necessary and justifiable—is evidently ripe for confusion. Such challenges and others do not, however, obviate the benefits of studying, in more depth than would otherwise be possible, such a significant and growing feature of global socio-religious culture—and one that not only sheds light upon, but actively interests undergraduates, and gets them thinking and talking about, crucial questions regarding the role of religion (and/or the lack of it!) in contemporary public and private life.

Bibliography

Bainbridge, William Sims, 'Atheism', *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 1/1, (2005) pp.1-24.

Barnett, R. and Coate, K., *Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005).

Biggs, John, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999).

Biggs, John, 'Aligning Teaching and Assessment to Curriculum Objectives', *Imaginative Curriculum Project Guide* (LTSN Generic Centre, 2003). Available online at: **http://www.palatine.ac.uk/files/1030.pdf**. Last accessed on 21 March 2011.

Biggs, John and Tang, Catherine, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*, 3rd revised edition

(Buckingham: Open University Press, 2007).

Bunt, Gary, 'Studying Islam after 9-11: Reflections and Resources', *PRS-LTSN Journal*, 1/2, (2002) pp.156-64.

Cragun, R., 'On the Receiving End: Discrimination towards the Non-religious in the US', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, forthcoming.

Donnelly, Mark, '"Write the Book, Teach the Module": Integrating Historical Research and Teaching', (HEA History Casestudy, 2006). Available online at: **http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/ heahistory/ resources/cs_donnelly_writingteaching_xxxxxxxx.doc**. Last accessed on 21 March 2011.

Edgell, P., Gerteis, J. and Hartmann, D., 'Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society', *American Sociological Review*, 71/2, (2006) pp.211-34.

Gahagan, Jimmie and Hunter, Mary Stuart, 'The Second-year Experience: Turning Attention to the Academy's Middle Children', *About Campus*, 11/3, (2006), pp.17-23.

Hammersley-Fletcher, Linda and Orsmond, Paul, 'Reflection on Reflective Practices within Peer Observation', Studies in Higher Education, 30/2, (2005) pp.213-24.

Healey, Mick and Jenkins, Alan, *Developing Undergraduate Research and Enquiry* (York: Higher Education Academy, 2009). Available online at: **http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/resou rces/publications/DevelopingUndergraduate_Final.pdf**. Last accessed on 21 March 2011.

Jenkins, Alan, 'Designing a Curriculum that Values a Research-based Approach to Student Learning', **Imaginative Curriculum Project Guide** (LTSN Generic Centre, 2003). Available online at: **http://www.brookes.ac.uk/genericlink/documents/creative-curriculumV2.doc**. Last accessed on 21 March 2011.

Lea, S. J., Stephenson, D. and Troy, J., 'Higher Education Students' Attitudes to Student-centred Learning: Beyond "Educational Bulimia"?', *Studies in Higher Education*, 28/3, (2003) pp.322-34.

Palfreyman, David, (ed.) *The Oxford Tutorial: 'Thanks, You Taught Me How to Think'*, 2nd edition (Oxford: OxCHEPS, 2008).

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *Non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education* (London: QCA, 2004).

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

RoutledgeFalmer, 1992).

Reynolds, P. M. and Trehan, K., 'Assessment: A Critical
     Perspective', *Studies in Higher Education*, 25/3, (2000),
     pp.267-78.

Richardson, J. T. and Introvigne, M., 'New Religious Movements,
     Countermovements, Moral Panics, and the Media', in
     Bromley, D. G., *Teaching New Religious Movements* (New
     York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 91-111.

Struyven, K., Dochy, F. and Janssens, S., 'Students' Perceptions
     about Evaluation and Assessment in Higher Education: a
     Review', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*,
     30/4, (2005), pp.325-41.

Lee, Lois and Bullivant, Stephen, 'Where do Atheists Come From?',
     New Scientist, 2750, (6 March 2010) pp.26-7.

Zuckerman, Phil, 'Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns',
     in Martin, Michael, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*
     (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) pp. 47-65.

Appendix: recent resources for undergraduate study

As mentioned above, the scholarly secondary literature on atheism and non-religion (except in the disciplines of philosophy and, to a lesser extent, theology) is comparatively meagre. With the recent growth of interest in the field, this lacuna is, albeit slowly, being addressed.[7] However, the majority of this work remains at a technical level, and is largely unsuited for use in the undergraduate classroom. This problem is compounded by the multidiscipli-narity both of RS itself, and of the emerging subfield of nonreligion studies. It is, for example, unreasonable to expect RS undergraduates to read and appreciate books and journal articles written for specialists in (say) sociology, psychology, anthropology and social history. And yet data and ideas from each of these fields—if not from several more besides—may well feature in a typical RS module (like they do in RT251).

       What follows is a brief, annotated notice of various, fairly recent texts, which I have either found to be useful, or am confident would be so. In almost

---

[7] A frequently updated bibliography of books and articles published after 2000 may be found on the website of the international and interdisciplinary Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN), which was founded in late 2008. See **http://www.nsrn.co.uk/Bibliography.html**. Last accessed on 21 March 2011.

all cases, this 'use' is applies only to parts of the whole, whether whole chapters or shorter excerpts. As far as I am aware, no book currently exists that would be suitable as a primary 'set text' (at least not for so wide-ranging and introductory a module as RT251). Where applicable, I have highlighted certain chapters which I regard as specially useful, though these are not intended to be exhaustive. NB: texts relating to topics which are already firmly established in the undergraduate RS syllabus (e.g., secularization) are not included.

In terms of a general introduction to the topic (and, importantly, to the idea of studying atheism and nonreligion as part of the RS syllabus), the final chapter on 'Secular Humanism' in Ian Markham and Christy Lohr's *A World Religions Reader* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)—which is somewhat broader in scope than its title implies—would be a good place to start. Recent years have also seen a small number of high-quality edited collections surveying the field as a whole. Michael Martin's *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) is especially useful for students considering the definition of atheism (see Martin's 'Introduction' and Jan Bremmer's 'Atheism in Antiquity'), and for gaining overviews of global demographics (Phil Zuckerman's 'Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns') and psychological research (Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi's 'Atheists: A Psychological Profile'). Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar's *Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives* (Hartford, CT: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture) and Phil Zuckerman's two-volume *Atheism and Secularity* (Santa Barbara, CA; Praeger, 2010) are both strong on a number of areas, most notably their country- or region-specific surveys (David Voas has a characteristically illuminating chapter in each: 'Secularity in Great Britain' co-authored with Abby Day in Kosmin/Keysar; and 'The Triumph of Indifference: Irreligion in British Society' co-authored with Samuel Bagg in Zuckerman). Helpfully, Kosmin and Keysar's *Secularism and Secularity* is downloadable for free from their research centre's website.[8]

Compared with other areas, the history of atheism and nonreligion is comparatively well-resourced. Alister McGrath's *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (London: Rider, 2004) is both solid and entertaining, especially on western unbelief's political and intellectual roots (e.g., regarding Marxism and the science-religion conflict thesis). Students may also wish to reflect on whether it is premature to speak of atheism's 'twilight' (Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*, widely recognized as

---

[8] See **https://www.trincoll.edu/Academics/AcademicResources/values/ ISSSC/publications**. Last accessed on 21 March 2011.

the first of the New Atheist best-sellers, was published the same year; Dawkins' two-million-selling *The God Delusion* two years later). More recently still, Graeme Smith's *A Short History of Secularism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007) and Gavin Hyman's *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010) offer novel and insightful takes on somewhat familiar terrain.

For psychological perspectives, in addition to Beit-Hallahmi's chapter in *The Cambridge Companion* (above), Bruce E. Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer's *Atheists: A Groundbreaking Study of America's Unbelievers* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2006) provides a brief but illuminating profile of members of American atheist groups. Of particular interest, perhaps, is their investigation of the reasons and motivations given for becoming and/or remaining an atheist.

For the philosophy of humanism there are a range of helpful texts, including Richard Norman's *On Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2004), and Jim Herrick's *Humanism: An Introduction* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005). Jeaneane Fowler's *Humanism: Beliefs and Practices* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999) also provides valuable detail on the ceremonial and ritual aspects of contemporary humanism (e.g., humanist chaplains, humanist funerals, and baby namings). Perhaps the best and most accessible overview of the entire topic, however, is provided by Stephen Law's *Humanism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Finally, high-quality secondary literature on the New Atheism phenomenon, from a range of disciplinary perspectives, is beginning to emerge, and much more is undoubtedly underway. So far, though, the standout volume is Amarnath Amarasingam's edited collection *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2010), offering a series of rigorous reflections on its philosophical, sociological and cultural facets. While the book as a whole is neither suited, nor intended, for undergraduate use, certain chapters can indeed be used for this (including—dare I say it?—my own 'The New Atheism and Sociology: Why Here? Why Now? What Next?').

Critical Friendships Among Beginning Philosophers

Brendan Larvor, John Lippitt and Kathryn Weston

Department of Philosophy
University of Hertfordshire

> 'The noble man is chiefly concerned with wisdom and friendship; of these, the former is a mortal good, the latter an immortal one.'
>
> – Epicurus

Abstract

In a mini-project funded by the Subject Centre, we reviewed the educational literature on peer support and used focus groups to explore students' ideas of academic and critical friendship. We report on our findings, make some connections with philosophical writing on friendship, and offer some steps that institutions might take to foster academically fecund friendships among philosophy students.

Background and rationale

Students often do not realise that their best resource is each other. Or if they do, they are unsure how to help each other without falling into academic misconduct.

Students usually arrive at university with habits formed at school, knowing that they will have to 'work more independently'. All too often, they imagine that this means working in isolation, and the sparse timetable of classes universities typically offer them confirms this misapprehension.[1] Our prior research[2] indicates that a low ratio of classroom time to private study makes it difficult for students to form supportive intellectual friendships with other students on their courses. Many do not realise that 'independent study' means intellectual autonomy rather than cognitive autarky. It is rarely explained to them that a group of students can work autonomously on a shared project (if they devise or select their own methods and do their own research), or that working alone on a pre structured (and therefore tutor-dependent) task may not constitute independent study. Since first-year undergraduates have little direct contact with research activity, they may not

---

[1] One of the student voices in Longden & Yorke regretted not having made 'sure I was really organised and prepared as it is mainly singular study. Having come straight from achieving higher A levels in sixth form, this has been a shock. Sometimes brutal.' (p. 42) Another complained of 'Lots of time between sessions wasted' (ibid.), apparently unaware that such time could be spent in discussion with other students.

[2] See Larvor & Lippitt (2009). This project was funded through the HEA Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies.

notice spontaneously that philosophy is collaborative. Researchers in philosophy form reading groups, listen to and criticise each other's papers in seminars, read each other's drafts, give each other *ad hoc* tutorials and suggest sources. For most academics, becoming an independent researcher crucially involves developing and sustaining a network of scholars with similar or related interests—and gaining the skills and virtues necessary to sustain such relationships. This collaboration is almost entirely hidden from readers of the books and articles it produces. In the humanities, most research-products are single-author documents. We acknowledge help from others in small-print, in a preface or at the foot of a page, where few first-year students are likely to notice it.

Instead of explaining and exemplifying the collaborative nature of philosophy, we greet new students with warnings about plagiarism and collusion. This, together with the easily misunderstood instruction to 'work independently', confirms to them that university must be a solitary struggle. 'How to study' guides usually corroborate this impression. Even the otherwise excellent *Doing Philosophy* mentions interaction with other students just twice (Lamb et al, 2007: 93 4 and 159 60). Both these brief discussions suppose that 'study-buddy' relationships are already in place, and offer no advice on how to initiate or sustain them. Thus, practical and cultural factors conspire to discourage students from forming useful, supportive, intellectual peer-friendships at just the moment (the transition to university) when contact time with tutors abruptly diminishes.

The consequences are familiar to every personal tutor. Students struggling in isolation, suddenly deprived of the teacher-support they had in school or college, turn in sub-standard work. Their sense of how well other students are doing may depend excessively on the impressive talk of the confident few who dominate seminars and they may feel intimidated by imagining the wonderful essays such students must write. Their confidence drains away and their studies become purgatorial. This can happen to students at any point on the ability range.

Telling students that co-operation is normal may help. However, exhortation alone rarely solves deep-seated problems with their roots in years of school experience. We need to develop effective ways of promoting intellectual friendships among students and teaching them how to help each other without cheating.

The project

Philosophy has a rich tradition of writing on friendship in such figures as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, St. Augustine, Bacon, Montaigne, Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Emerson and Derrida,[3] to say nothing of contemporary treatments of the topic.[4] Outside philosophy, there is a burgeoning educational literature on learning communities, peer support, peer tutoring and critical friendship. The first phase of this project surveys and reports on this research insofar as it bears on the typical assessment instruments and aims of undergraduate philosophy education.

The second phase explores the target audience, namely, beginning philosophy students. Ideally, one would like to solve this problem at school level rather than at university. Or if we cannot intervene at school, we should begin on day one of their time at university (that is, a moment when their understanding is still essentially that of school students). An effective intervention requires knowledge of the present perceptions of the target population. Consequently, we formed two focus groups among year 12 and 13 students in two institutions (Peter Symonds College, Winchester and Sir John Lawes School, Harpenden). We used semi-structured discussion to explore their understanding of friendship, co-operation and collusion. We regard these groups as a source of representative student voices, rather than as an attempt to identify statistically normal student opinion.

The third phase notes the connections between these results and some important philosophical writing on friendship.

---

[3] Two good anthologies are Pakaluk (ed.), 1991 and Badhwar (ed.), 1993.
[4] See for instance Lynch, 2005 and Vernon, 2005.

I: Learning communities and peer support—a critical review of the educational literature

Introduction: what do we mean by 'peer support'?

Peer support has been used in British education to involve students in each others' academic and social development since at least the 1950s (Topping, 1988). Peer tutoring first appeared in the primary classroom, where children were used as 'agents of change' for improving the behaviour and attainment of peers. In practice, this would mean the establishment of 'reading pairs' and teachers encouraging more able pupils to assist others with classroom work. However, it was only in the 1980s in the UK, with the publication of the first major work on the subject (Goodlad, 1978), that peer tutoring became more widely used in schools and universities.

Peer tutoring first appeared in higher education in the 1990s and it has been used within a range of academic disciplines since (Tariq, 2005). It claims to offer three benefits: (1) improving cost-effectiveness (2) reducing non-completion rates and (3) improving study and learning skills. The following section will discuss these points in turn.

Peer support in higher education

The development in British universities over the last twenty years of Peer Assisted Learning Schemes (PALS) reflects the need to assist students without further stretching human and/or financial resources. This form of student-to-student intervention owes much to the North American Supplemental Instruction (SI) model, which at its core, emphasises 'preparing students to learn and empowering them to become autonomous in their learning' (Martin and Arendale, 1993). SI emphasises cooperation rather than competition. It uses informal review sessions in which students compare notes, read, discuss and develop organisational tools for learning. Sessions are often facilitated by older students with experience of the course. SI is now an internationally recognised academic support and retention programme (Wallace, 1996).

A review of the literature reveals that peer support, and being receptive to it, is strongly correlated with academic engagement. Kingston (2008) explored the 'affective characteristics' of students who participated in courses that experienced high numbers of students dropping out. She concluded that students on these courses were more likely to have high self-esteem and good levels of interpersonal skills (than students on 'low drop-out' courses), but less likely to trust their peers as sources of support. On courses with low drop-out rates, the opposite was true; students exhibited a high level of confidence in their peers as sources of social support and exhibited a more proactive attitude to self-improvement.

In 2003, there were 35 PAL schemes within UK Higher Education. Sixty-one percent of these were initiated for 'retention purposes' as well as widening participation (Phillips, 2006). As is often the case, a programme that might benefit all students is introduced to support students who are judged to have particular needs or vulnerabilities. Carefully organised induction programmes focusing on building social support networks for new entrants, now form part of a widely used student retention strategy across UK universities. What follow are a few selected examples of these schemes at work.

In Goldsmiths, University of London, a PAL scheme exists to help first year students make the transition into higher education by 'creating a supportive environment'. Second and third year students are recruited and trained as mentors to run peer-assisted learning groups for first years.

A similar scheme operates in Bournemouth University, which adopted a personal tutoring system in 2002. The aim of the programme is 'to enhance the first year experience' within departments 'at risk' of student drop-out. Second-year students are now paired with those in the first year, and mentoring time designed into student timetables to facilitate learning and ease new arrivals into university life (Hartwell and Farbrother, 2006).

At the University of Ulster, where peer tutoring schemes have been in existence since 2002, there have been noticeable improvements in retention rates at the university in courses where peer-support strategies have been implemented. Students perceive peer support as being of real benefit to them. They have reported a greater ability to retain knowledge as well as, 'enhanced creativity, greater use of library

material, resourcefulness and increased motivation' (Houston and Lazenbatt, 1996).

The University of Manchester has established two major peer support programmes: 'peer mentoring' and 'peer assisted study sessions' (PASS). PASS provide additional opportunities for all students to interact with their peers in collaborative study groups within their own disciplines. The sessions are attached to a unit within a degree course and provide 'a safe environment for students to discuss ideas, share problems and resolve questions in a setting that supplements the core curriculum' (Ody and Carey, 2008).

The 'peer mentoring programme' at Manchester is less about academic achievement and more about providing a social support network for students. It fosters a sense of community through 'informal activity enabling interaction across the various student cohorts within a discipline'. Sessions are informal and can be attached to tutorial groups or run independently. In 2008, the university operated a peer mentoring scheme with over 1100 students acting as peer mentors across 39 disciplines (Ody and Carey, 2008).

Often, participants in PALS experience corollary benefits apart from improved study skills. Sheffield Hallam University, for example, has been running a peer support project for Chinese students on a pre-masters course in recent years, integrating them with students on an international business programme that involves a placement in China. The scheme was developed by staff mainly to improve the study methods of Chinese students. However, there have been many other reported positive effects for student participants, such as gaining an understanding of a different culture, and conventions, etiquette, daily life, making friends to have regular contact with, and overcoming shyness.

Fostering a sense of belonging and helping establish friendship groups for students is now a recognised strategy for increasing the enjoyment of the social and academic aspects of university life, and ultimately, as we discuss in more detail below, improving learning and critical thinking skills.

The positive impact of peers on learning

Programmes that focus on helping new students adapt and succeed in the first year of university are only one variant of many models of peer tutoring that have appeared in higher education. Other models include: (1) student 'discussion' groups, (2) seminars led by postgraduate or more advanced students, (3) learning cells or what are termed 'enhanced pairs': a form of learning in pairs in which students alternate in asking questions, (4) collaborative peer learning (a form of learning which occurs through social interaction between peers and is directed towards the accomplishment of a task or problem solving exercise), (5) 'cascading' which involves teaming up with one peer and then discussing with others subsequently, (6) 'parrainage' (a buddy system) and (7) self and peer assessment (Houston and Lazenbatt, 1996).

At the heart of the models listed above is the thought that the most effective learning environment is one where learning is a social activity, 'fully involving the learner, preferably...in a supportive and non-threatening environment' (Wallace, 1996: 110). Social isolation is not conducive to academic achievement; we know that learning together in a collaborative and experiential way can significantly increase an individual's learning potential (ibid: 112). The peer group can discourage intellectual interest and growth or conversely invigorate a person's desire to learn (Schaffer and Griggs, 1990: 2). This is particularly the case for young people, where the peers are highly influential (Antonio, 1994; Wentzel and Watkins, 2002).

The emergence of the 'personalised learning' model in schools and universities in the UK in recent years gives extra emphasis to the value that peers can bring to learning. This approach emphasises one-to-one tuition, mentoring, peer coaching, smaller tuition groups, online support and discussion, in order to 'encourage students to be intellectually curious, learn independently and self-evaluate' (Shepherd, 2006). It is based on the idea that learning is an 'active process of constructing knowledge' (Hewitt, 2008: 35) and less about performing actions in line with teachers' instructions.

Critical friendship

Peer scrutiny has proved a useful learning tool for practitioners across

a wide variety of settings. For example, it has been recognised that peer coaching can enhance performance and improve practice in business (Ladyshewsky, 2006), the medical profession (Baguley and Brown, 2009; Kammer, 1982; Schaffer and Griggs, 1990; Roberts, 2009) and teaching (Cornu, 1995; Bambino, 2002; Dunne and Honts, 1998). 'Peer coaching' is a term that is often used interchangeably within the literature on peer support. It is not entirely synonymous with, but does contain many aspects linked to the idea of 'critical friendship'.

Collectively, the studies above reveal how scrutiny, under the guise of 'critical friendship', can significantly develop and enrich professional standards, mainly through the development of reflective practice. The literature contains many interpretations of 'critical friendship' but central to most definitions is the acknowledgement that a critical friend is 'a 'confidant' who acts as a 'sounding board', providing guidance and support (Baird, 1993). This model of critical friendship involves individuals assisting each other through 'questioning, reflecting back and providing another viewpoint'. It is a process that should prompt 'honest reflection and appraisal' (Swaffield, 2008), and although it can be an uncomfortable experience to have one's practice scrutinised, it is ultimately one that participants find useful.

Being a critical friend may require qualities more like those of a teacher than of a student. That may be why Briggs' *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* offers a very short note on student learning partners (p. 112), but a longer discussion of critical friendship (pp. 154-5) in the chapter on 'The Reflective Teacher'. These two discussions assume that such relationships require no special virtues or nurturing beyond those found in any other kind of friendship.

Beyond Briggs, there are many references in the educational literature to the role that critical friendship can play in the development of professional practice. Of particular note are 'critical friends groups' (CFGs) or 'critical friendship communities' for teachers. Such groups usually entail participants observing each other during lessons and providing support, companionship, feedback and assistance (Ackland, 1991; Wynn and Kromrey, 1999). They offer a 'space' where individuals can challenge each other in a climate of mutual vulnerability and risk-taking (Achinstein and Meyer, 1997), absorb multiple perspectives, explore practice, try and test out new pedagogical methods and develop a professional 'voice' (Cropley, 2001; Kohler et al, 1999).

Such groups reflect a growing trend for site-based professional development in which educational practitioners behave as 'managers of their own learning' (Franzak, 2002). The type of peer coaching typically contained within CFGs is known as 'reciprocal coaching', as it does not regard one of the parties as an 'expert', but rather an equal partner (Showers, 1985: 47).

Critical friendship has also been used to develop leadership qualities among teaching staff and improve schools' performance (Swaffield, 2008). This study explored the attributes of critical friendship in school learning communities. Swaffield usefully lists the key ingredients crucial to critical friendship in this context as: trust, provocative questioning, an alternative perspective, constructive critique and advocacy. She describes 'dialogue' as being 'at the heart of critical friendship' and learning (Swaffield, 2008: 334).

Studies equally reveal the positive contribution that CFGs can make towards developing a culture of learning for students (Waghid, 2006; Van Swet et al, 2009). This latter study, for example, highlighted the value of critical friendship for postgraduate students doing research and writing their dissertations within an international master's course. A key line of enquiry that formed the basis of this study was exploring how the process of becoming critical friends can be actively promoted by those running the course. The course consisted of lectures, workshops, roundtables, working as critical friends, individual and group presentations, tutorials and self-study. It was considered that in order to become more competent practitioners (in their chosen area of special needs education), students should be encouraged to be a 'critical friend' to their peers.

This study shed light on how best to implement a successful critical friendship strategy among higher education students. To achieve participant buy-in, studies emphasise the importance of discussing the concept of critical friendship with students beforehand (taking into consideration as far as possible life histories, cultural background and focusing on issues of trust and critical debate). They also underline the importance of defining roles and tasks as clearly as possible before starting the process. Other vital features are as follows. Firstly, critical friends must be happy to engage in open and honest communication. Secondly, they must be able and expected to ask uncomfortable questions and present critiques that may be challenging.

Thirdly, the recipient needs to be able to receive feedback non-defensively, be open to alternative perspectives, and feel 'safe' in 'thinking aloud'. According to Franzak, a feeling of safety within a CFG stems from three factors: (1) a sense of equality, (2) the group's positive attitude and (3) the purposefulness of the work (Franzak, 2002: 226).

A common issue affecting critical friendship is an initial reticence about exposing one's work to peers. This reluctance, studies show, may be reduced by participants being able to choose their own critical friend in the initial stages (Van Swet *et al*, 2008).

Diversity among students was seen across studies on critical friendship, as a rich source of intellectual growth, indeed the 'multicultural characteristics' of CFGs in the Van Smet study appeared to 'aid students in the process of seeing other perspectives and viewpoints'. CFGs ran more smoothly when 'small' in size because then discussing each other's work does not take too long. Finally, the literature warns that developing CFGs may take time, as participants (perhaps for the first time) learn to talk, share their work and think in a collaborative way. Of course, both aspects of critical friendship (learning to give and receive criticism and becoming friends) take time.

These studies and other literature on critical friendship illuminate a number of barriers to critical friendship. The most common issue concerns the 'uneasy marriage' (Achinstein and Meyer, 1997) between the norms of friendship with those of critique.

The practice of criticising friends' work can cause tension and discomfort. This is common amongst, but not confined to, students, who can be particularly reluctant to evaluate peers and provide an assessment of their work (Falchikov, 2001: 2). For many, 'critical friendship' contains an obvious tension. As Handal (2008) observes, 'criticism [is] usually conveyed by someone who represents contrasting or alternative points of view or other interests and who may even be hostile to us'. However, as he notes, a 'real friend' is someone 'on whom we can rely and who will even hold a critical mirror before us when necessary'. The theme of trust arose spontaneously in the focus groups (section II) and we return to it in section III below.

In a study of critical friendship practices among trainee teachers, a number of practical tensions were identified relating to individuals' reluctance to criticise peers. Participants would often leave problematic assumptions unchallenged, limiting their feedback to 'safe'

feedback, and recipients would often resist hearing criticism (Achinstein and Meyer, 1997). Critical friendship requires individuals to develop diplomatic and constructive ways of communicating feedback to others.

Barriers to collaboration in the context of critical friendship may include defensiveness, differences in communication styles and cultural norms (Cropley, 2001: 165). Other barriers may be more practical, such as unavailable space within institutions or inappropriate available space (see Klein, 1999). As Klein notes, learning through collaboration and critical inquiry necessitates both a physical 'thinking space' conducive to talking, sharing and listening and a 'thinking environment' (a set of conditions under which people think for themselves and think well together). A 'thinking environment' necessitates equality, appreciation, limiting assumptions, respect, ease (the space that a thinking environment needs to stay intact), encouragement, diversity, incisive questions, attention and information.

According to Klein, competition in a thinking environment is particularly hazardous (Klein, 1999: 72). In order for a person to think well, they have to be encouraged by the listener 'without smelling a bead of envy or competition from them'. Competition may mean one participant steering the other away from a great idea by suggesting they concentrate somewhere else. Conversely, if the person thinking is competing with you, trying to seem more clever or competitive, they will not be able to pursue their own ideas honestly or fully. Competitive listeners are thinking inhibitors (*ibid*).

Handal (2008) argues that it is our attitude towards criticism that requires challenge. He claims that it should be seen as an 'academic virtue' rather than something to fear, resist or avoid. He notes that a critical approach is already a highly valued tool for assessing the quality of ideas and outcome within academia, so there is no reason why this cannot be the case in other areas. Indeed, as he sees it, 'critical appreciation is a central element of academic identity' (ibid: 66). Handal defines 'good criticism' as 'generally relevant, argumentative, well-documented and something we learn from'. Among academic philosophers, Handal's definition is platitudinous (though perhaps honoured in the breach more often than we would care to admit). The fact that he troubled to make these remarks at all is a useful reminder that these apparent platitudes about the value of criticism are part of a

professional identity that incoming students, and their schoolteachers, do not necessarily share. Much of the literature insists on the desirability of a safe environment (Ody and Carey 2008, Wallace 1996), without always noting the tension between this and the 'mutual vulnerability and risk-taking' to which Achinstein and Meyer allude.

Although we have been exploring the value of 'critical' friendship above, the literature also confirms that friendship *per se* can have a powerful effect on learning; it does not necessarily require a critical component. Eraut (2000 as cited in Roberts, 2009: 368) defines 'informal learning' as 'any kind of learning which does not take place within, or follow from, a formally organised learning programme'. The control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner; it is unstructured and does not take place in a classroom (Marsick and Watkins, 2001).

Roberts' (2009) ethnographic study of student nurses in clinical practice sheds light on how 'informal learning' can be a powerful by-product of friendship. His study reveals three key themes relating to friendships and peer learning. Firstly, that student nurses develop an 'ask anything' culture amongst their peer group, and see each other as valuable sources of information. Secondly, they see each other as a discrete group, who are 'in the same boat' and develop their own community to 'to help each other out'. Thirdly, knowledge is not linked necessarily to seniority. Within clinical practice, student nurses in this study collaborated in order to learn, constructing their knowledge informally, through shared experience and practice. Friendship provided the medium through which 'vicarious learning' took place (ibid: 371).

Peers are clearly a rich resource for enhancing the learning process whether or not their role involves any formalised means for providing critique and feedback. This fact has led some commentators to argue that educators need to find a way of capitalising on informal learning opportunities, helping learners to make their vicarious learning 'more visible and rigorous' (Marsick and Watkins, 2001).

Why does peer coaching lead to improved learning?

It has been claimed that peer learning promotes (among other things): working with others; critical enquiry and reflection; communication

and articulation of knowledge, understanding and ideas; managing learning and how to learn; and self and peer assessment (Boud et al, 2001). But how?

Constructivist educational theorists influenced by Piaget and Vygotsky underline the importance of conceptual conflict as a means of provoking individual reflection and ultimately improved conceptions (Andersen, 2001). Ladyshewsky (2008) explains how 'critical cognitive conflicts' as Piaget called them, provoke new ideas and refine thinking and problem solving skills:

> When a learner... through discussions with another peer becomes aware of a contradiction in his/her knowledge base, the learner experiences a lapse of equilibrium. The learner will initiate strategies to restore equilibrium, for example, by engaging the peer in working together to find a solution that both can accept.

This view is echoed by Andersen (2001), who notes that 'social interaction offers a natural corrective to the egocentrism of individual thought: we try out our ideas, and often our interlocutor is better able than we are to evaluate and offer a critique of them perhaps even offering a contrasting view'.

Peer coaching and collaboration encourages individual development through a process of purposeful enquiry based on reflection and action, leading to 'enhanced meta-cognition'. Baird (1993: 46) claims that meta-cognition encompasses three components:

- *meta-cognitive knowledge* (knowledge about the nature and process of learning, personal learning style, productive learning strategies),
- *awareness of the current learning task* (generated by the learner asking appropriate evaluative questions such as 'What am I doing?' and 'Why am I doing it?' and then instituting procedures to find out the answers).
- *control of the current learning task* (by having learners make more purposeful, productive decisions, based on their increased level of awareness).

Boud (1995) claims that meta-cognitive learning has been shown to lead to a deeper and more lasting learning. Below are some examples where meta-cognitive learning has taken place within a number of peer support learning models in higher education.

First, 'small group teaching' (SGT) is particularly conducive to improved meta-cognition. The main publication on this teaching method states that 'SGT is all about helping students learn with and from each other through the promotion of 'active interpersonal communication' (Exley and Dennick, 2004). It commonly occurs in 'student-led SGTs', which can mean 4-8 students developing a 'learning set' or 'tutor-less' tutorials which support a constructivist approach to learning.

Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning; the SGT simply facilitates discussion. SGT often includes peer tutoring, self and peer monitoring, where 'participating students are called to think beyond what they have been given or taught' (Exley and Dennick, 2004). This requires a degree of collaboration and free exchange not commonly found in other forms of teaching. SGT or peer learning in pairs for example, is much more effective for transmitting information and for achieving higher-level conceptual skills (Cropley, 2001:168).

Within the literature on what is termed 'action learning', the positive benefits to students of working with other course participants (normally in small groups) are well documented. Studies talk of the camaraderie that can develop within a 'learning set'. These personal 'think tanks' are places of mutual support; a safe place to explore project and self; a place where friendships are formed; a place to be challenged; and a place to get feedback which is both positive and negative (Bourner and Frost, 1996).

Second, Ladyshewsky (2006) describes peer coaching meetings intended to provide students with a safe place to discuss learning objectives and questions stemming from their real-life project assignments. Peer coaches each received a one-hour orientation on peer coaching and its relationship to management education and professional development. Students also received a guide to peer coaching. The duration of the peer coaching relationship had a set time of twelve weeks. To receive credit for peer coaching, all students were required to submit peer coaching reports that described their experience (based around set questions). The report, along with the students' learning objectives and an excerpt from their learning journal, was worth twenty per cent of their overall grade for the unit. The peer coaching reports showed the enhancement of critical thinking and the heightening of meta-cogni-

tion. In other words, the students understood their own thinking better, were able to take control of it and do it better.

To summarise: there is an overwhelming consensus in the educational literature that student-to-student coaching and critical friendship deepen learning. They are particularly helpful in developing intellectual independence, especially when the participants are members of the same class or cohort. On the other hand, the authors surveyed differ in the relative emphasis they place on the safety of the thinking environment and the risks associated with genuine criticism.

II: Students in years 12/13 discuss academic friendship

Method

Against the background of this literature, we conducted two focus groups, one of eight students at Peter Symonds College (a sixth-form college in Winchester with over 3000 students) and, one of ten students at Sir John Lawes School (an all-ability co-educational LEA-maintained secondary school in Harpenden with an annual year-seven intake of about 180). Each group discussion took just over an hour. We presented the questions on PowerPoint slides but we allowed the discussion to range freely. We first asked the students, 'What sort of activities help you to understand a new topic?' and 'What resources are there at school or college to help you learn?' This was to test whether they spontaneously identified their working with their peers as an aid to learning. We then presented them with this quotation from a student nurse:

> When you begin university, you are told about all the support available to you, but the most important support network is never mentioned; fellow students. No one can empathise with you like another student can. (Roberts 2009: 369)

With the topic thus introduced, we invited the students to 'Contrast the friend who helps you with your academic work and an ordinary pal.

What extra skills, knowledge, values and virtues does the former need to have?'

Next, we specified 'academic' friendship as 'critical' friendship, explained that this idea has practical application among teachers from trainees up to headteachers,[5] and asked the students:

- What do you make of this idea?
- What problems do you see with it?
- How might these problems be solved?

We also wanted to explore the idea, mentioned in section I, that resistance to critical friendship might be minimised by allowing participants to choose their own critical friend in the early stages. This runs into a potential objection: the idea, very common in discussions of friendship amongst the ancients, that the true friend is the very opposite of the flatterer. We asked the students to discuss whether flattery has any place in friendship generally and academic friendship in particular.

We then asked the students whether they wanted to revise or augment their answers on the contrast between ordinary and academic friendships. To keep the peer-to-peer aspect in view, we asked the participants whether reciprocity is an essential element in academic friendships. Here we were interested in students' views as to whether a one-sided academic friendship could possibly work: cf. Franzak's point above about the importance of equality in critical friendships. Compare here too Emerson's claim that 'the only way to have a friend is to be one' (Emerson in Pakaluk (ed.) 1991: 230).

Our prior research identified anxieties about plagiarism and collusion as barriers to informal peer-support, so we asked:

- How can students help each other to study without cheating?
- How can students help each other with essay-writing without cheating?

Our enquiry is motivated by a search for effective interventions, so we asked 'What conditions or activities would be conducive to forming and maintaining academic friendships?' and 'Could social networking sites make a difference to academic friendships? If so, how?'

The target for this research is the assumptions that students bring to university with them, so we asked, 'Do you think your answers to all

---

[5] See discussion in section I (above).

these questions might be different at university? If so, how?'

Finally, we asked the students how many contact hours per week they expected to have at university.

Results

In answer to the first question, no students identified each other as a resource. Invited to explain why, they said that their peers wouldn't be able to help them as they lack topic-knowledge. There were anxieties about the reliability of information gained from non-teachers. Most seemed to assume that 'help' must mean explaining curriculum content. Called on to elaborate, some participants observed that new students won't have any more idea than themselves how to write essays. More advanced students are more useful, because they may have worked out study techniques. One participant did eventually say, 'The best way to learn something is by teaching it yourself.'

Asking for help from a teacher is easy because teachers are there to help, but asking a student for help is awkward as that person may not want to teach. Also, the participants reported pressure not to reveal struggles and weaknesses: you do not want to admit that you are falling behind. This suggests that going to another student for help is seen as an exceptional, remedial event rather than a normal part of learning (which connects with a common feature of many of the programmes reviewed in section I). Furthermore, they observed that fellow students can be competitors. Some felt deeply anxious that their ideas might be stolen, even though A-level marking is on an absolute scale: one student's mark is not affected if another benefits from a borrowed or stolen thought. One lamented that essays are not covered by copyright.

In response to the question about the skills, knowledge, values and virtues required of the friend who helps with academic work, participants said that maturity is more important than intelligence. By 'maturity' they seemed to mean discipline and focus. One said it was more about the person's work ethic; another said that an ordinary friend with a good work ethic is better than someone who is merely knowledgeable. The academic friend would have to take the academic side seriously: the relationship cannot 'just be based on hanging out'. (Here and elsewhere there was a tacit admission that time set aside for study is too easily and too often spent messing about.) There was some ambi-

guity about whether the academic friend is also a regular friend, or merely a utility-relationship. One participant suggested that you wouldn't choose someone who wasn't already a friend. Participants eventually assembled a demanding list of qualities that an academic friend should have. An academic friend should be 'blunt but polite with it'; be truthful; have some knowledge about you as a person; have 'good morals'; 'do what's morally right for you' and have the same values as you but different (complementary) skills and knowledge. Your academic friend should challenge you and 'take you out of your comfort zone'.

There was a spontaneous suggestion that reciprocity is a good thing in such friendships. Your academic friend need not be someone 'cleverer' than you because you could 'work things out together'. It is noteworthy that the idea of intellectual near-equals working things out together is what the researchers understand by academic friendship, but this picture emerged only late and fleetingly in the participants' contributions. One participant opined that while it's nicer and better for a friendship to be reciprocal, more likely one party will be academically stronger, and persisting in such an unequal relationship requires moral strength and self-respect from the weaker party (note that this remark assumes that one party is stronger than the other across the board). One participant observed that reciprocal academic relationships help to develop the independence required at higher levels (meaning year 13 and university). A one-sided academic friendship would foster dependency. Indeed, one participant said that academic friendship has to be reciprocal to be a friendship—otherwise it is a teacher/student relationship. Then, the student won't feel able to challenge the teacher, so the debating activity would get lost.

In addition to maturity, discipline, focus and a will to learn, the participants identified patience as a cardinal virtue in academic friends, followed by kindness, efficiency, reliability and communication skills. In contrast with the remark about the value of reciprocity, one participant suggested that a good academic friend should be 'someone a bit better at the subject than you'. Another suggestion was that academic friends should have contrasting opinions, though this was quickly qualified by the thought that this is unlikely because friends tend to be of a like mind.

When invited to think about critical friendship, the participants

for the most part reiterated their remarks about academic friendship, but with greater emphasis on the trust that arises from a friendship that is not only about mutual criticism. Indeed, one participant was very clear that, 'There had better be more to the relationship than criticism'. Critical friends should have some fun stuff in common; there should be a means of de-stressing within the relationship. This, they thought, would most likely arise if the friendship precedes the criticism. Similarly, a well established friendship helps communication. It's easier, less hurtful if the critic knows you, and shared humour makes the criticism easier to take. At any rate the critic must not 'act superior', or even constructive criticism might be badly taken. A potentially good academic friend is someone who already knows your faults and doesn't think less of you on account of them.

When thinking about the tension between friendship and criticism (the theme of the work already cited by Achinstein and Meyer), the participants noted a natural reluctance to hurt a friend's feelings. However, some insisted that real friendship requires warts-and-all knowledge and criticism. One went so far as to say that, 'A real friend is more critical than a [merely] academic friend.' The questions focussed on the qualities required of the critic, but participants noted that critical friendship requires 'maturity' (possibly the most often-used word in the discussions) from the person criticised.

Both groups raised the possibility that the critic may end up learning from the friend criticised. Participants noted that academic friendship may require both parties to swallow their pride so that disagreements don't damage the friendship. The critic must be able to distinguish a difference in views from an objective error or fault (professional academics know that this is a tall order that not all reviewers of papers and books manage to deliver).

The participants identified several features that suggest a role for educational institutions in mitigating the tension between criticism and friendship. They pointed out that while a friend may find gentle ways of putting critical points, someone who has been given the role of critic is 'just doing their job' so there is less danger of criticism hurting. This distancing effect can be enhanced with explicit marking guidelines (so that the criteria of criticism are part of the task, not personal to the critic) and clarity that the work is being criticised, not the author. In other words, both parties should understand that criticism is primarily

an encounter between work and criteria, not between critic and victim. Critics should find something to praise and understand that everything starts less-than-perfect. Taken together, these points explain why students were more comfortable receiving criticism from teachers. One participant observed that it is a teacher's job to criticise, but it's not obviously part of a friend's role, so someone could be offended by criticism from a friend.

When asked about flattery, participants replied that 'there's a time and a place for flattery', and some suggested that mutual flattery can be an enjoyable activity. There was some disagreement as to whether flattery involved praising without meaning it (deception) or could mean sincerely complimenting. None identified the flattery of omission, of failing to point out faults, nor was there any awareness of the place that selectively positive feedback might have in building up a student's confidence. When pressed on the choice between warts-and-all frankness and flattery, some participants finessed the point by insisting on the importance of timing in truth-telling.

When invited to discuss cheating, one participant said that there is a definite line between giving someone your work and generally coaching them. Helping without cheating includes: coaching in method and technique; going over background information; providing sign-posting phrases; explaining what sort of answers exam boards look for; pointing out flaws in essays; suggesting ideas; mentioning the key points and supplying an answer to a different question. One participant said that you need to be taught in such a way that you develop your own style and original ideas. (This is a useful reminder that the best protection against plagiarism is intellectual independence. Students who patch together essays out of found materials sometimes fall into plagiarism when they forget to record where they found some snippet; students who create their own arguments do not run this risk.)

When asked about forming and maintaining academic friend-ships, participants returned to the theme of trust. Character flaws and weaknesses should be tolerated and not broadcast to others: 'it comes back to trust'. On the other hand, the participants were much more positive about competition than Klein and other educationalists reviewed in section I. There was a sense that friendly rivalry is always healthy. 'Friendly' means not 'rubbing it in the other person's face' and must not be essential to the relationship. That is, the friendship could

continue if the rivalry were suspended. Some participants were frank about the motivational power of their desire to beat the person who is top. Others talked about academic friendship as a means to explore extra-curricular curiosity.

Facebook and the Internet were considered to be distractions. However, e-mail conversations are more likely to stay focussed than face-to-face conversations with mates. Here as before, some participants sheepishly acknowledged a tendency to muck about in time intended for study. Moreover, participants valued the ease and discretion of electronic communication. Internet conversations can be easily terminated, require little commitment and need not be visible to the whole peer group. It is easy to prevent the relationship from becoming more intimate than intended. Facebook friending involves no commitment (unlike an exchange of phone numbers or e-mail addresses) and messaging is invisible to all but the sender and recipient. No-one said so, but the thought seemed to be that you can chat with someone online without being seen to do so by your friendship group. Internet chat can be worked in with other activities, and therefore does not require the same commitment as going to the library with someone. One observed, of Facebook, 'You can post a question on your status... and if someone gives you something that is complete rubbish, you can disregard it without hurting their feelings at all.' One participant said that you have to be more of an individual learner to learn things over the Internet (i.e. someone who doesn't have to be shown).

When asked how they thought things will be different at university, the participants confirmed our hypotheses about their expectations. They expressed worries about plagiarism, and knew that there would be less contact time than at school and sixth-form college. Nevertheless, some were surprised that contact hours at university in the Humanities can be as little as eight hours per week or less ('Isn't that, like, nothing?').

Participants thought that there is more point to academic friendships and social networking at university because school exams are relatively prescriptive, whereas university involves extra research and need for debate. As one put it, 'You have to use your own head.' There was a sense that university study is a different 'animal' from anything the participants had directly experienced thus far. Rather touchingly, there was an expectation that academic friendships will be easier to

form at university because students at that level are more mature (that word again) and have a desire to learn. (Our prior research into the experiences of philosophy undergraduates included some quite bitter expressions of disappointment that the thirst for learning was not as intense in the undergraduate body as had been expected (Larvor & Lippitt 2009).) At the same time, some participants felt that university would be more competitive than school because it is the last stage before the jobs market. Participants saw value in peer friendships as sources of support—they will all be new to the experience and thus in the same boat—and discipline ('You have to be more honest with your friends at uni because there are no parents to keep them in line.')

III: Philosophers on friendship

How do these naturally-occurring thoughts connect with some of those found amongst philosophers, ancient and modern, who have written on friendship? Is there anything in this literature that could be used to encourage new undergraduates/school leavers to think about how best to form beneficial intellectual friendships?

To begin with, there seemed to be little in the students' default understanding of friendship that echoed the idea, found in Aristotle and Cicero amongst others, that true friendship is possible only amongst 'good men': those in possession of the necessary virtues.[6] Friends, for these students, are first of all those with whom you hang out and muck about. Or as Aristotle put it: '...the friendship of young people seems to aim at pleasure; for they live under the guidance of emotion, and pursue above all what is pleasant to themselves and what is immediately before them...' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1155a31-33). However, once the discussion got going, the importance of the academic friend possessing certain values and virtues came increasingly to the surface. One of the most frequently recurring virtue-words was 'maturity', by which they meant, among other things, the capacity to set aside immediate pleasures and settle to some work. In other words, Aristotle was right about young people, but he failed to do justice to their recognition of this

---

[6] 'Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue...' (*Nicomachean Ethics,* 1156b7 8).

tendency in themselves, and their efforts to overcome it. (The participants also used 'maturity' to refer to emotional continence in the face of criticism.)

One of the questions that came up in the focus groups concerns frankness. This is a central theme in the philosophy of friendship from Plato's *Lysis* onwards: the importance of honesty, and the related idea that flattery is the very opposite of true friendship. 'Without honesty', Cicero claims, 'friendship has no meaning' (Cicero xxv.92). To be sure, on the relationship between friendship and flattery, one encounters different views. William Hazlitt describes friendship as 'a flattering mirror' in which we see 'our virtues magnified and our errors softened' (Hazlitt 1991: 153). On the subject of flattery, the participants in the focus groups talked about the role friends have in boosting each other's confidence, especially in the face of criticism that magnifies errors and downplays virtues. Here, your friend is the person who nurses your wounded pride when your work has taken a critical battering.

Hazlitt's remark captures a truth about friendship, but many (perhaps most) philosophers take a more strenuous view of the matter. They insist that, recognisable though mutual admiration societies may be, the kind of 'flattering mirror' Hazlitt describes is not true friendship at all. Writers in antiquity, Cicero and Plutarch, discuss in detail the problem of how to distinguish a flatterer from a true friend, and in the early Christian era, when there is considerable discussion of especially Cicero's view of friendship, St Basil the Great and St Jerome make much of his idea that flattery destroys friendship and that true friendship thus demands a degree of frankness.[7] Basil insists that: 'the flatterer speaks to give pleasure while the friend refrains from nothing, even that which causes pain' (Basil of Caesarea 1972: ep. 20, cited in White 1992: 74). This echoes Cicero's claim that:

> flattery is far sorrier [than frankness], for by failing to call wrongdoing to account, it lets a friend fall to his ruin … It is an essential part of true friendship … to offer and receive admonition; but it must be offered courteously, not peremptorily, and received with forbearance, not with resentment. By the same sign, we must

---

[7] Plutarch's treatise is entitled 'How to discriminate a flatterer from a friend'. On Plutarch, see Konstan 1997: 98-105; on Plutarch, Basil and Jerome, see White 1992: 39, 74, 81 and 140.

> maintain that there is no danger more deadly to friendship than servility, sycophancy, flattery… (Cicero, ibid., xxiv.89-xxv.91).

It is this 'failing to call wrongdoing to account' that most interests us here. The focus on safety referred to in much of the literature reviewed in section I tends to overlook the fact that to reduce anxiety to zero would require backing off from making incisive (that is to say, cutting) criticism. This is a kind of flattery: what in section II we have called the flattery of omission. It is not overt buttering-up, but this failure to mention faults would be, in the context of *academic* friendship, a failure of such friendship.

Cicero is a major influence on the humanist writers of the Renaissance, and among them Francis Bacon (in his essay on friendship) describes 'faithful counsel' from a friend as one of the key 'fruits' of friendship. Approvingly quoting Heraclitus' saying that'dry light is ever the best', he asserts that:

> certain it is, that the light, that a man receiveth, by counsel from another, is drier, and purer, than that which cometh from his own understanding, and judgement; which is ever infused and drenched in his affections and customs. (Bacon in Pakaluk (ed.) 1991: 205).

In other words, the honest friend brings something that one simply cannot provide oneself. However, in the group discussions, the participants insisted that there must be more to a critical friendship than criticism. There should be mutual affection and shared humour, recreation and values. This suggests that, to use Bacon's metaphor, 'faithful counsel' is a *fruit* of friendship; it is not the whole tree. Moreover, as the participants noted, the commonalities that constitute the friendship also make it less likely that the academic friend will offer alternative points of view. This youthful kind of friendship, with its origins in pleasure and play, is likely to hold between friends who are 'infused and drenched' in the same 'affections and customs' as each other and therefore not as drily challenging as Bacon might have hoped. In any case, one of the 'affections' in which a pair of friends might be 'drenched' could be a passion for a particular intellectual pursuit. As noted, some of the group discussion participants identified shared extra-curricular curiosities as grounds for the sort of friendship that might become an academic or critical friendship.

A friendship might originate in a shared interest without demanding shared opinions. C.S. Lewis claims that, 'The man who agrees with us that some question, little regarded by others, is of great importance can be our Friend. He need not agree with us about the answer.' (Lewis 1960: 66). Compare this with Ladyshewsky's assumption (quoted in section I) that the route out of *aporia* (that is, the criticism-induced disequilibrium he described) must be towards a solution acceptable to both discussants. However, where friends do hold differing opinions, or hold the same opinions with differing intensities, it may not be easy or even possible to explore these differences. As Nietzsche observed:

> ...human relationships rest on the fact that a certain few things are never said, indeed that they are never touched upon; and once these pebbles are set rolling, the friendship follows after, and falls apart.' (Nietzsche 1984: 193 (§376)).

Students are aware of this danger; their reluctance to criticise each other's work is not merely the expression of a preference for safety and ease. Nietzsche's solution is to remember that our opinions and those of our friends are not simple products of reason. Rather, they are the necessary consequences of 'the indissoluble interweaving of character, occupation, talent and environment.' (ibid.). Reflection on this thought ought to make us less inclined to claim truth for ourselves and impute error to those who disagree with us. In this perspective, differing opinions become evidence of differences in 'character, occupation, talent and environment'. This way of looking at differences offers the possibility of mentioning the unmentionable, of handling and hefting the pebbles which, if allowed to roll free, would threaten the friendship. Friends with a deep appreciation of Nietzsche's point may be able to treat their differing convictions as hypotheses of equal standing. A feeling for the dependency of one's opinions on the contingencies of one's life may come only with experience, that is, with noticing changes in one's opinions consequent on changes in occupation or environment. Nietzsche's observation suggests that the psychological conditions necessary for Cicero's courteous exchange of criticism are complex. The soldierly Roman virtue of forbearance under critical fire will not suffice. Rather, we must come to regard our nature as '...a changing sphere of opinions and moods, thus learning to despise it a bit...' (ibid.). This insight into the processes that form and reform our

opinions may not be readily available to the young—it may be part of the 'maturity' at which our focus groups kept gesturing. It can be manufactured, sometimes, by presenting students with philosophical intuition-pumps that drag their opinions first this way then that. Some students do learn through such exercises to despise their own opinionated natures a bit; others learn to despise philosophy.

A second and related theme is the importance of trust. Here is Cicero again: 'the foundation of that steadfastness and loyalty for which we are looking in friendship is trust, for nothing endures that cannot be trusted' (Cicero xxviii.65). Several of the students' comments showed their tacit agreement with this claim. Trust was one of the reasons why some students thought that academic friendships could best (or only?) arise from a pre-existing friendship. Perhaps this echoes Emerson's thought that 'A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud.' (Emerson in Pakaluk (ed.) 1991: 225). This 'thinking aloud' is clearly an important part of the mutual working through a problem central to academic friendship. Why would one not wish to think aloud before a stranger? The obvious possibility is that our thoughts are unfinished and we do not wish to commit to them publicly. They may have logical faults we have yet to detect. There are other dangers: our thoughts may violate a taboo, or be open to misinterpretation, or expose us to physical danger. The participants' comments on trust indicate three objects for it: work, feelings and reputation. If I show you a draft of my work and ask for your critical opinion, I trust you not to steal my ideas, I trust you not to ridicule them to my face, and I trust you not to disparage them behind my back or publish them without my permission.

The first of these was clearly present in the minds of students who worried about having their ideas stolen, even though such theft could not affect their own academic progress. The second of these three kinds of trust goes beyond refraining from overt ridicule of the work and its author. For the participants, it is part of trust that the more skilled or knowledgeable critical friend should not be patronising, should not 'act superior'. This again echoes one of Cicero's claims: 'the most important thing in friendship is the preservation of a right attitude towards our inferiors. So many times there are among us men of extraordinary distinction, such as Scipio was ... in our little group. Yet he never set himself above ... those of his friends who were of

inferior station.' (Cicero xix.69). The third worry, about risk to reputation, was especially acute for the participants in our groups because they saw going to another student for help as a remedial action, and therefore evidence of academic weakness or falling behind in the course.

This connects with the final big theme, reciprocity. This cropped up in the literature reviewed in section I, and emerged in the student discussion too, though only once the discussion shifted from peer teaching to peer coaching. The connection the students made between reciprocity and intellectual independence interests us greatly. Several philosophers of friendship make much of the theme of reciprocity in friendship: consider, for instance, Aristotle's pessimism about the prospects for lasting friendships between unequals (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1158b29-1159a13). The difficulty of friendships between unequals is the reason, Aristotle writes, why there is a question whether friends really do wish for friends the greatest goods. If my friend gains 'the greatest goods' to the point where his stock far surpasses mine, it may not be possible for us to remain friends. Education aims at increasing students' store of knowledge, skill, virtue and wisdom. Since different students gain these goods at different rates, it is not to be expected that a pair of academic friends will remain academic equals indefinitely, even if they begin as equals.

In the student discussion, reciprocity seemed to take numerous forms. First, the mutual respect that friendship implies. As noted, some students introduced the interesting idea, absent from Aristotle's account, that the good friend is someone who already knows your faults and doesn't think less of you on account of them. Second, the idea of being companions in pursuit of a common project. The student discussion moved from the assumption that the person capable of helping with you with your work would be someone more knowledgeable or skilful than you to the idea that 'it doesn't have to be someone cleverer, you could be working things out together.' This centrality of focus on a common goal recalls C.S. Lewis's contrast between erotic love and friendship in *The Four Loves*: 'Lovers are always talking together about their love; Friends hardly ever about their Friendship. Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest.' (Lewis 1960: 61).

Discussion: what can educational institutions do?

A meta-theme of our investigation was maximising the intellectual benefit of critical friendship while minimising the emotional costs. In the literature reviewed in section I, we noted that various writers talk about ensuring a feeling of safety, etc., and Klein condemns competition as an inhibitor. But we would claim that you are not in fact safe if the criticism is real. Your work is in danger of failing to meet the required standard and you are in danger of falling into *aporia*. So, while confidence-building is important, and the tone and manner of criticism (and reaction to it) have to be policed, we should expect a sense of danger to remain so long as the criticism remains rigorous. The students in the focus groups knew this, which is why they returned repeatedly to the trust between friends. Trust is necessary because and insofar as something is at stake and could be lost. This is most obvious in dangerous activities such as diving and rock-climbing, where trust between companions is essential, both of their characters and competence.

When students are invited to criticise each other's work, they often do so very tentatively and make only the most anodyne suggestions. This reluctance to wield the red pen arises, we claim, from a combination of awareness that feelings and reputations are at stake, and nervousness about their competence as critics. (Imagine going on a diving course and being invited to check someone else's breathing apparatus before you have learned how it works.) The students in the focus groups said that explicit marking criteria make it easier to evaluate their own work and that of others. The successful mentoring and peer-support schemes reviewed in section I all include some training. It follows that if we wish students to participate in a version of the culture of mutual criticism in which professional academics work, we should offer them some guidance in the arts of editing, criticising and reviewing. Few philosophers, if any, are ever trained to referee journal articles or review books; most of us pick it up as we go along. This, though, is not how most professions maintain standards. Usually, when people are given new roles and responsibilities, they get some training in how to fulfil these. Suppose one were to design a training course for journal referees. What would be its content? What

exercises would foster the required virtues and sensibility?

Such a training course should include some discussion of the virtues of a critical friend, such as we have begun here. These virtues have application whenever one person criticises the work of another, whether they are friends or not. There is no reason why anonymous referee reports on papers submitted to academic journals should not be friendly. This imagined training course would include reflection on the distinction between disagreement and incompetence. There can be a competent presentation of an argument that the critic disagrees with, especially in philosophy, where arguments aim at plausibility and phenomenological recognition rather than empirical or mathematical validity. Few would deny this in principle, but the problem of distinguishing disagreement from incompetence in practice could bear further discussion.

The aim of an intervention such as this would be to help students achieve the double-distancing mentioned above. Double-distancing is valuable even between friends. Perhaps your friend can put things in a way you'll understand and can beware of your red buttons. Perhaps you already trust each other and forgive each other's faults, and have ways peculiar to your friendship of de-stressing and recovering from conflict. Nevertheless, critical friendship requires competence as well as character. A training in criticism of this sort must be part of the mainstream development of academic skills. One of the barriers to the development of critical friendships is the perception among students that asking for help is exceptional and remedial. This is, regrettably, corroborated by the tendency of institutions to introduce peer-support programmes in response to difficulties experienced by specific student groups, such as international students, students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds and others who are judged to be at risk of dropping out. Training in how to help peers, framed as induction into research practice, might go some way to embed the idea that mutual assistance is a normal part of academic life, even for the most senior academics.

Another assumption that the focus group participants shared with many of the programmes reviewed in section I is that the proper sources of help for students are staff and more advanced students. The students referred spontaneously to students in the years above; many of the 'peer' programmes we surveyed are in fact programmes in which advanced students mentor beginners. This reflects a deeper assumption

that the help must be in the form of teaching rather than critique. As we have seen (principally in the focus group results), there is a close connection between genuine peer-support (that is, between academic near-equals) and the development of intellectual independence.

As noted in section I, Handal defines 'good criticism' as 'generally relevant, argumentative, well-documented and something we learn from' (Handal, 2008). Training in criticism should offer a process in which criticism is written down. Writing requires the critic to think a little harder about the criticism. It makes criticism more effective and more open to challenge. It is not uncommon for journals to supply questions or outline headings to referees. Some suitably modified example could serve as a useful tool for students learning to criticise the work of others.

For us, one of the most valuable outcomes of the focus groups was to be reminded of the significance of peer-groups. Among students, your friendship-group fixes your place in (school or university) society and is thus expressive and to some degree constitutive of who you are. Finding an academic friend with all the properties we have been discussing may require violation of these structures. We see this at university: students of a sort flock together, even when doing so is clearly against their academic interests. In cases of collusion, it is almost always weak students colluding with other weak students. This point about social structure emerged in various ways, most obviously but not uniquely in the discussion of Facebook. The students seemed to be telling us that the discretion and lack of commitment of Facebook allow them to get around the constraints imposed by their social structures. No-one need know that you are messaging a nerd, and anyway it's not proper friendship, it's only Facebook. The question for institutions, then, is how can we design buildings, virtual environments and activities that offer the possibility of discreet and non-committal peer-support?

References

Achinstein, B. & Meyer, T., 'The Uneasy Marriage Between
     Friendship and Critique: Dilemmas of Fostering Critical
     Friendship in a Novice Teaching Learning Community',

Stanford University, Graduate School of Education, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, (Chicago: USA,1997).

Ackland, R., 'A Review of the Peer Coaching Literature', *The Journal of Staff Development*, 12 (1), (1991) pp.22-27.

Andersen, T., 'Peer Interaction and the Learning of Critical Thinking Skills in Further Education Students', *Instructional Science,* 29, (2001) pp.1-32.

Antonio, A.L., 'The Influence of Friendship Groups on Intellectual Self-confidence and Educational Aspirations in College', *Journal of Higher Education*, July, (2004) pp. 446-471.

Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, (New York: Random House, 2001). McKeon (ed.)

Badhwar, N., (ed.) *Friendship: a Philosophical Reader*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press,1993).

Baguley, M. & Brown, A., 'Critical Friends: an Investigation of Shared Narrative Practice Between Education and Nursing Graduates', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 1470-1294, (2009) 14(2), pp. 195-207.

Baird, J.R., 'A Personal Perspective on Mentoring' in *Return of the Mentor: Strategies for Workplace Learning*, Caldwell, Brian J. and Carter, Earl, (eds), (London; Washington, D.C : Falmer Press, 1993) pp.45-58.

Bambino, D., 'Critical Friends', *Educational Leadership*, 59(6), March, (2002) pp. 25-7. (Alexandria VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development).

Basil of Caeserea, *The Letters*, (trans. Deferrari, R.), (London: Loeb, 1972), 4 vols.

Bhadwar, N., (ed.) *Friendship: a Philosophical Reader*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

Boud, D., *Enhancing Learning through Self-assessment*, (London: Kogan Page, 1995).

Boud, D., Cohen, R. & Sampson, J. (eds.,) *Peer Learning in Higher Education: Learning From and With Each Other*, (London: Kogan Page, 2001).

Bourner, T. & Frost, P., 'In their Own Words: the Experience of Action Learning in Higher Education', *Education and Training*, 38(8), (1996) pp. 22-31.

Cicero 'On Friendship (*De Amicitia*)' in Cicero, *On Old Age and Friendship*, (trans. Frank Copley), (University of Michigan Press,1967), in Pakaluk (ed.) (1991).

Cornu, R., 'Peer Mentoring: Engaging Pre-service Teachers in Mentoring One Another', *Mentoring and Training* 13(3) December (2005).

Cropley, A.J., *Creativity in Education and Learning: a Guide for Teachers and Educators*, (London: Routledge, 2001).

Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Personalised Learning: a Practical Guide*, (Nottingham: DCSF Publications, 2008).

Dunne, F. and Honts, F., 'That Group Really Makes Me Think! Critical Friends Groups and the Development of Reflective Practitioners', Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA (1998).

Emerson, R.W., 'Friendship', in Pakaluk, M. (ed.) (1991).

Entwistle N., Thompson S. & Tait H., *Guidelines for Promoting Effective Learning in Higher Education*, (Edinburgh: Centre for Research on Learning and Instruction, University of Edinburgh, 1992).

Exley, K. & Dennick, R., *Small Group Teaching; Tutorials, Seminars and Beyond*, (Key Guides for Effective Teaching in Higher Education, 2004).

Falchikov, N., *Learning Together: Peer Tutoring in Higher Education*, (London: Routledge, 2001).

Franzak, J., 'Developing a Teacher Identity: the Impact of Critical Friendship Practice on the Student Teacher', *English Education,* 34(4) (July 2002).

Goldschimd, 'Teaching and Learning in Higher Education', *Recent Trends in Higher Education,* 5(4),(1986) pp.437-456.

Goodlad, S., *Learning by Teaching: an Introduction to Tutoring*, (New York: Nichols Publishers, London: Kogan Page, 1978).

Handal, G., 'Identities of Academic Developers: Critical Friends in the Academy', Vol. 79. Chapter Four, in Barnett, Ronald and Di Napoli, Roberto, (eds.) *Changing Identities in Higher Education: Voicing Perspectives,* (London: Routledge, 2008).

Hartwell, H. & Farbrother C., *Personal Tutoring to Enhance the First Year Experience*. Link 15. The Higher Education Academy: Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Network. (2006) **http://www.hlst.heacademy.ac.uk**.

Hazlitt, W., 'On the Spirit of Obligations', in Enright, D. J. and Rawlinson, D., (eds.) *The Oxford Book of Friendship*,

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Hewitt, D., *Understanding Effective Learning: Strategies for the Classroom*, (Open University Press, 1998).

Houston, K. & Lazenbatt, A., 'The Introduction and Evaluation of Peer-tutoring in Undergraduate Courses', *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 20(1), (Spring 1996) pp.39-50.

Joyce, B. and Showers, B., 'The Evolution of Peer Coaching', *Educational Leadership*, 53(6) (1996) pp.120-16.

Kammer, C.H., 'Using Peer Groups in Nursing Education', *Nurse Educator*, 7/6, (Winter 1982), pp.17-21.

Kingston, E., 'Emotional Competence and Drop-out Rates in Higher Education', *Education and Training,* 50(2),(2008), pp.128-139.

Klein, N., *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind*, (Cassell Illustrated,1999).

Kohler, F.W., Ezell, H.K. & Paluselli, M., 'Promoting Changes in Teachers' Conduct of Student Pair Activities: an Examination of Reciprocal Peer Coaching', *Journal of Special Education*, (33), (1999).

Konstan D., *Friendship in the Classical World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1997) .

Ladyshewsky, R.K., 'Peer Coaching: a Constructivist Methodology for Enhancing Critical Thinking in Postgraduate Business Education', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 25(1), (2006) pp.67-84.

Lamb, D., MacDonald Ross, G., Mossley, D & Saunders, C., (Closs, J., ed.), *Doing Philosophy: a Practical Guide for Students*, (London & New York: Continuum, 2007).

Larvor, B. & Lippitt, J., 'Wot U @ Uni 4? Expectations and Actuality of Studying Philosophy at University', *Discourse* 9(1) (Winter 2009), pp.93-110.

Lewis, C. S., *The Four Loves*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960).

Longden, B. & Yorke, M., *The First-year Experience in Higher Education in the UK*, (The Higher Education Academy, 2007).

Lynch, Sandra, *Philosophy and Friendship*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

Marsick, V. J., & Watkins, K. E., 'Informal and Incidental Learning', *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* 89, (2001) pp.25-34.

Martin, D. C., & Arendale, D. R., (eds.) *Supplemental Instruction:*

Increasing Achievement and Retention, (CA: Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1993).

Nietzsche, Friedrich, (Trans. Faber & Lehmann) *Human, All Too Human*, (Penguin, 1984).

Ody, M. & Carey, W.,. 'Demystifying Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS): What…? How…? Who...? Why...?', PASS at The University of Manchester. (The University of Manchester, 2008). See: **http://www.aldinhe.ac.uk/bmth09/papers/ OdyCarey_paper.pdf**

Pakaluk, Michael, (ed.) *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

Phillips, R., 'Research to Investigate Peer Mentoring in UK Higher Education', Link 15. The Higher Education Academy: Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Network, (2006): **http://www.hlst.heacademy.ac.uk**.

Riegle-crumb, C. & Callahan, R. M., 'Exploring the Academic Benefits of Friendship Ties for Latino Boys and Girls', *Social Science Quarterly*, 90(3), (September 2009), pp.611-631.

Roberts, D., 'Friendship Fosters Learning: the Importance of Friendship in Education', *Education in Practice*, 9 (2009) pp.367-371.

Schaffer, J.C. & Griggs, R.C., 'Students Teaching Students: a Medical School Peer Tutorial Programme', *Medical Education*, 24, (1990) pp.336-343.

Shepherd, J., 'First Blocks of a Customised Campus', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, May 12th, 2006.

Swaffield,'Critical Friendship, Dialogue and Learning, in the Context of Leadership for Learning', *School Leadership and Management*, 28(4) (2008) (September Issue).

Tariq, V.N., 'Introduction and Evaluation of Peer-assisted Learning in First-Year Undergraduate Bioscience', Bioscience Education E-journal, 6-3 (2005) available at: **http://www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/journal/vol6/beej-6-3.aspx**.

Topping, K.J., *The Peer Tutoring Handbook: Promoting Co-operative Learning*, (London: Croom Helm; Cambridge, MA : Brookline Books,1988).

Van Swet, J., Smit, B.H., Covers, L. & Dijk, I., 'Critical Friendship as a Contribution to Master's-level Work in an International Programme of Study', *Educational Action Research*, 17(3)

(September 2009), pp.339-357.

Vernon, Mark, *The Philosophy of Friendship*, (London: Palgrave, 2005).

Waghid, Y., 'Reclaiming Freedom and Friendship through Postgraduate Student Supervision', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 91(4), (October 2006) pp.427-439.

Wallace, J., 'Peer Tutoring: a Collaborative Approach', Chapter Seven of Wolfendale, S. and Corbett, J., (eds.) *'Opening doors': Learning Support in Higher Education*, (London: Cassell, 1996) pp.101-116.

Wentzel, K. R., & Watkins, D. E., 'Peer Relationships and Collaborative Learning as Contexts for Academic Enablers', *School Psychology Review*, 31(3), (2002) pp.366-377.

White, C., *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Wynn, M. J., & Kromrey, J., 'Paired Peer Placement with Peer Coaching in Early Field Experiences: Results of a Four-year Study', *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 26(1)(1999), pp.21-38.

VLE Wiki as Philosophy Assessment

Istvan Danka and Juha Saatsi

Department of Philosophy
University of Leeds

Introduction

This article reports a PRS Subject Centre funded mini-project that aimed to develop and evaluate collaborative online wikis as an assessment form in philosophy. Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is a networked computer-based system that supports educational purposes. Wiki is a platform for creating and editing collaborative webpages. 'VLE wiki', hence, is a virtual educational environment for collaborative creation and editing of web pages.

The aim of the project was to develop a framework for collaborative student work and its assessment based on a VLE wiki. The

framework was developed in conjunction with two single-semester modules in philosophy of science. This article provides (i) the project's motivation and rationale; (ii) description of the wiki assessment employed in the pilot; (iii) the results achieved and problems solved; and (iv) the challenges that remain.

Motivation and rationale

Doing philosophy is often viewed as a somewhat solitary endeavour: sitting in the proverbial armchair reading, thinking or writing. At the same time philosophy is of course essentially argumentative, requiring at least two points of view juxtaposed one against another. Whilst experienced philosophers are able to develop and contrast alternative viewpoints by themselves, equipping undergraduate philosophy students with the required argumentative skills is an ever-present challenge. The use of a VLE offers various means to tackle this challenge.

For example, one may consider tutorials and other face-to-face discussion groups that are part of the typical means of developing argumentative skills through peer interaction. Though undeniably integral to philosophy education, it is worth considering the virtues of offering students opportunities for corresponding interaction online using a VLE. For instance, less prepared students are less able to respond to arguments on the spot, and ditto for those averse to face-to-face social interaction. A VLE offers the possibility of 'instant but constant' responses in virtual discussion rooms: responses can be provided more or less immediately (as opposed to written feedback on an essay) but they are not ephemeral (as opposed to oral communication), and thus allow time for thinking and responding.

In order to provide incentives for students to participate in virtual 'discussion' and argumentation, one may want to employ VLE interaction as a form of assessment. Essay and exam writing are of course the traditional methods of assessment for philosophy undergraduates. Essay writing, in particular, is extremely entrenched because 'essay writing is what philosophers do'. Most philosophy students do not become professional philosophers, however, and many end up working in sectors where the ability to write extended essay-like arguments is not by default the most highly valued asset. Other forms of writing and

efficient communication may be better developed by other forms of coursework, and it is worth exploring alternative forms of assessment to essay-writing, not only in order to offer variety, but also to provide a wider range of transferable skills. Equipping philosophy students with the broadest portfolio of transferable skills possible is another constant challenge. Again, a VLE offers various means to respond to this challenge.

Motivated by these kinds of broad considerations, we developed and evaluated VLE-based 'wiki' assessment as an alternative to essay writing. Students in small groups collaboratively authored an online wiki that was used both as a formative assessment during the course of the module and also as a summative assessment for the whole module.

By enriching the variety of assessment methods and coursework, students are provided with a more enjoyable (or at least less monotonous) overall learning experience and a wider range of transferable skills. Collaborative wiki writing facilitates the acquisition of various transferable and non-cognitive skills not developed by traditional assessment methods: editing, reviewing, collaboration, IT-skills, organization, etc. It also develops a different kind of efficient communication from essay writing. Wikis can also provide novel means by which to provide both formative and summative feedback: students get formative peer feedback through collaboration, and summative feedback can take into account the quality of such peer collaboration. Wikis offer a contemporary blended-learning alternative to traditional assessment methods, taking full advantage of modern VLE facilities such as Blackboard.

Amongst other potential benefits of a wiki are the following: it introduces a genuine collaborative dimension ('learning community') that is difficult to achieve in philosophy; it allows a natural way to spread a written assessment over the module, forcing students to study the whole module equally thoroughly; it allows students to follow the progress of others' written work; and the module leader can teach and assess a different kind of effective communication that also personalizes student learning experience.

Scientific research on the educational applications of wikis is now an extended and growing field. There are, however, no accounts of VLE wiki techniques applied specifically to philosophy education. The pilot project aimed to provide some experimental ground for inves-

tigating the applicability of the insights of the above-mentioned general sources.

The pilot

The project ran over two semesters in conjunction with two philosophy of science modules. It involved (i) designing a wiki assessment for one of the modules; (ii) testing it in practice and gathering feedback from the students through questionnaires and other means; (iii) improving the assessment method with the second module; before (iv) analysing the results and presenting them through a project webpage.

In the pilot the wiki assessment had the following basic format: students, working in small groups of 5-7 on a total of 20 questions (spanning a whole module), collaborated by leaving comments on each others' initial answers so as to enable the author of each answer to improve it further.

What follows is a mix of details on the pilot implementation and related points of recommendation.

Keeping things simple

There are several ways to set up a broadly wiki-type collaborative assessment in philosophy. The pilot wiki endeavoured to keep things as simple as possible in order to make the rules of the game easy for the students to grasp. These rules are, in outline, as follows.

- The wiki comprises a number of sections that span the module in question, with a fixed number (N) of questions in each section.
- The cohort is divided into groups, with each group (apart from one, perhaps) having N members.
- Each student is required to answer one question per section, and the other students are only asked to comment on their group members' answers. Students are not allowed to directly amend any other answer apart from their own.
- A student responsible for a given answer then revises the initial version of it in light of the comments provided by other group members and/or the module leader.

This is a very simple scheme. Indeed, it may seem so simple that it doesn't even satisfy the definition of 'wiki', since students do not engage in genuinely collaborative authoring of an answer. Whether a genuine wiki or not, the advantage of keeping things simple is that this makes the individual contributions clearly discernible. This is critical if a wiki is used as a form of summative assessment. (This is less of a concern if the assessment plays only a formative role in a module and the feedback provided is purely qualitative.) The more collaborative the writing process is, the harder it is to identify individual achievement. Hence, there are some tensions in the applicability of wiki technology to summative assessment. It may be possible to identify individual outputs—provided that the VLE platform at hand is powerful enough (e.g. Blackboard gives access to every edit of a wiki)—but the examiner's workload very quickly becomes unmanageable.

The cognitive/communicative value of wikis is the collaborative creation of shared knowledge, a sort of social interaction among the students. The more collaborative the authoring process is, the higher the efficiency in collectively producing high-quality answers. But an increase in collaboration decreases the efficiency of a wiki as an individual assessment. All the same, if collaboration increases the quality of writing and argumentation, these collaborative skills also must be assessed in order to evaluate a student's overall abilities.

Deadlines

The most important difference between traditional essay writing and wiki-style collaborative work is the possibility of writing comments on others' (initial) answers or essays. Comments appear immediately and in the pilot these could not be deleted or modified later by the students. Students then edit their wiki entry in light of the comments they have received. In order to ensure a smooth, timely process, some deadlines are required. In the exemplar set-up there is a deadline for each: (i) posting an initial version; (ii) posting comments to others; (iii) posting a final version. That is, a student revises his/her initial answer in response to a single round of comments from group peers. There could be more iterations—more than one round of comments—requiring more time and increasing the number of deadlines to keep track of. Even with a single round of comments, with four wiki entries per

student, this amounts to 12 deadlines over the module, which already begins to detract from the enjoyableness of the exercise!

Marking scheme and encouraging collaboration

Regarding the collaborative dimension of the exercise, the biggest challenge was to ensure high enough student activity. As a carrot one can reward collaboration by a suitable marking scheme. In the exemplar a set percentage of the final mark was awarded for comments, with the additional clause that in order for a student to gain a mark above the pass threshold (40) for a given section of the module, at least one *bona fide* comment must be provided in that section. The percentage awarded for comments was 20% and 15%, respectively, for the two modules tested. Here 15% seemed to be high enough to act as an incentive. In as far as the final mark should reflect students' knowledge and understanding—as opposed to mere activity and effort—it seems better to keep the percentage relatively low.

In the spirit of collaboration, each author needs to receive at least some comments. In order to encourage an equal distribution of comments, one can give small extra reward for the first comment on each entry.

In the modules piloted, the average number of comments remained modest. No serious debate or conversation occurred. On the other hand, student comments were focused and got to the point of criticising the form or content of the initial wiki entries, though they were sometimes either too general (e.g. 'The second paragraph could be clearer') or too fastidious (e.g. 'The world 'unnecessary' is repeated too many times'), and not appropriate for driving proper revision in content. In order to ensure the quality of peer feedback it was therefore extremely important to be very clear on what precisely a '*bona fide*' comment consists in.

Wiki questions

Questions in the two pilot wikis were focused and asked for to-the-point answers that could be given in 650 words or less. The idea was that all four wiki entries (per student), added together, would amount to approximately 2,500 words, which is on a par with a typical undergrad-

uate essay. The incentive was to keep the overall workload manageable. A tight word limit, accompanied by appropriate tutoring for this type of writing, would also help to develop a succinct writing style, and help students focus only on what is most essential.

The obvious downside of a tight word limit is that it does not allow much room for independent creativity and argument development. This could be viewed as a severe price to pay for a philosophy module, and for this reason a wiki assessment is best viewed as a way of complementing essay writing, certainly not replacing it. On the other hand, one may take the view that it is also important for students at this stage (level-2 undergraduates) to know and be able to succinctly express as many as possible of the key concepts, arguments, and positions pertinent to a given module. Arguably a wiki assessment where a student answers and contributes to numerous focused questions can serve this goal better than a single essay. In any case, much here depends on the exact wiki questions set and for more advanced students an encouragement to follow a debate for/against the main statement(s) of an initial paper could be a way to achieve more depth through collaborative work, for example.

If wiki assessment is used to complement an essay or an exam, one must (of course) minimize the overlap between these and the individual wiki questions. In the piloted modules this was achieved with wiki questions that zoomed in on specific topics, whilst using the exam questions tested for broader understanding drawing on several wiki questions from across the module.

Monitoring and feedback

The module leader can monitor students' progress through the various versions of their wiki entries. (S)he can also leave feedback, just as other group members do, by using the commenting facility (and perhaps somehow making clear which comments come from the module leader). Ideally, a well-functioning group would require only a modest amount of input from the module leader, as feedback is received from peers whilst writing a wiki entry and from the module leader on the finished entry through appropriately justified marking. In general, if a wiki is designed to spread the coursework across a module, students are likely to get a better sense of their progress throughout the

module. Depending on the number of various deadlines involved, there can be some record-keeping in that regard, but Blackboard, for instance, provides an easy way to keep track of the actual editing and commenting times. It also allows the module leader to revert back to an earlier version, if needed.

Taking advantage of Blackboard VLE

More generally, the Blackboard VLE platform, with its out-of-the-box wiki facility, provides an efficient and adequate system for managing an exemplar-type wiki. There are a number of very useful features to this facility. For example, one can easily create student groups and multiple copies of the basic wiki structure, each copy accessible only to a single group. So one can divide students into small discussion groups that each work on a single essay, which can in turn be discussed by other students once the finished version is shared in a discussion room accessible to all students. One can also use unidentifiable user-names instead of real names for the sake of anonymity in order to help students argue more confidently. And one can create hyperlinked cross-references between different wiki pages so that a group's final output becomes a coherently navigable, multilayered web-entity without unnecessary duplication. An inclusion of multimedia documents is also possible. How much use is made of such navigational features ultimately depends on the students, of course. It may be useful to keep things quite simple to begin with and emphasize the quality of the content over hypertext writing skills.

Blackboard allows the module leader to extract a wiki—with or without comments—in PDF form, for example. Marking and final feedback can be provided electronically with this facility. It may be wise to extract copies of the completed pieces of work in case a system-wide IT problem occurs, and certainly if one doesn't print out hard-copies for marking. Whilst Blackboard VLE in general functioned very well in the project, there are some expected limitations worth bearing in mind. For example, since only one person at a time can edit a page in the wiki, the overall structure should assign an individual webpage to each individual question.

Feedback and evaluation

The feedback gathered indicates very distinct appreciation of the attempt to enrich the array of assessment methods available. Here are some telling data (on the scale 1-5; 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree, 3=uncertain):

> 'Wiki is a worthwhile assessment method in philosophy': 4.25
> 'I would recommend the adoption of wikis in other philosophy modules': 3.58
> 'Wikis introduce beneficial diversity to assessment methods in philosophy': 4.00
> 'The workload of the wiki has been appropriate': 4.17
> 'Wiki proves a good way of giving and receiving feedback': 4.33
> 'With a wiki one's workload is better spread over the semester': 4.27
> 'Wiki assessment develops different skills from essay writing': 3.91
> 'Wiki entries have covered the module's key topics well': 4.68

The course evaluation questionnaires for the two modules also said things like 'Wikis were a very good idea'. There were no distinct negative comments to the contrary. Students viewed both modules successful overall, with one summarised by the student representative as a 'resounding success'. The questionnaires also clearly indicate that wiki assessment can provide a welcome way of providing and receiving feedback. In light of the feedback and the students' general interest towards the wiki assessment, and its potential for further development, it is safe to say that the project was successful as a starting point for developing further this mode of blended learning in philosophy.

Discussion: advantages, disadvantages, and remaining challenges

Drawing on the student feedback and the module leader's personal reflections, we summarize here the perceived advantages, disadvantages, and remaining challenges of using a wiki of this type as a philosophy assessment.

Advantages

There are some clear advantages to a wiki in relation to essay writing. In particular, a wiki provides a good way of spreading the workload evenly over the course of a module. Students provide and receive feedback more continuously, both from the module leader and from student peers, thus teaching students to read their peers', and hopefully their own, essays more critically. Wiki assessment requires a student to have some understanding of even those key points, issues, and positions that are beyond the scope of their final essay; this allows students to be assessed on most of a module's key topics. Wiki also introduces variety to coursework, developing a wider range of skills and abilities. In particular, wikis develop efficient and 'prioritizing' writing skills, and also other transferable and non-cognitive skills that are not developed by essay writing (e.g. IT skills; reviewing, and editing, etc). Last but not least, wiki introduces a collaborative dimension ('learning community') to philosophy assessment—an aspect that has been largely missing in traditional forms of philosophy coursework.

Disadvantages

There are some clear disadvantages as well. For example, a wiki assessment (as implemented in the pilot) does not cater for the development of an in-depth analysis of a single philosophical issue or position. For the same reason, wiki does not allow a great deal of room for independent creativity and argument development. It is even possible that the collaborative dimension of the exercise allows a few outstanding students to be the source of most of the creativity exhibited. Neither does a wiki significantly develop independent research

skills, or the ability to organise and structure a longer piece of written work. The number of written wiki assignments and the requirement to comment on others' work do not necessarily yield a particularly enjoyable assessment, due to the extended nature of the exercise and the number of deadlines involved. Also, a wiki can potentially be a relatively onerous method of assessment for the module leader, especially for larger cohorts.

Given these disadvantages, in our view wikis are only a way of supplementing essay writing (as has been already argued above).

Remaining challenges

The basic format of the piloted wiki assessment leaves much room for tweaking and further development. A key challenge remains regarding the collaborative dimension of a wiki: it is challenging to find a way of prompting genuine collaboration that produces an output that allows students to be individually assessed for their own contribution. The simple version of the assessment presented in the pilot exemplar only allows students to comment on each other's wiki entries; it does not invite or even allow collaborative editing of the entries themselves. This simple format satisfies the second desideratum, as each entry is ultimately solely written by a single student, but it only partially succeeds regarding the first desideratum. It is unclear whether this tension can be resolved from the present perspective. Collaborative work is to an extent incompatible with individual assessment, and in as far as the purpose of higher education is not exclusively to teach students but also evaluate their development as individuals, the room for any sort of collaborative work (including VLE Wiki) is restricted. This does and should not lead one to disregard the obvious advantages discussed above.

Dispersed Teaching and Learning through a Foundation Degree in Theology and Ministry:

Towards the Creation of a Community of Scholarship

John Williams

Department of Theology and Religious Studies
York St John University

Introduction

The context for this study is the York St John University Foundation Degree in Theology and Ministry. The FDTM was launched in 2003 and has been adopted as the validated route for the training of licensed lay ministers (and latterly also some ordained

ministers) within the Church of England across the five Anglican dioceses of the Yorkshire Region (York, Ripon & Leeds, Bradford, Wakefield and Sheffield), as well as working with the Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hallam and a number of other partners. The FDTM is currently taught at 11 off-site Centres as well as on site at York St John. The author of this study is now a Senior Lecturer in Theology and Ministry at York St John, but was formerly an Associate Tutor teaching on the programme at one of the off-site Centres.

The situation giving rise to the study is that over a period of several years efforts have been made to offer more support to the off-site Centres, for example by providing termly module planning sessions and annual tutor training days. The hope has been that off-site Centre Tutors would feel part of the academic community at YSJ and that YSJ and off-site staff alike would benefit from opportunities to share ideas and good practice. Although progress has been made in this direction, some off-site tutors continue to express a sense of remoteness from the University and a desire to work more closely with YSJ staff on the task of turning the basic module documentation into teaching and learning activities that will engage students effectively towards the delivery of the module and programme learning outcomes. This study is designed to address this identified need and to take its implications to a stage beyond the provision and sharing of learning materials for modules, and towards the building of a genuine sense of a dispersed community of scholarship and learning within the Programme.

During the academic year 2008-9, FDTM staff began to undertake the following steps in pursuit of these objectives:

- Consultation with Centre and Associate Tutors, by email and in some cases in person, to discover their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the present arrangements and to identify possible ways in which the sense of being a learning community might be improved and enhanced.
- Meetings of Centre and Associate Tutors after the conclusion of each of the three FDTM Level 1 modules running during the academic year 2008-9, to reflect on the learning experience of the module and identify and share good

practice including the pooling of learning materials used.
- Search of academic literature and practical projects relevant to the subject of creating a community of scholarship over a dispersed area.
- Investigation of the potential enhancement of use of the Blackboard VLE to provide an expanding and regularly updated bank of learning resources accessible to all partners.
- Training in principles and practice of on-line learning, teaching and tutoring in order to develop the dispersed learning community enabling social networking as well as the sharing of resources.

This paper reflects on the experience to date and seeks to establish some theoretical and theological underpinning for improvements in practice, integration and mutual enrichment between YSJ staff and off-site tutors as a community of scholarship. This leads to some suggestions about practical requirements for developing the online learning community across all YSJ partners, implications for critical reappraisal of professional practice in relation to teaching and learning, and a concluding theological reflection.

Theoretical foundations

The aspiration towards a dispersed community of scholarship rests upon a constructivist foundation with an added theological dimension. In developing the constructivist perspective in educational theory, Piaget emphasised that learning is a process of discovery more than the acquisition of information (Piaget, 1973). Dewey argued that the best context in which to experience this learning by discovery is within a community of learners who are able to reflect on their experience together (Dewey, 1966). Vygotsky built further on this work in his theory of the social construction of knowledge through contextual and collaborative interaction among learners (van de Veer and Valsiner, 1994). While the FDTM seeks to model a constructivist approach in its regular on-site learning and teaching activities, in the sense that students are encouraged to build their learning through critical reflection on contextual practice in dialogue with what they experience in the

face to face learning sessions, an enhanced use of the opportunities of online learning would further strengthen the model by facilitating a richer mutual engagement among students and tutors alike when not gathered on-site. This in turn could serve to reduce the assumption made by at least some students (and some tutors) that the teaching contact time during modules is the place where a more didactic method will be employed, i.e. that students come to their Centre to be resourced with 'content' by academically qualified tutors, which they are then expected somehow to 'apply' in their context.

Weller (2002) has proposed a matrix illustrating four pedagogical styles dependent on the extent to which teaching is 'high-tech' or 'low-tech' in its use of online technologies, and didactic or constructivist in its theoretical underpinning. Traditionally much teaching in HE has tended to be low-tech and didactic; Adult Education in particular has pioneered more constructivist low-tech approaches. Once a high-tech practice is embraced, this does not automatically mean that pedagogy moves from the didactic to the constructivist end of the spectrum; it remains perfectly possible to employ technologies in the service of 'information delivery', and indeed, as we shall see later, online tutoring can be vulnerable precisely to a kind of manipulation of learning with the tutor gaining a guru-like status. To aim to move on Weller's matrix into the 'high tech and constructivist' sector requires clear intention, commitment and careful planning, and where a VLE such as Blackboard is used chiefly as a repository of course information and materials, this aim is not yet achieved.

The idea of the learning community

Writing of the introduction of a VLE with students on a distance learning theology programme, Alison Le Cornu (2005) describes the process of design and delivery of a Residential School at which students were to gain their first experience of how to use the VLE. A stated goal of the School was 'to build a sense of community and to encourage higher levels of friendship through small-group work'; however, staff planning the School felt that elements of the modules to be studied should also provide the opportunity to engage with the themes of community formation, and thus a further goal was formulat-

ed, *viz*. 'to encourage students to reflect theologically on the meaning of body and community, using these concepts in a wide variety of ways' (Le Cornu 2005: 2). Another online programme describes the value of collaborative learning, that:

> depends on both independent and interpersonal interaction in the virtual environment …involves an active process of exploring personal experience, knowledge and understanding within a shared community…fosters personal learning through peer exchange and group interaction within a mutual and supportive learning environment. ('Training for Teaching and Learning Online' available from Ushaw Online, accessed 19.11.09)

These examples draw attention to the resonances between the idea of the learning community and elements of Christian theology. Personal growth is the ultimate goal of education, and learning ultimately is measured by change in oneself; and the theological case for this is based on how God leads us towards the flowering of full personal identity in relation with others whom God is similarly leading. We learn together and from each other, whoever is in the role of teacher or learner on any given occasion. This is the insight of the Trinitarian doctrine, that Persons are realised in Relations (Zizioulas, 1993).

Learning becomes a repeated process of bouncing ideas back and forth among the partners in a conversation, not as an intellectual exercise but against the backdrop of the daily commitments in which the participants are involved (in this case, as practising Christians). Parker Palmer writes that 'the truth that emerges through listening and responding to each other and the subject at hand is more likely to transcend collective opinion that to fall prey to it. With consensus, individual truth is both affirmed and corrected by the communal troth in which we live and learn' (Palmer, 1983: p.97). Palmer's use of the archaic word troth is important. As a kind of blending of trust and truth, the idea of troth points to mutual commitment, an honest and open giving and receiving in relationship, a listening and learning, that forms the context for personal and corporate growth and development. Trustfulness and truthfulness belong together somewhere at the heart of education as also of Christian discipleship. In the context of online learning, this introduces a crucial role for the tutor as the builder of authentic community.

The tutor as community builder

The online environment engages participants in a setting where the indications of personal gestures, body language, surroundings and so on are not present to distract or 'skew' communications or their interpretation. There are echoes here of the 'discourse theory' of truth propounded by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who posits the 'ideal speech situation' as a scenario in which truth would be attained by all participants in a discourse having freedom to place propositions on the table, so to speak, uninfluenced by prejudices, external constraints, vested interests and all forms of distortion of communication. In reality any actual situation of discourse or dialogue can only ever approximate towards this idea: hence it is indeed, in theological terms (which Habermas does not employ), something 'eschatological'. For this reason these are precisely the conditions for which Christians must strive, and the 'ideal speech situation' provides a model for educational activity within the church community. To foster undistorted communication that issues in healthy learning online requires particular skills. The online environment is peculiarly dependent on good discussion and the cultivation of behaviours that encourage rather than impede it (Wilson and Whitelock 1998).

Salmon (2003) offers a five stage process for guiding the students towards effective learning:
- Access and motivation
- Online socialisation
- Information facilitation and exchange
- Knowledge construction or 'creating'
- Development and application

At each stage, she identifies a Technical Support role that decreases over time as students become more proficient with the systems, and what she calls the e-moderating role of the tutor, that correspondingly increases as the Technical Support role recedes. To begin with, induction into the use of the technological platforms is the priority, and tutors need to ensure that this takes place in a supportive, accessible and encouraging way. At the second stage, tutors need to pay attention to 'online hospitality', developing the ground rules, customs and ethos that will facilitate good mutual relationships and wholesome learning environments. At the third, emphasis shifts to the nature of the learning

activities provided, especially their collaborative character; at the fourth, provision of fresh teaching and learning materials reduces as students gain the confidence to engage more and more in discussions, explorations and initiatives in which they resource and learn from one another. Finally the fifth stage is reached when learning and practice and fresh developments to enrich and advance these further are ongoing, the online participants taking responsibility themselves for the process.

In consultation with the dispersed network of Associate Tutors on the FDTM, comments were made that are illuminated by Salmon's analysis. In particular, there was evidence of confusion or frustration because of the mixing up of different stages of the community building process. There were recurrent technical problems that meant that some participants were never able successfully to negotiate Stage 1. In some cases, tutors were only involved in teaching occasional modules and as the pattern of delivery of the FDTM means that most modules come round only once every two years, these tutors would struggle with the socialisation at Stage 2. On the other hand, inexperienced tutors found they needed much support in the use of learning materials (Stage 3) even though they had little opportunity for developing and sustaining close online relationships. One tutor who had much greater personal experience of online learning felt, however, that the FDTM staff were tending to limit their input to Stage 3, giving guidance about module content and learning materials, whereas more academically resourced theological debate and discussion would have been welcomed, i.e. more operation at Stage 4. Some tutors expressed doubts about the desire of students to embrace the concept of an online learning community given the many other demands on their time and their struggle to complete the requirements of the programme, as well as in some cases their lack of IT literacy.

Practical necessities

A dispersed community of learning will be dependent from square one upon a suitable and functioning IT system with adequate technical support from personnel who understand the use to which the system is being put. University support personnel accustomed to dealing with the

needs of a student and staff body present on site may not always appreciate the issues involved with a dispersed system. Additionally, however, the issue is being raised as to whether a single VLE system such as Blackboard is the best tool for facilitating what is being sought. Many other applications are available that enable a variety of different ways of interactive sharing and collaboration among students and tutors alike, such as Dropbox and Etherpad. Many students and tutors will personally use social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter, and there are programs that enable these to be incorporated into specially created learning networking sites. The tool Compendle allows a wide range of learning resources to be compiled together from different sources and then published to students who can access them through a whole range of media including social networking and mobile phone technologies.

Nevertheless, if a specific VLE like Blackboard is the chosen vehicle, it remains essential that all participants are thoroughly comfortable with using it and the tutor acting as co-ordinator or 'animateur' has a key role in ensuring this. One teaching colleague not involved in the FDTM programme found that students were not using the VLE even though many regularly used Facebook and other media in their daily lives. She concluded that much more help and support was needed, and in particular adopted a very 'flat' structure' for the layout of online content so that students did not have to locate material hidden away in a complex system of folders, sub-folders and files. Instead, the basic page for each module was turned into a compendium of immediately accessible sites comprising basic module information, up to date details of learning activities for each upcoming session, interactive tasks and options, supported open learning activities, occasional podcasts by the tutor, opportunity for students to post reviews of materials accessed themselves, links to discussion boards, DVD clips and so on. By this means by accessing the module page, students were immediately offered a lively, varied, regularly updated range of participative learning and sharing opportunities, such that most would opt into at least some of them at any given time.

The strategy adopted by the team working on the Residential School described by Le Cornu was to mount a real time practical experience of setting up a VLE learning project during an afternoon workshop, with students in groups of mixed ability in regard to IT.

Students needed to use the online facility working in teams to access a range of resources from which to construct the initial proforma for a Portfolio assignment that would form the assessed work for a course module. Staff were available throughout to guide, support and facilitate where needed. Every part of the experience became material for learning, including the inevitable cases of technological failure or error leading to valuable work being lost! Evaluating the experience, Le Cornu identified the reasons for what went well:

> Organization, team work which brought in all the necessary skills, good staff presence and commitment, clear explanations, and the openness and honesty towards the students which pervaded throughout…our greatest satisfaction was in seeing students being prepared to have a go, take the risk, and gain more than they or we might have anticipated (Le Cornu, 2005: 5).

All of this points up the necessity for tutors to acquire distinctive skills of facilitation alongside adequate technological knowledge to be able to support a planned programme of learning and practice to make the online community a reality (for practical guidance see Clarke, 2008; and on developing the use of the VLE, Weller, 2007).

Critical issues

The FDTM at the time of writing remains in the position of operating a dispersed delivery of programme teaching with use of the VLE very largely as a means of disseminating module information, teaching and learning materials and occasional study resources to students and tutors across the Centres. The present project has begun the process of exploring the potential to move towards a more creative and interactive use of the VLE to enhance the learning experience on the programme, both for dispersed tutors sharing and contributing expertise and ideas, and for students cultivating a greater level of interactivity and collaboration in learning. Within the parameters of the project, Centre Tutors have been consulted, some examples of other VLE-based projects have been explored, and training in online tutoring undertaken. This has been done against the backdrop of some initial engagement with literature in the field. Out of all this, the critical issues for further attention can be

summarized as follows:

- Where a programme is not delivered by distance learning, with online working as its essential focus, levels of motivation for developing a learning community online remain variable. The FDTM in particular continues to attract a range of mature part-time students from extremely varied social and cultural backgrounds, some of whom have little or no IT experience, and the fairly minimal procedures of accessing and using the VLE as a repository of module documents are already distinctly challenging to some.
- Tutors likewise vary in their IT skills, but it would appear that only those who invest a significant portion of their time in this role (i.e. as Centre Tutors for the FDTM) are likely to want to pursue the additional possibility of being part of a dispersed 'community of scholarship'. Further discussion seems required to establish a potential minimum nucleus of such a community, and to agree more precisely on the levels of online activity this will entail.
- Technological problems continue to hamper progress, and the lingering doubts remain about whether the centralised VLE system is the best way to achieve the desired objective, when so many more flexible packages are available, not least those that can tap into media already used by students and tutors for personal social purposes.
- The role of online tutor would require significant professional developmental activity for participating tutors, and considerable energy would need to be invested in making an online learning community work, not least in sustaining and refreshing it over time. Without this continual investment, there is a risk that the online tutor could in a subtle way reproduce an overly didactic model of the teacher as 'fount of knowledge' as the online medium readily lends itself to a top-down dissemination of information if care is not taken to avoid this.

At this point it may seem as if the idea being explored in this paper is hedged about with too many pitfalls. This does not have to be the case, however, but it has taken up most of the time of the current project to reach the point of being clearer about what the issues are and so to be

in a position potentially to formulate a better understanding of where we might go from here. A recent report concluded:

> The potential to share ideas and information and to join in online conferencing can be a powerful motivator… Some products have been associated with developing higher levels of learning through enabling students to engage in online discussions and fostering self-study. (BECTA ICT Review of the Research Literature on the use of MLEs and VLEs in Education available at **http://www.becta.org.uk**)

To re-focus the vision for a community of scholarship in a more positive light, this paper concludes by reflecting theologically on the potential.

Theological reflection

The FDTM is a programme designed expressly for the education and formation of church ministers, lay as well as ordained. Ministerial education is characterized by an interwoven threefold pattern of (to adapt some slightly differing versions of the terminology) knowledge of the tradition, practice of skills in context, and spirituality or personal formation. The theologian Edward Farley (1983) designates these strands as Gospel, Ecclesia (or Church) and Faith; each has a characteristic style of learning that resources it, namely the academic/critical, the practical/contextual and what Farley has termed *habitus*, meaning the cultivation over time of a kind of indwelt wisdom that is the deposit of a lived life of faithful discipleship. In a similar way, Stanley Hauerwas (1984) has described the ultimate aim of theological education in terms of 'performativity', that those educated for Christian ministry should in their whole-life expression, not just as individuals but in community, model and give shape to authentic performance of Christian faith. The question is whether an online learning community can enrich and enhance the opportunities for accomplishing this.

One advantage of online learning is that it takes place *in situ*, and can therefore help to overcome the difficulty felt by many students who come to their teaching Centre to receive input, but then struggle to know what to do with it back in their church, or work-day context. The

missing strand of critical and contextual reflection on practice could well be facilitated more effectively by the much more flexible and 'instant' medium of an online environment, especially with opportunity for real-time discussion with tutors and fellow students on matters arising. It is possible to see how the connectivity and collaborative spirit enabled by online means can serve to bring together the elements of ministerial theological education as Farley sees them in a more tangible way than more traditional methods of delivery that alternate between taught 'contact time' at the remote location and 'fieldwork' or placement activity in the context. Moreover, the personal formative dimension that is less well measured by traditionally academic methods of assessment could be enhanced in an exciting way by sharing through discussion forums and chat rooms rather than remaining a rather private, individualistic thing. It is this corporate, contextual, critical searching after truth that is profoundly formative.

As theologian Julie Hopkins (1995: 103) has put it:

> Truth is best grasped by the weaving together of diverse experience and praxis through a process of dialogue…That process is one of listening honestly and with respect to the other and then through discussion, criticism and evaluation finally reaching a temporary consensus and acting upon it until new experience requiring new criteria engenders further dialogue.

Rowan Williams (1992) gives three reasons for the necessity of an educational process in the church that insists on wrestling with difficult issues of doctrine. First, there is no intrinsic merit in 'keeping it simple' if the reality is complex. Second, it is patronising to tell someone that something is 'all they need to know' and all they need to do is just believe it. Third, doctrine can all too easily be pressed into the service of oppression, and this is far more likely to occur where it is kept in the hands of the elite few. Williams argues that true Christian learning occurs not by 'the church telling people what to think', but in attentiveness to one another (1992: 36-7):

> to have a sense of this demands of us a level of patience and attention that can properly be called 'contemplative'…we recognize the reality and dignity of another, the fact that they are not abstract fictions of our own preference, in the degree that we pause to look

and to hear before we impose solutions, interpretations, condem-
nations or whatever.

Again, it may well be that the facilities of an online environment could
be exactly what is needed, when carefully handled and marshalled, to
bring people together in a manner that can bring about this type of
learning. Mary Hess observes (2005: 30):

> I do think that traditionally we have tended in church circles, the
> institutional church, to look at media and IT as a visual aid...But
> rather than just looking at media as a delivery system, the church is
> more and more looking at media as the sacramentals of today...We
> need to break the borders of what is sacred and what is profane
> and bring into the catechetical forum, into theological forum these
> media experiences that people are reporting...this is how they are
> meeting the divine, how they are telling their stories...

And David Pullinger (2001: 45-6) comments that:

> We are to develop technology in such a way that the blessings,
> riches and potential God has put in creation are allowed to
> flower...Second, our technological activity should reflect love for
> God and neighbour by expanding, not constricting, the opportuni-
> ties for men and women to be the loving, joyful beings God intends
> them to be.

Lastly Quentin Schultze (2004) reminds Christian educators of the
need to be not so much technologists as 'wise caretakers' of the educa-
tional dimension of God's world, and to use learning technologies to
model wisdom, truth, compassion, justice and peace in humility in
reliance upon the Holy Spirit. These are all noble aspirations and espe-
cially challenging to those who adhere to the view that in the end it is
only face to face interaction that can genuinely facilitate the kind of
relationality that fosters and nurtures true spiritual flourishing. But, as
many today are discovering through their experience of 'second life'
technologies that allow them to participate in a group through the
persona of an 'avatar', for all the potential dangers that may lurk in this
practice, self-disclosure and exposure to others in an environment that
does not require physical presence can be liberative and facilitate
genuine personal growth that might otherwise be impeded through

shyness, feelings of unworthiness, poor body image and a host of other limiting factors. Theologically there can be no grounds for restricting human communication to media of physical presence (which would in any case rule out the telephone!), and many may well thrive in a learning environment that does not immediately draw attention to their personal academic shortcomings in the ways that traditional learning and teaching environments so often do. For a vocational programme like the FDTM this may be an opportunity too fruitful to pass by.

Bibliography

Clarke, A., *E-Learning Skills*, 2nd edn., (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Dewey, J., *Democracy and Education*, (New York: Free Press, 1996).

Farley, E., *Theologia: the Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Knowledge*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

Hauerwas, S., *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Non-violence*, (London: SPCK, 2004).

Hess, M., *Engaging Technology in Theological Education: All That We Can't Leave Behind*, (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

Hopkins, J., *Towards a Feminist Christology*, (London: SPCK, 1995).

Le Cornu, A., 'Baptism of Fire: Introducing Brookes Virtual to Theology Distance Learning Students', *Brookes eJournal of Learning and Teaching*, Vol. 1, no. 3, (2005) pp. 1-6.

Palmer, P., *To Know as We are Known: A Spirituality of Education*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

Piaget, J., *To Understand is to Invent*, (New York: Grossman, 1973).

Pullinger, D., *Information Technology and Cyberspace; Extra-connected Living*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001).

Salmon, G. E., *Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online*, (London: Kogan Page, 2003).

Schultze, Q., 'Faith, Education and Communication Technology', *Journal of Education and Christian Belief*, Vol. 8, no. 1, (2004) pp.9-21.

Van der Veer, R. and Valsiner, J., (eds.) *The Vygotsky Reader,* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994).

Weller, M., *Delivering Learning on the Net*, (London: Routledge Farmer, 2002).

Weller, M., *Virtual Learning Environments: Using, Choosing and Developing your VLE*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

Willams, R., 'Teaching the Truth' in John, J., (ed.) *Living Tradition: Affirming Catholicism in the Anglican Church*, (London: DLT, 1992).

Wilson, T. and Whitelock, D., 'Monitoring the Online Behaviour of Distance Learning Adults', *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, Vol. 14, (1998) pp.91-99.

Zizioulas, J, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993).

Websites

BECTA ICT Review of the Research Literature on the use of MLEs and VLEs in Education available at:
http://www.becta.org.uk

Ushaw Online:
http://www.ushaw.ac.uk/html/outreach/outreach_web/ index.php

Reading to Learn to Read Philosophy

Renee Smith

Department of Philosophy and Religion
Coastal Carolina University

> For things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them. (Aristotle)

Abstract

Given the right sorts of reading assignments, students can learn to read philosophy by reading philosophy. This paper identifies a number of obstacles to students' reading philosophy and recommends re-envisioning student-learning outcomes in light of the revised Bloom's

taxonomy of learning objectives and using directed reading assignments that help students achieve them. It describes seven reading assignments in philosophy that emphasize active learning to facilitate students' learning to read philosophy as they read philosophy.

Introduction

Not long ago, I seriously contemplated teaching my introduction to philosophy course without a book and by assigning no readings at all. I had been teaching philosophy for several years and just like the courses I took as a student and for which I was a teaching assistant in graduate school, I assigned the standard list of readings for my classes, usually one per class meeting or about 30 per semester. Then it dawned on me that the students were not doing the reading. The reading, even though it was standard fare, was difficult for them. Having changed books a few times but kept the same problem-based approach to the course, the topics I covered in class became generic and accessible versions of the central problems in philosophy—the existence of God, the mind-body problem, the problem of free will, etc. It was actually easier to teach these topics when the students had not read. When a student complained on a course evaluation that she should not have to buy a book she did not use, I very briefly considered eliminating the book. I know others have had the same thought and some have found creative alternatives to using the standard list of readings to teach philosophy (for example, see Irvine 1993).

However, I was not ready to abandon ship. I do think students gain something valuable from reading philosophy. Of course, they learn something about what philosophy is and how it is done, but they also learn to think philosophically—at least they can if they are taught how to develop and use these skills as they read. So rather than throwing in the towel, not to mention my career, I committed myself to getting students to read. At first, I made a pseudo attempt to do this by creating online reading quizzes for each of the assigned readings in the course. Students were required to complete these quizzes prior to coming to class the day that reading was assigned. These short, 10-question quizzes got students to open the book and at least skim the reading. I made them true-false and multiple-choice quizzes to avoid

having to grade hundreds of quizzes every week.

If my goal were simply to get them to open their book, to skim it, and to feel like the expense of the book was at least somewhat justified, these quizzes accomplished this objective. However, these quizzes did very little to satisfy what I take to be the core learning objectives of any philosophy course. Completing a course in philosophy, students should be able to:

- Recognize philosophical problems, issues and questions
- Understand philosophical methodology
- Know central philosophical arguments, objections and positions
- Construct and evaluate analyses
- Formulate and evaluate arguments

Reading philosophy is an integral part of satisfying these objectives, but students are frequently unwilling and often unable to read philosophy in such a way that will provide them with anything close to the rich sort of learning experience we want for them. If all but a few students are unmotivated, unable, or unprepared to read and we do nothing to help them overcome these obstacles, then why would we continue to teach given that no one is learning? It is not unreasonable to think that it is our job to give students at least some of the tools necessary to satisfy these learning objectives and this requires thinking about why they do not read and how we can help them read philosophy better.

When I was developing a new course in philosophical writing, I began to think differently about how to use the readings I assigned to teach students not only about philosophy and how to write philosophy papers, but how to read philosophy. There have been a number of articles that address writing to learn philosophy, such as Richardson, (2002) and Roberts, (2002), but the activity of reading philosophy to promote learning has received much less attention (two noteworthy exceptions are Concepción, 2004 and Adler, 1998). McKeachie and Svinicki (2006, p. 11) note that a central course objective should be to facilitate student learning. It is the presumption of this paper that directed reading assignments facilitate student learning not only by getting students to do the reading, but also by helping students learn how to do the reading as they read philosophy.

1. Identifying the obstacles to students reading

It is easy to imagine a number of reasons *external* to the course why students do not read. Their schedules are packed with coursework, jobs, social commitments, and extracurricular activities. They are distracted by their lives. Reading requires a type of focused attention for which they are unprepared. Moreover, many students have very poor reading skills and some have learning disabilities, which make reading of any kind, and even more so reading philosophy, nearly impossible. A former colleague was amazed when he asked his students to read a short paragraph aloud in class and many of them could barely do so. More than a few students simply cannot read at the level required to read philosophy.

We can do very little overcome these external obstacles to students doing the reading. Still, there are a number of obstacles that are *internal* to our courses that we can help students overcome in order to facilitate learning. Students will not read when

- They see no value attached to doing the reading.
- They do not see the relevance of doing the reading.
- They are not given any guidance or criteria for reading well (see Concepción 2004).
- The reading proves too technical, too obtuse, or simply too much.

We are responsible for reinforcing these obstacles when we do not give students the tools they need to read well, when we do not use the readings we assign to teach philosophy, when we do not convey the value of the readings, and when we let them, and ourselves, off the hook.

2. Overcoming these obstacles

We can help our students overcome these obstacles by rethinking the way we understand expected student learning outcomes and by creating assignments that help students hone the skills necessary for learning to read philosophy by actually reading philosophy. What I am proposing is a number of directed reading assignments that focus on

particular skills necessary for reading philosophy. No doubt, reading itself is an activity; but it can range from the low-level activity of skimming or scanning to high-level activities such as 'connecting ideas and sources of information, spotting faulty logic in argumentation, recognizing bias …, [and] identifying unsupported ideas' (Meyers and Jones, 1993, p.27). These assignments are premised on the assumption that active engagement with the material will promote student learning, which seems to have empirical support (ibid.). Students complete certain tasks and are engaged in certain activities as they read—the very sorts of tasks and activities they need to read philosophy well. Directed reading assignments give students a clear objective when doing the reading, guide them through difficult material, and teach them how to tackle philosophical readings. Additionally, these assignments provide the basis for using the readings in class to teach the material, which will make the readings relevant to what students are reading, and they can be assessments of student learning. Finally, if students are going to come to appreciate the problems and methods of philosophy, they can only do so once they have a deeper understanding of philosophy. This understanding can come from reading philosophy.

A useful model for rethinking student-learning outcomes and creating directed reading assignments is Bloom's taxonomy. By now, most people reading a journal like this one are well versed in Bloom's levels of intellectual behaviour involved in learning. In the cognitive domain, that geared towards acquiring knowledge, learners progress through stages of intellectual activity, from the more simple to the more complex. The higher up the ladder one goes, the more substantial the learning becomes. Bloom's taxonomy was revised in the early 1990s and the stages were renamed to reflect the activities that characterize them as follows.

- **Remembering**: Retrieving, recognizing, and recalling relevant knowledge from long-term memory.
- **Understanding**: Constructing meaning from oral, written, and graphic messages through interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarizing, inferring, comparing, and explaining.
- **Applying**: Carrying out or using a procedure through executing, or implementing.
- **Analyzing**: Breaking material into constituent parts, deter-

mining how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose through differentiating, organizing, and attributing.

- **Evaluating**: Making judgments based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing.
- **Creating**: Putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganizing elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning, or producing. (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001, pp. 67-68)

It is well documented that instructors tend to focus their coursework at the lower levels of the cognitive domain and our reading assignments are a further reflection of this. If we do any more than telling them to read something, it is usually giving short reading quizzes. These quizzes tend to be low-level emphasizing the first or second level on Bloom's taxonomy. For example, here is a question I have used on an open-book reading quiz.

> How does Anselm conceive of god?
> a. something greater than which cannot be thought
> b. an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent being
> c. something greater than which has not been thought
> d. the ruler of the universe

Students merely need to recall, verbatim, Anselm's conception of God. Simply skimming the article, a student will find the answer in this passage in the third sentence of the assigned excerpt from the Proslogium.

> And, indeed, we believe that *thou art a being than which cannot be conceived* [emphasis added].

This sort of assessment only encourages students to skim the reading and does not motivate them to learn from it. As such, students are likely to think memorizing a definition or argument is more important than understanding it. Moreover, I am inclined to think that this emphasis on what it says in the reading encourages students to plagiarize. They are prone to copy passages to 'get it right' because the emphasis on what is stated in the reading and not what is expressed in it.

While it is important that students learn some of the jargon of philosophy, assignments that aim at higher-level cognitive skills will promote the sort of learning required for doing philosophy. Moreover, McKeachie and Svinicki (2006, p. 32) point to research that shows that higher-level reading assignments, rather than those that are fact-based (such as most reading quizzes), contribute better to student learning. What reading assignments must do, they say, is get students to think about the reading. (op. cit.). Meyers and Jones (1993) suggest providing students with study questions to guide them through the reading, modelling how to read and interpret a passage, having students create concept maps, using the readings as the basis for in-class activities, and tying writing assignments to the reading assignments (p. 133). These are all worthwhile activities; however, the emphasis in the assignments that follow will be to engage students in philosophical activities as they read philosophy in order to facilitate students learning to read philosophy by reading philosophy.

3. Remembering the student learning outcomes in directed reading assignments

A student completing a course in philosophy should know what some of the central problems, arguments, and issues in philosophy are. He or she should also be familiar with the methodology used for tackling philosophical questions, be able to give and evaluate arguments, and be able to consider objections. At least some of the language in this abbreviated list of standard outcomes leans towards the higher levels of cognitive activity on Bloom's taxonomy. Perhaps certain writing assignments ask students to demonstrate that they know certain things about philosophy or that they can employ philosophical methodology, but how often do our *reading* assignments help students achieve these outcomes? More often than not, reading assignments are just that: 'read such and such article for the next class meeting.' Alternatively, the assignments suggested below go beyond asking students simply to read something. Instead, they require that students perform some activity with respect to the reading, to engage with the reading, and to think about what they are reading. In doing so, they acquire the sorts of skills

necessary for really doing the reading and for reading philosophy philosophically.

Here, I offer seven sample assignments with the goal of teaching students to read philosophy by actually reading philosophy. They require that students move beyond the basic levels of thinking, use active learning techniques, and engage with the text. Several of these assignments were designed around particular readings in a sophomore-level course in philosophical writing focused on the single topic of the ethics of abortion and others were developed for an introductory course in philosophy. Still, modified versions of these assignments would work with different readings or for more advanced philosophy courses. What is important is to think of ways to move beyond the 'read and be prepared to discuss such and such for next time, there will be a quiz' type of reading assignment and towards reading assignments that direct students to read in a way that promotes learning.

Assignment 1: Ongoing Glossary

Level 1 Understanding
A fundamental difficulty for students reading philosophy is the frequent use of technical jargon and 'big words' in philosophy papers. This coupled with the prevalence of vocabulary deficiencies, makes reading philosophy particularly challenging before even getting to the difficult content. Gabriel (2008, p. 111) reports that vocabulary deficiencies are a serious impediment to student learning. It is not difficult to imagine that rather than stopping to look up unfamiliar words, which is time-consuming and unlikely to lead to retained knowledge (*op. cit.*), a student would resort to skimming the reading or avoiding it altogether. To facilitate student learning, reading assignments should motivate students to improve their technical and non-technical vocabulary.

With this in mind, this first assignment challenges students to seek out unfamiliar and technical terms or expressions and create a glossary of them. The glossary is a semester-long assignment in which students identify unfamiliar words sorting them into two categories: philosophical terms and non-technical terms that are new to them. They keep a list of these as they encounter them in the readings include an abbreviated citation, a brief description of the context in which the word is used (or the actual sentence), and a definition. I have asked that

students find twenty words or expressions in each of the two categories by the end of the semester. Additionally, students can earn extra credit for discovering the word used in another reading and citing that occurrence. For example, if one author refers to an empirical fact, a student would add this to her glossary. Later, while reading another article, the student may recognize that someone describes something as being empirical. Having seen this word used in one context, having looked it up, and being motivated to look for other occurrences of it, the student is more likely to learn and retain the meaning of the term.

The first time I used a version of this assignment was in a 400-level (advanced undergraduate) epistemology course. Epistemology, for some reason, seems particularly riddled with technical terms and names of positions, arguments, and principles. The 'isms' alone are too many to count: Empiricism, Rationalism, Evidentialism, Foundationalism, Fallibilism, Reliabilism, Externalism, Internalism, Coherentism, Contextualism, etc. Having students create a glossary, asking them to share their newest entries in class, and allowing them to refer to their glossaries for other assignments, not only helps students overcome some of the challenges of reading philosophy by introducing them to its jargon, but it puts value on the activity of learning this vocabulary. Moreover, students come to understand and 'keep straight' the various positions, arguments and terms they encounter in the reading and this understanding allows students to engage with what they read rather than merely skimming it.

In an introductory-level course, I have given students a list of terms and asked them to find definitions or explanations of the terms in the assigned reading and to explain the relevance of these terms to the course topics in their own words. I described this assignment as 'preparing a study guide,' and found that a majority of students put a lot of effort into it. Despite initially complaining about the workload, later in the semester when students were given a choice of what kind of assignment to complete to demonstrate that they had learned, nearly all of them chose this assignment.

Assignment 2: Understanding and Applying New Concepts

Level 2 Understanding and Level 3 Applying
Once students have a tool to face the obstacle that technical language

may pose, they need to learn to apply their understanding of philosophical terminology as they read. Over and above remembering the meaning of a term is understanding how it is used. For this assignment in a course on philosophical writing, students read the first chapter of Bedau's *Thinking and Writing about Philosophy*. In this chapter, Bedau characterizes five important features of philosophical writing: definitions, contrasts, examples and analogies, counterexamples, and questions. The goal in assigning this reading was to have students learn key features of philosophical writing so that they will recognize these features as they read and employ them when they write later in the course.

One might ensure students read by giving a brief quiz on the material in class, asking, for example, that they name or characterize the five features Bedau describes. This may be enough to get students to do the reading; however, the sort of learning it would promote is very low level. Instead, to move to a higher level of learning, one could assign a philosophical paper and ask students to apply these concepts as they read. For example, I assigned Russell's 'Philosophy for Laymen.' In this lesser-known paper, Russell argues that philosophy fulfils a particular function in society. It is less esoteric than his 'Value of Philosophy,' but it still requires that students attend to what they are reading in a directed way—by applying their understanding of the concepts introduced in the first reading. I asked students to answer the following questions about Russell's paper.

1. What are three important concepts Russell *defines*?
2. What are three of the most important distinctions (*contrasts*) Russell draws?
3. Identify at least one instance where Russell either gives an *example* or uses an *analogy* to support a claim and identify the claim that is being supported.
4. Identify at least one instance where Russell points out a *counterexample* to a general claim.
5. Suppose Russell wrote this paper in response to a single *question*. What might that question have been? What other *questions* does Russell intend to answer in this paper?

These questions require that students understand the concepts introduced in the Bedau chapter and be able to apply this understanding by

recognizing those features of philosophical writing in what they have read. Students cannot answer these questions by skimming the paper. Moreover, in answering these questions, students are engaged with the text. For example, they must ask themselves, 'Is he drawing a distinction between the philosophy of general education and the philosophy of specialists? What is that distinction? Why is he drawing it?' They have some specific thing to accomplish in reading the text. Since their answers form the basis of small group discussions in the next class meeting, they come to class prepared. This in turn shows students how the reading relates to the topic of the course.

Assignment 3: Analyzing Concepts and Evaluating Analyses

Level 3 Applying and Level 4 Analyzing
For this assignment, students read Earl's 'Classical Conceptual Analysis' (2004) and Harris's 'The Concept of a Person and the Value of Life' (1999). The desired outcome is that students learn what a classical analysis is, how to identify and evaluate a candidate analysis, and how to develop an analysis oneself. Since this was a course in the ethics of abortion, additional goals of this assignment were for students to begin thinking about the criteria for personhood, marginal cases, candidate analyses and their strengths and shortcomings, as well as introduce students to the language philosophers use to talk about this issue.

For the assignment, students used the method of analyzing concepts introduced in Earl's paper to state Harris's analysis of the concept of a person in terms of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. Furthermore, they stated one candidate analysis he rejects and characterized his rejection of it in terms of the key elements of good analyses as Earl characterizes them. Finally, they offered their own candidate analysis of the concept of a person.

In completing this reading assignment, students satisfied the learning outcomes through directed reading—reading with the outcomes in mind. They learned the procedure for analyzing a concept and for evaluating an analysis, recognized that procedure and then applied that it. A reading quiz that asks, 'True or false, a sufficient condition, S, for x's being a C is one such that if x is a C then x is S?' is unlikely to help students satisfy the desired learning outcome even if it does get them to skim the reading. Alternatively, the proposed assign-

ment prepares students to recognize and evaluate analyses in the other papers that they will read during the course.

Assignment 4: Translating a Text

Level 2 Understanding, Level 3, Applying, and Level 4 Analyzing
Often, the prose rather than the specific vocabulary of an assigned reading becomes an obstacle to student learning. For example, Bean (2001) notes that students have difficulty tracking complex syntax, they lack the cultural literacy assumed by the author, and they have difficulty appreciating a text's rhetorical context. To overcome these obstacles, students need to learn to translate what they read into something they can understand that captures the author's intended meaning.

Since these issues arise frequently when students read historical works, one assignment that helps them understand the material is to have them translate a paper or passage by writing a summary of each paragraph in language a contemporary reader can easily understand. I have used this assignment when students have read and excerpt from Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* in which Cleanthes, Demea, and Philo discuss the problem of evil. They translate the dialogue into contemporary English doing their best to preserve the author's intentions. They summarize each speaker's part to get to the core of the discussion being sure to make it clear the reasoning to which each person appeals and the conclusions, if any, that are drawn in light of the discussion.

Similarly, to help students keep track of an author's implicit dialogue with a philosophical opponent, I have asked students to translate a text into a dialogue of the conversation the author would have with his opponent. For instance, Moore offers an objection to Descartes' dream argument in his defence of empiricism, 'Certainty.' It is not hard to imagine the conversation going back and forth over whether one can know one is or is not dreaming. Asking students to create a dialogue between Moore, Descartes and the sceptic having read just a few pages of the text helps them understand the structure of Moore's argument and his objections to both Descartes and to the sceptic. The dialogue provides a map or guide for keeping track of the back and forth nature of giving and responding to arguments and objections—a key element of doing philosophy. Moreover, students can use

their creativity to demonstrate their understanding of the text.[1]

Assignment 5: Dissecting and Reconstructing a Paper

Level 2 Understanding, Level 4 Analyzing, and Level 5 Evaluating
Inevitably, students have a hard time with this back and forth style of argumentation that philosophers use to defend a position. When an author summarizes and then rejects her opponents' arguments, the students often think the author is contradicting herself. Thus, it is essential to provide students with the tools and the skills for navigating through a complicated argumentative paper. The desired student-learning outcome for this assignment is that students recognize some of the central elements of a philosophical paper and distinguish between the positions and arguments the author defends from those she rejects. Additionally, they learn how these elements can be organized to defend a philosophical position, which is an essential component of learning to read and write philosophy papers.

This assignment is similar to Bean's (2001) 'What it Says/What it Does' assignment in which students write brief summaries of each paragraph of an assigned reading and then identify its role in the overall paper. The following assignment begins with an in-class discussion of some of the strategies philosophers use in defending a philosophical position and by providing a list of key elements that philosophy papers may exhibit. For example, a philosophical paper defends a thesis, addresses a philosophical problem, considers alternative positions or arguments, defends an argument, considers analyses, responds to objections, etc.

For this assignment, students received an *edited* copy of John T. Noonan's 'An Almost Absolute Value in History,' specifically, one in which *the paragraphs were presented out of order and the title was withheld*. Students complete the following multi-part assignment:

---

[1] For instance, students might use the website Xtranormal **(http://www.xtranormal.com/**) to create their own cartoon dialogue. See Drey, Jeremy, January 16, 2011. 'So You Think An English Professor's Life Is A Cartoon', *The Chronicle Of Higher Education.* Accessed January 26, 2011: **http://chronicle.com/article/So-You-Think-an-English/125954/?sid= at&utm_ source= at&utm_medium=en**

1. Summarize each paragraph in just one or two succinct sentences.
2. Classify each paragraph according to the foregoing list of key elements of philosophical papers.
3. Number the paragraphs in the order in which the author most likely intended them.
4. Provide a title and three to five brief sections headings that would make the most sense for helping the reader understand the structure of the paper.

This assignment then served as the basis for class discussion. Students defended their classification of each paragraph, compared their summary statements, clarified their understanding of the argument, and discussed how best to organize the paper.

Since this was a writing course, this was also an opportunity to point out the use of logical language as signposts directing the reader to the key elements of the argument and the use of specific expressions to indicate transitions or relations. Since a key task in reading philosophy is identifying main lines of argumentation and distinguishing these from the rejection of alternative positions and from consideration of objections to the central argument, this assignment prepares students to read other philosophy papers. In addition, students learn to recognize argumentative strategies that they may encounter in other papers or that they may employ in their own writing.

Assignment 6: Outlining or Diagramming a Paper and Writing an Abstract

Level 4 Analyzing and Level 5 Evaluating
A paper's abstract provides an overview of a paper's main line of argument. In order to write an abstract, one must be able to extract the key elements of the paper. An abstract also invites the reader to closely consider the argument presented in the paper and provides important information about the content of the paper. In reading philosophy, it is important to understand the relationship between an abstract and the paper it introduces. In this assignment, students worked backwards. Rather than reading an abstract and then the paper, students read a version of Warren's 'The Moral Significance of Birth' that did not

include the author's abstract and later produced an abstract from what they took to be the key elements of Warren's argument. The assignment required students to diagram or outline the paper in a single page. To do so, they must take note of the thesis of the paper, its structure including the main divisions and the objectives of each part of the paper. They must be able to summarize the main line of argument as it is given in each part of the paper including objections considered and replies offered, conclusions drawn along the way, important distinctions drawn, etc. In class, they worked in groups to refine their diagrams and outlines and to construct what they took to be the most straightforward statement of the author's argument. Finally, they engaged in the following in-class activity.

> Activity Directions: (1) Write a single sentence reflecting a core element of the author's paper. (2) Pass your paper to the person sitting next to you. (3) Read the paper you receive and add another sentence identifying another key element of the paper. (4) Continue to pass you paper and add a sentence until you receive a paper with seven sentences on it. (5) Write an abstract of the paper using the seven sentences you have received editing as necessary and underline the thesis statement.

A typical list of student-generated statements might be these.

> Warren defends her pro-choice position through a distinction she draws between abortion and infanticide.
> Warren claims that abortion is not homicide but infanticide is considered homicide.
> Warren then draws distinctions between conservative, moderate, and liberal views of the moral significance of birth.
> She considers the sentience and self-awareness criteria and in the end she rejects both.
> From these two arguments, she shows why we do and should protect infants but not foetuses.
> Since foetuses are not considered self-aware, she concludes that abortion is not as bad as killing a child or infant.
> She also says that it is not possible to respect both the foetus's rights and the mother's rights until after birth, when they are separate beings.

An abstract using these statements might be this:

> Warren defends a pro-choice position on abortion in her paper, 'The Moral Significance of Birth.' She describes three separate philosophical views of the moral significance of birth (the conservative, moderate, and liberal views). She rejects arguments that moral consideration should be given to foetuses based on viability, sentience, or self-awareness. She distinguishes between late-term abortions and infanticide by arguing that it is impossible to respect the rights of two distinct persons, the foetus and the child, during pregnancy. <u>She argues that birth is the point at which the child gains moral standing because only then is it possible to distinguish between the mother's rights and the child's rights.</u>

In this assignment, students learn to recognize the overall structure of a philosophy paper, how the parts relate to each other, and how to support a thesis. They also learn how to write abstracts by identifying the most important components of an extended argument. In turn, this prepares them to evaluate or raise objections to the argument. For instance, Warren's argument might rest on a particular view of rights that warrants further consideration. This fact emerges only after a careful reading of the paper and recognition of her overall argument. Thus this assignment facilitates student learning by helping students to identify elements of a philosophical paper that they can criticize, question or evaluate—all skills central to reading and doing philosophy. Moreover, having a clear grasp of the overall structure of her paper, her rejection of opposing positions, her understanding of important concepts and issues, the students are well prepared for class discussion focused on evaluating Warren's argument—much more so than if the assignment had been to 'read and be prepared to discuss Warren's paper.'

Assignment 7: Charting the Positions

Level 4 Analyzing, Level 5 Evaluating, and Level 6 Creating
This assignment helps students put together all that they have read on a topic, provide a preliminary analysis of the arguments, and develop a topic for a paper. It is not a directed reading assignment, *per se*, but it is the culmination of the foregoing reading assignments. Since this

assignment was for a course in philosophical writing focused on the ethics of abortion, students had read about six of the central papers on this topic. Drawing on previous assignments, lectures and discussions, students created a chart or table in which they did the following.

1. Listed or summarized three of the central issues, arguments, positions, or claims relating to the abortion debate;
2. Clearly stated what at least two different philosophers would say about each of these issues, arguments, positions, or claims; and
3. Either
a. Wrote a paragraph explaining one item of agreement or consistency and one item of disagreement between two philosophers, or
b. Wrote a short dialogue between two of the philosophers we had read in which their points of agreement and disagreement are illuminated.

For instance, students might identify divergent analyses of the concept of being a person (Noonan 1970, Harris 1999) the debate over whether personhood matters to the moral status of the foetus (Thomson 1989, English 1975, Noonan), the Violinist analogy (Thomson 1989, Wiland 2000), and the sentience criterion (Noonan 1970, and Warren 1989) for part one and go on to clarify the disagreement between Noonan and Warren in parts two and three. In doing so, students enter the philosophical dialogue which prepares them to write a paper on one of these issues. They come to see the big picture, to integrate what they have learned, and discover how to participate in the philosophical conversation.

4. Suggestions for using and grading these assignments

How these sorts of reading assignments can be integrated into a course will vary. One should not be intimidated by creating an unbearable amount of grading. These reading assignments can be used as the basis for in-class discussions and activities, and students can be assessed on

how well-prepared they are for these activities. These assignments can be the basis for short writing assignments—either in class or at home. Alternatively, as a culminating project in the course, students can prepare a portfolio of their work during the course. Asking students to reflect on what they learned from completing certain activities, which activities were most likely to contribute to their understanding of the material, and which activities best helped them learn how to do philosophy (that is, a portfolio that requires reflection on the learning process, or metacognitive element) will further advance the student learning outcomes. What is important is that these activities somehow come to play a part in the assessment of student learning, that they facilitate learning through active engagement with the text, that they connect the material students encounter outside of the classroom with that in the classroom, and that they provide students with the skills they need to read and do philosophy.

5. Conclusion

Directed reading assignments go beyond the 'read this for next time' sort of assignment and facilitate student learning by teaching students how to use certain skills to read and do philosophy. Reading philosophy requires focusing one's attention, comprehending and applying technical concepts, recognizing of lines of argumentation, distinguishing positions defended from those rejected, tracking objections and responses, and being involved with the philosophical dialogue. Simply instructing students to read a paper without instructing them how to read it, without providing direction, goals, or the tools for reading it, and without making the reading an integral part of learning philosophy misses out on the rich sort of learning experience that comes from reading assignments that focus on higher-level cognitive skills—just the skills necessary for reading and doing philosophy.

Bibliography

Adler, J. E., 'Reading and Interpretation: A Heuristic for Improving Students' Comprehension of Philosophy Texts', in *In the*

Socratic Tradition, Kasachkoff, Tziporah, (ed) (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998) pp.37-46.

Anderson, L. W., and Krathwohl, D. R., (eds.) *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, Complete edition (New York: Longman, 2001).

Anselm, 'The Ontological Argument', excerpt from the *Proslogium*, in Timmons, M. and Shoemaker, D., (eds.) *Knowledge, Nature and Norms*, (Wadsworth, 2009) pp. 217-220.

Bean, J.C., *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

Bedau, H., *Thinking and Writing about Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002).

Bowery, A., 'The Use of Reading Questions As a Pedagogical Tool: Fostering an Interrogative, Narrative Approach to Philosophy', *Teaching Philosophy*, 22:1(1999) pp.17-40.

Braver, L., 'Paraphrasing: An Exercise to Teach Close Reading in Introductory Classes', *Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy*, Kasachkoff, Tziporah, and Kelly, Eugene, (eds.) 4:2 (2005) pp.6-8.

Concepción, D. W., 'Reading Philosophy with Background Knowledge and Metacognition', *Teaching Philosophy*, 27:4 (2004) pp.351-368.

Earl, D., 'Classical Conceptual Analysis', in *Ultimate Questions: Readings in Philosophy*, Rauhut, N. and Smith, R., (eds.) (New York: Longman, 2004) pp.42-52.

English, J., 'Abortion and the Concept of a Person', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 5:2 (1975) pp.233-243.

Gabriel, K. F., *Teaching Unprepared Students: Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education*, (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2008).

Harris, J., 1999. 'The Concept of the Person and the Value of Life', *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal,* 9:4 (1999) pp.293-308.

Hume, D., 'The Problem of Evil', from *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* in Timmons, M. and Shoemaker, D., (eds.) *Knowledge, Nature and Norms*, (Wadsworth, 2009) pp. 250-257.

Irvine, W.B., 'Teaching Without Books', *Teaching Philosophy*, 16:1 (1993) pp.35-46.

Meyers, C. and Jones, T., *Promoting Active Learning*, (San

Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

McKeachie, W. and Svinicki, M., *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).

Moore, G.E., (1959) 'Certainty,' from *Philosophical Papers* in: *Knowledge, Nature and Norms*, Timmons, M. and Shoemaker, D., (eds.) (Wadsworth, 2009) pp.290-295.

Noonan, J. T., 'An Almost Absolute Value in History', in *The Morality of Abortion: Legal and Historical Perspectives*, Noonan, John T., Jr., (ed.) (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1970) pp.51-59.

Richardson, M., 'Student Papers and Professional Papers: Writing to Learn and Writing to Teach in Undergraduate Philosophy Courses', *Teaching Philosophy*, 25:4 (2002) pp.291-309.

Roberts, R. C., 'Teaching Writing-Intensive Undergraduate Philosophy Courses', *Teaching Philosophy*, 25:3: (2002) pp.195-211.

Skipper, R.B., 'Aliteracy in the Philosophy Classroom', *Teaching Philosophy,* 28:3 (2005) pp.261-276.

Thomson, J., 'A Defense of Abortion', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1:1 (Autumn 1971) pp. 47-66.

Warren, M. A., 'The Moral Significance of Birth', *Hypatia,* 4:3 (1989) pp.46-65.

Wiland, E., 'Unconscious Violinists and the Use of Analogies in Moral Argument', *Journal of Medical Ethics,* 26 (2002) pp.466-468.

Teaching Source Criticism and Independent Investigation in the History of Science, Technology and Medicine

James Sumner

Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine,
University of Manchester

Most of the groups teaching undergraduate history of science, technology and medicine (HSTM) in the UK offer some optional courses to students on science degree programmes. Often, such courses provide these students' only experience of humanities-style learning at university. Past work for the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies and its precursors has mapped

various of the challenges involved in teaching history to students who may have no background in the field, and who do not expect or intend to pursue it further. This literature affirms that, while a minority of science students adapt readily to humanities norms, most struggle to understand the point of assumptions, values and skills radically different from what they are used to.[1]

Geoffrey Cantor's 2001 survey of this issue identifies the following as major stumbling blocks: managing heavy reading loads; note-taking; essay-writing; speaking in open-ended seminar discussions; and, more generally, interacting confidently with lecturers and peers familiar with humanities conventions. Yet Cantor also notes some common strengths of science students in the HSTM classroom. They are already familiar, of course, with the theory underpinning their own specialisms. More broadly, most scientific disciplines involve significant problem-solving at undergraduate level.[2] Faced with a set of data and a well-defined exercise, science students may set to work more confidently than their humanities-based peers. Such confidence, however, is often built on the assumption that the problem has a definite solution, which is by no means always the case in historical research.

This paper focuses on what I identify as a further problem area: source criticism and investigation, as applied both to primary and to secondary sources. This overlaps with all of Cantor's categories, but is worth addressing in its own right, not least because a careful definition of the problem takes us some way towards its solution. Typically, science students who perform poorly at historical investigation are not merely floundering: they are consciously applying received understandings which lead them astray. I describe a series of classroom exercises which I use to anticipate, and as far as possible to head off, these difficulties. These exercises respond to the established strengths of their audience, as identified by Cantor: they are mostly discipline-specific, and take as their starting point a carefully specified problem

---

[1] Gooday, Graeme, 'The Challenges of Teaching History and Philosophy of Science, Technology and Medicine to 'Science' Students,' HEA Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies , 2007; online at **http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsdocuments/66**.

[2] Cantor, Geoffrey, 'Teaching Philosophy and HPS to Science Students', *PRS-LTSN Journal* 1:1 (2001), pp.14-24.

or enquiry, which may be gradually broadened out towards the conventional historical pattern.

The problem

Undergraduate history teaching and assessment is commonly rooted in a set of understandings along the lines of the following:

- independent study is the basis of scholarship; the most able students' research and interpretation will take paths their instructors have not yet taken
- the point of essay-writing is to practise constructing and presenting arguments, supported by well-documented use of sources
- all sources themselves result from particular historical processes which are open to investigation, and should be read in the light of what we can learn about their origins
- although sources may be widely accepted as authoritative for particular purposes, authority is never self-evident: it depends on careful evaluation of status claims, and often needs to be corroborated by a range of other sources
- students who successfully use challenging and less accessible source material thereby develop valuable skills, and deserve formal credit.

These norms closely represent real-life scholarly research practice. The typical undergraduate on a dedicated history programme will soon come to know them: indeed, they are often made explicit through essay skills training or taught courses on historiography.

Science students encountering HSTM, however, typically have no such background to draw on. All too often—perhaps proceeding from recollections of school history, or from simple received opinion— they base their research and writing on a series of false assumptions:

- there is an agreed corpus of subject knowledge, and all competent lecturers and assessors are thoroughly familiar with it
- the purpose of essay-writing is to demonstrate such knowledge
- such knowledge consists largely of facts: if the subject is

history, of facts about past events
- there are authoritative texts which contain these facts (popular textbooks, carefully tailored to their audiences' needs and abilities, being prime examples)
- a responsible lecturer will point the student to the appropriate texts to allow the student to learn and successfully reproduce the facts.

The results will be familiar to anyone who has assessed regularly: lack of analysis and focus, extensive but pointless parroting, eccentric performances based on inappropriate literature, the unpleasant duty of assigning poor or mediocre grades to students who have worked hard, and the recriminations that occasionally result.

In what follows, I focus entirely on how to resolve this tension by bringing the students' expectations into line with the assessors'. I should therefore explain why I do not consider the alternative approach of adapting the assessment criteria. We should be self-aware enough to consider the possibility that the students' prior expectations represent productive norms of science teaching, and that these might offer lessons for humanities practice. Most science educators who have considered the question, however, agree that this is not the case.

Current science education literature stresses the importance of critical interpretation, argument and authorship, and this for the most practical of reasons: professional scientists need to comprehend changing currents in the science around them, make value-judgments and practical decisions concerning their work's influence on the world, and adequately discuss their positions with non-scientists.[3] 'Learning from writing' has long been part of the toolkit used in encouraging more nuanced grasp of scientific authority.[4] Similarly, though most science degree programmes use textbooks, researchers usually want to make sure their students can operate beyond the walled garden; and a

---

[3] Newton, Paul *et al.*, 'The Place of Argumentation in the Pedagogy of School Science', *International Journal of Science Education* 21:5 (1999), pp. 553-576. Argumentation, broadly considered, has emerged as a key theme in science educationalists' literature: see Erduran, Sibel and Pilar Jiménez-Aleixandre, María, (eds.) *Argumentation in Science Education*, (London: Springer, 2008).

[4] Prain, Vaughan, 'Learning from Writing in Secondary Science: Some Theoretical and Practical Implications', *International Journal of Science Education* 28 (2006), pp. 179-201.

text which is accepted as an introduction to the discipline's internal knowledge may nonetheless be faulted for giving sterile, improbable and off-putting account of how that knowledge is developed.[5]

One useful study on critical thinking in undergraduate science—addressing connections not with the humanities, but with the workplace—focuses on the nature of problem-solving tasks.[6] Conventionally, these tend mostly to be 'closed': each has the clearly defined goal of a distinct answer which is obtainable from given data. Such exercises may be useful in teaching course content, and help to reassure students that they are working along the right lines, but a rounded education must involve strategies for coping in situations where no single approach is clearly suggested by the circumstances of the problem – as tends to be the case in real life.

Although all of these problems may be addressed in various ways, there is strong support for the use of historical case studies and historians' methodologies, often drawing on professional HSTM scholarship.[7] This view is not general, of course: it is opposed, as Graeme Gooday has pointed out, by those science programme directors who 'quietly advise their undergraduates that studying history of science would be an unhelpful distraction.'[8] To the extent that we are encouraged to recruit science students, however, we can be reassured that, in disrupting their expectations, we are not disrupting science teaching. Indeed, I have tried to show how the cases outlined below draw on the

[5] Allchin, Douglas, 'Scientific Myth-conceptions', *Science Education* 87:3 (2003), pp. 329-351; and see the literature reviewed in Michael Clough, 'The Story behind the Science: Bringing Science and Scientists to Life in Post-secondary Science Education', *Science and Education*, 2010, published online: **doi 10.1007/s11191-010-9310-7**.

[6] Hager, Paul *et al.*, 'Teaching Critical Thinking in Undergraduate Science Courses', *Science and Education* 12 (2003), pp. 303-313.

[7] Variations on this approach are regularly outlined by contributors to journals including *Science Education*, *Science and Education* and the *International Journal of Science Education*. A good starting point is the themed collection, edited by Michael Clough and Joanne Olson, on teaching the 'nature of science': *Science and Education* 17:2-3 (2008). For the historical background to these approaches, see Matthews, Michael, *Science Teaching: the Role of History and Philosophy of Science*, (London: Routledge 1994).

[8] Gooday, Graeme, 'U-rated, not X-rated: Reassessing how Science Students could Benefit from Learning History of Science', PRS-LTSN, 2003; online at **http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsdocuments/68**.

students' existing scientific awareness, and contribute to extending it.

The audiences

Most of the work described below originally appeared in a skills training course I developed for University of Manchester Faculty of Life Sciences undergraduates taking final-year dissertation projects in HSTM. We supervise 20 to 30 such students each year, all of whom have a strongly biological or biomedical background. Students' prior exposure to HSTM concepts varies, but most have taken only one or two option modules; a few have no undergraduate-level humanities experience at all. The project is a major element of assessment. It may be up to 12,000 words long, and counts for one third of the credit for the student's final year, which is the chief determinant of degree classification. The students therefore need extensive student support, both from individual supervisors and centrally, to negotiate unfamiliar techniques of source- and time-management.

In 2007-08, my colleagues and I benefited from a grant from the University's Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning to develop a skills training course to prepare students for the task of independent research.[9] We found that exercises promoted under the banner of 'enquiry-based learning' in the humanities—with their emphasis on critical reading, independent research, and realistic communication formats—already corresponded quite closely with the taken-for-granted goals of the final-year project itself.[10] My approach, therefore, was to bring the students up to speed through a series of small, self-contained research exercises. The initial exercises contained elements which were reassuringly 'closed' and clear-cut, yet were also designed to provoke questions about the origins and credibility of source material. Later exercises were progressively less artificial, leading towards the much more 'open' practice of scholarly research.

[9] Sumner, James *et al.*, 'Critical Project Development Skills in the History of Science, Technology and Medicine', in *Case Studies: CEEBL-Supported Projects 2007-2008*, (Manchester: University of Manchester 2008), pp. 81-91.

[10] Hutchings, Bill, 'Designing an Enquiry-based Learning Course', CEEBL, 2006. Online at: **http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/ceebl/resources/guides/ceeblgr001.pdf**.

I draw further examples from my past and current optional courses surveying the history of technology in general, and of information technology in particular; students on these courses represent a range of backgrounds, with computer science, physics and the life sciences prominent. All such students have specialist data-handling skills particular to their core disciplines: they have often brought them to bear on the exercises in unexpected ways, and I have steered the discussion (and sometimes reworked the exercises) to examine the overlaps with, and differences from, the source-handling skills we are looking for.

Much of the work discussed here was not conceived as part of any formal research project, and I have not carried out detailed evaluation. The results, therefore, are impressionistic, though I have recorded as far as possible both the general tone of student responses and the most interesting of the isolated responses. My main purpose in writing is to encourage colleagues in similar situations to experiment along similar lines, and to share the evidence of their own experience.

Why I lie to students

'Discrepant events', as Michael Clough once put it, 'are powerful tools for initiating a sense of uneasiness with prior ideas.'[11] Clough's concern was with students' received assumptions about how science works; mine is with the somewhat related question of source authority. The first item on the final-year project training course, once the orientation and housekeeping announcements are out of the way, is contrived purely to establish a distinct sense of unease.

Announcing that the class is going to discuss a case study in source criticism, I present a photograph of a man of nineteenth-century gentlemanly appearance. This, I explain, is Michael Sapway Millar, an influential Edinburgh zoologist best known for his influential taxonomic innovations. Most famously, Millar's *Alphabetic Taxonomy* (1870) synthesised post-Lamarckian transmutationalist currents with moves

---

[11] Clough, Michael, 'Strategies and Activities for Initiating and Maintaining Pressure on Students' Naïve Views Concerning the Nature of Science', *Interchange* 28:2-3 (1997), pp. 191-204.

by contemporary philologists to capture the lexicon of English. Millar argued, I continue, that the development of species must have followed the alphabetical sequence: the aardvark, therefore, must be the elemental form of life, corresponding to the protozoon or monad of other systems. On the Millarian scheme, development progressed linearly through the other South African fauna with 'aa-' beginnings: the theory was not without controversy, as it made the aasvogel, a bird, an immediate descendant of the mammalian aardwolf. Contemporaries such as Thomas Henry Huxley were only provoked into public protest, however, when Millar insisted on continuing the evolutionary sequence with the abacus.

This narrative usually causes mild but increasing unrest or nervousness among the students. (Delivered in lecture format, it has never raised an unprompted challenge: it would be interesting to see what response the tale provoked in seminar discussion.) Following the abacus revelation, I break off and appeal for questions or comments. Typically, one of the more confident students will ask why contemporaries believed the story, or whether it is true. I confess immediately that it is a tissue of falsehoods from beginning to end, invariably to the students' great relief.

I then ask them to explain why they remained unconvinced by the story, when I—as lecturer, supposedly an officially sanctioned dispenser of facts—showed every possible appearance of sincerity about it. The most immediate answer is often that the story is merely ridiculous: I clarify that this is a good illustration of a gut response, yet is merely a restatement of the problem. Some students may suggest that Millar could not have promoted the theory because the theory itself is wrong: opening this up to the group, however, generally results in other students pointing out the fallacy in this reasoning.

In the course of a few minutes' whole-group discussion, more analytical answers invariably start to emerge. Students may, for instance,

(a) argue that the story should be discredited because it is alarmingly dissimilar to familiar accounts of genuine theories and systems
(b) take the empathy approach, trying to imagine in practical terms the outcome of Millar's intervention, concluding that other naturalists could not possibly have been as charitable

      as I suggest

(c) point out that the tale has the conventional form of a parody: since this assumption accounts neatly for all the appearances, there is no necessary reason to favour any other assumption.

Response (a) is the commonest. It allows discussion of the important point that all of us routinely assess the value of assertions relative to our own expertise, often without being aware of doing so: the trick is simply to stop suspending the faculty whenever an 'authority' makes a pronouncement, on paper or in person. Response (b) tends to come from students with some prior historical sensibility or training, whom I encourage to articulate it clearly for the benefit of those who do not. Response (c), if offered, can be invoked here as one illustration of how knowledge which might seem to have nothing to do with the enquiry can still be productive. None of these responses, of course, is straight-forwardly satisfactory in general terms. Prompted to vent their frustra-tions, some students counter that they simply don't know how nine-teenth-century naturalists thought or behaved, whereas I (presumably) do. This is the springboard for a discussion of external corroboration, which is a recurring theme across the skills course.

Given the ever-growing tendency for students to bring networked laptops and handheld devices into class, I am surprised that nobody, to date, has tried to dispel the uncertainty by running searches on the terms and concepts discussed. Were I able to run this exercise with a class of computer science students, experience suggests that several would investigate unhesitatingly and relentlessly until they achieved a concrete result (perhaps reporting that, while the phrase 'alphabetic taxonomy' has been variously used, no book of that title was published in any year by anyone). The successful resolution of the question, however, should not be presented as bringing an end to the discussion. In the following sections, I discuss how coverage may be broadened out to address the situations students will encounter in actual research practice.

Interrogating authorship

Anyone planning anything as perverse as the Michael Sapway Millar

exercise should be cautious on two points. The first is that the students must not mistake it for a counsel of despair. Although sources are not automatically authoritative, we must emphasise that valid authority nevertheless exists, and that it's within the students' power to identify, and even to build it. An obvious corrective is to talk through a short and accessible piece of scholarly literature, asking how and why we know the case is watertight—perhaps following up a few supporting references or external corroborations online, or in books brought along for the purpose. You might begin by doing this with an influential paper in the students' own scientific discipline, whose content they can readily interpret: then, in a following session, do the same for a historical paper.

The second concern is to prevent students thinking the Millar case is too artificial to be relevant to serious work. Who, outside the context of a training exercise, would ever go to the trouble of passing off an entirely invented scientific figure as real? I take care to establish that this was, in some historical situations, common practice. Witness this title page from an elementary chemistry textbook of 1810:
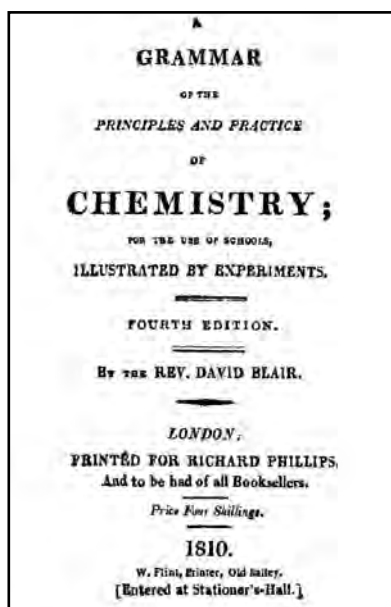
The students are given the apparently trivial task of identifying the book's author. Post-Millar, they are typically guarded, as well they

might be. The *Grammar* was in fact one of a stream of works compiled, with varying degrees of originality, by the publisher Richard Phillips and his assorted hired hacks. As an outspoken Radical, and a well-known figure with no obvious chemical credentials, Phillips would not have helped sales by putting his own name on the work. 'The Rev. David Blair', therefore, was one of a clutch of respectable-sounding clergymen whose identities Phillips borrowed or created to fit the part. (Phillips was also Miss Pelham, Monsieur l'abbé Bossut, and so forth, as the occasion demanded.)[12]

Again, it is important not to lead the students to abandon hope. Though the title page does not tell the truth, as we would define it, on a point where we would hope it to be authoritative, it remains a vitally important clue. It points us to David Blair, whom we cannot trace; but it also points us to Phillips, whom we can. Dogged exploration of the available avenues, in the light of wider reading on early nineteenth-century literary practices, does lead to an accurate understanding of the book's authorship.

This focus on questions of authorship is a useful basis for wider considerations of the plural and changing conventions of scientific literature. When running this exercise with biology students, I compare Phillips' title page with the first page of a recent biological paper, usually one co-written by a biologist colleague whom the students know as a lecturer. Such papers usually list around half a dozen co-authors. Asked 'who wrote this?', students readily explain the name ordering convention of the field: principal author at the front; lab head or grant-holder at the end; lesser contributors in the middle. The principal author may be entirely responsible for the text, and it is probable that some of the 'co-authors' did not literally generate a word of it.

Is the paper, then, another fraud? Of course not, the students quite reasonably reply: to claim this would be to misunderstand the conventions involved. I normally move from here to discuss the valid, yet incompatible concepts of authorship which exist in different disciplines. Some scientific fields place the 'lab head' first in the list; others identify no such role, often for the very good reason that they do not

---

[12] Kinnell, Margaret, 'Sceptreless, Free, Uncircumscribed? Radicalism, Dissent and Early Children's Books', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 36:1 (1988), pp. 49-71.

possess a lab group structure.[13] Pure mathematics is strongly committed to purely alphabetical ordering—not on Millarian grounds, but because mathematicians value it as a stable basis for cooperation. And what are we to make of recent papers from the CERN ATLAS collaboration, which each identify around 3000 named authors?[14]

By analogy with this broader contemporary picture, nineteenth-century publication—a frequent focus for dissertation projects—can be introduced in terms of its unfamiliar, yet ultimately comprehensible peculiarities. Joseph Lister, to take one example among thousands, is formally identified as the sole author of his iconic work on antisepsis.[15]. Was Lister merely a towering lone genius (of a kind which, it seems, no longer exists), or did he too have some help? If so, who were his helpers, and where, if not on the title page, might we find them? Most HSTM practitioners are familiar with the literature on such questions, and this is precisely the kind of issue on which individual supervisors on the final-year projects issue guidance.[16]

Getting students to consider the conventionality of declared authorship may also lead onto discussion of the scientific paper more generally. Do the context-free stream of 'results' and wholly separate 'discussion', leading miraculously to the desired outcome, add up to 'a totally mistaken conception, even a travesty, of the nature of scientific thought'? This, of course, was the view promoted not by any postmodern upstart, but by the Nobel-laureate immunologist, Peter Medawar.[17]

---

[13] The existence of variations in acknowledgment and authorial ordering conventions seems often to come as a surprise to monodisciplinary researchers, and causes much frustration to those working between disciplines. It is occasionally discussed in the most general of scientific journals: 'Games People Play with Authors' Names', *Nature* 387 (26 June 1997), p. 831; Pearson, Helen, 'Credit where Credit's Due', *Nature* 440 (30 March 2006), pp. 591-592.

[14] For instance, Aad, G. *et al*., 'Observation of a Centrality-dependent Dijet Asymmetry in Lead-lead Collisions at sqrt[S(NN)] =2.76 TeV with the ATLAS Detector at the LHC', *Physical Review* Letters 105:25 (2010), 252303. This paper's PubMed entry lists each author individually: **http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21231581**, accessed 27 April 2011.

[15] Lister, Joseph, 'On the Antiseptic Principle in the Practice of Surgery', *Lancet* 2 (1867), pp. 353-356.

[16] Shapin, Steven, 'The Invisible Technician', *American Scientist* 77 (1989), pp. 554-563; Russell, Nicholas *et al*., 'Missing Links in the History and Practice of Science: Teams, Technicians and Technical Work', *History of Science* 38 (2000), pp. 237-241.

Most practising scientists would accept that the best means of representing *the idea itself* may give a very poor representation of *the history of the idea*. Asked what else would useful for a more rounded reconstruction, students can usually offer appropriate answers: drafts, diaries, letters, invoices, sheets of barely processed data.

Learning history through source criticism

A more structured exercise based on these principles appears near the beginning of my second-year undergraduate course on the history of information technology. The class (varying from 15 to 30 students) is divided into small groups, each of which is given the same set of eight short published documents. Each document describes a piece of computer technology, or computing machines in general, for a non-expert audience. The sources include a newspaper Sunday supplement, a home computer magazine, a humorous anthology and a programming guide for children, and vary in date from 1864 to the early 2000s. This contextual information is erased, however, and the groups are directed to answer, as best they can, the following questions:

   (a) When was this document created?
   (b) Where was it published? (eg: in a popular magazine, a specialist newsletter…)
   (c) What kind of audience was it created for?
   (d) What kind of person might have created it?
   (e) What does it tell you about the way 'the computer' was perceived at that time and in that situation?

Students from all backgrounds engage readily with question (a), which invites answers of a definite form. This has the advantage of offering a shared premise for debate: when different groups' answers diverge widely, it is easy to get them to reveal the approaches they used to justify them. These may refer to the internal evidence of the text, the nature of the computers described, the tone of the English, and the typography of the material. Discussion can be directed according to the

---

[17] Medawar, Peter, 'Is the Scientific Paper a Fraud?', 1963; collected in, for instance, *The Strange Case of the Spotted Mice and Other Classic Essays on Science*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp. 33-39.

lecturer's priorities. Only a small minority of students, for instance, dated an extract from a reprint of Charles Babbage's 1864 autobiography any earlier than the 1920s.[18] Was Babbage really 'ahead of his time', or did he lay down the model for subsequent explanations—or do some elements of fundamental description simply tend to be relatively static?

The succeeding questions are progressively more 'open', inviting longer and more reflective responses. Question (b), for instance, generates many clear-cut answers, but students often suspect (rightly) that some of the publications belong to genres they are not familiar with, and which may no longer exist. Question (e) is probably at the limit of what can practically be considered in seminar discussion. It requires integrated examination of the text's internal evidence, the form of the publication, and any available external cues as to the context of authorship. Having been led through the preceding questions, however, students often find that they can contribute, and thereby examine changes in perceptions and promotion of computer technology—a central course theme—for themselves.

I did, however, add one thoroughly artificial complication to the exercise. Students were warned at the outset that one of the eight sources was 'fake', and did not 'come from the period or situation suggested'. This item was supposedly a 1954 RAND Corporation mock-up of how a home computer might look like in 2004—in reality, a photo-manipulated image produced in that year.[19] The aim, again, was to discourage assumptions of inbuilt authority, while sparking interest among habitual problem-solvers and offering another spur to discussion. This part of the exercise continues to generate interesting responses. Some students, as in the Millar case, correctly interpret the image as a parody, while others question the informal language of the text. One recent student stared intently at the image before pronouncing that it had 'clearly been shopped' (manipulated using the Photoshop

---

[18] The text in question is Babbage, Charles, *Passages from the Life of a Philosopher*, (1864), reprinted (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1991), p.30, passage running 'Calculating machines comprise … fulfilling this condition.'.

[19] The image was created by the fark.com user Troels Eklund Andersen ('lukket') in September 2004, and is preserved at
http://www.fark.com/comments/1115586/
Photoshop-this-mock-up-of-a-submarines-maneuvering-Room.

package). Such responses usefully demonstrate that critical enquiry depends on a wide range of tools.

This class also served to prepare students for a source interpretation exercise I set later in the course to tie in with lecture content on the Turing Test, Alan Turing's operational definition of machine intelligence in terms of the ability to mimic human conversation. Students were first shown a photocopy of a 2004 *New Scientist* story describing a piece of software devised to trap 'paedophiles attempting to "groom" children in internet chatrooms', using an sophisticated artificial text-generator to pose as a child and monitor the responses for 'suspicious activity.'[20]

I began, as before, with an easily specified task. The report features a sample of 'very convincing' dialogue between two individuals, A and B, inviting the reader to guess which is the artificial intelligence, and which the human. Asking the class to do likewise usually resulted in controversy: some students claimed to see unmistakeably human-generated responses in A's conversation, others in B's. I then split the students up into small groups and asked them to comment on selections from a range of documents published in response to the *New Scientist* report. These included personal blogs with comments by various contributors, a column by Ben Goldacre in the *Guardian*, an entry from the Museum of Hoaxes website, and a follow-up story in the *New Scientist*.[21] This process led us to the following instructive ques-

---

[20] 'Software agent targets chatroom paedophiles', *New Scientist*, 20 March 2004, 23.

[21] John Leyden, 'Software hunts for Net paedos', *The Register*, 18 March 2004, online at **http://www.theregister.co.uk/2004/03/18/software_hunts_for_net _paedos/**; Michael Williams, "Unbelievable ChatNannies", 18 March 2004, online at **http://www.mwilliams.info/archive/2004/03/unbelievable-chatnannies. php**; Cameron Marlow, "My chat with a Nanniebot", 22 March 2004, online at **http://overstated.net/2004/03/22/my-chat-with-a-nanniebot**; Andy Baio, "Nanniebots: hoax, fraud or delusion?", 23 March 2004, online at **http://waxy.org/2004/03/nanniebots_hoax/**; Ben Goldacre, '"Nanniebots" to catch paedophiles', *Guardian*, 25 March 2004, online at **http://www.bad-science.net/2004/03/nanniebots-to-catch-paedophiles/**; John Leyden, 'Paedo-stalking ChatNannies: fact or fiction?', *The Register*, 25 March 2004, online at **http://www.theregister.co.uk/2004/03/25/paedostalking_chatnann iesfact_or_fiction/**; Museum of Hoaxes, 'ChatNannies last all summer long', 25 March 2004, online at **http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/weblog/**

tions:
- The software, if real, embodied a major conceptual break-
  through in computer science in its own right. Why, then,
  was its initial announcement couched purely in terms of its
  child-protection significance?
- Several investigators argued that the software could not be
  genuine because its ostensible responses could only have
  been written by an actual human. Perfectly human-like
  output, however, was the intended criterion for success!
  Some, therefore, specified experimental set-ups which
  would, by their standards, prove or disprove the presence
  of human chicanery, but the software's originator rejected
  most of these on practical and commercial grounds. In this
  kind of situation, what factors determine which view comes
  to be seen as most credible?
- Meanwhile, the same investigators quickly established that
  the software's creator had limited software development
  experience, an interest in Holocaust denialism, and a
  tendency towards abusive comments online. Do these dis-
  coveries prove anything about the case? If not, can they
  still legitimately shape the enquiry?
- How did the controversy end? How do participants decide
  when to attack and when to ignore their opponents, and
  how should our understanding of this point guide our
  reading of the historical record?

Developing source criticism more broadly

The preceding sections show how cases of deliberate deception can
prepare the way for addressing more subtle, and more commonplace
complications. It would be easy to set up a great many case studies
involving authors who serve partisan aims in their selection of
evidence, framing of questions, and use of language. It is important,
however, that students do not start to see particular sources as inherent-

permalink/chatnannies/; 'Chatnannies' AI credentials still on hold', *New
Scientist*, 16 June 2004, 23.

ly 'good' or 'bad', as though they were passively consumed rather than operated on by the researcher. In the dissertation skills classes, the focus is on whether the use to which a particular source is put is valid or invalid. I therefore discuss a number of situations where a potentially useful source may mislead the reader quite unintentionally.

Any experienced researcher should be able to offer concrete examples relevant to the students' research activities. There is, for instance, John Marshall's famous warning to the oral historian. 'At what age did you leave school?', asks the interviewer of a former Blackburn millworker. Fourteen, comes the simple response. On a naïve analysis, fourteen is therefore the age at which Lancashire schoolgirls went out to work. In reality, the subject has been a 'half-timer', moving between schoolroom and loom-shed, from a much earlier age, 'like hundreds of thousands of Lancastrians of her generation.' It is precisely because the arrangement was commonplace that she did not point it out.[22] In this case, closer examination of the source will not help: greater contextual awareness is needed to dodge the trap.

Changing terminology offers a particularly rich seam of warnings of the need to read in context. A neat, if trivial example crops up in Andrew Ure's correspondence for 1822, in which the chemist Edward Daniel Clarke mentions the 'gas which you collected from Plutonium.'[23] Clarke's preferred term for the element others called barium never caught on, eventually finding a very different use in 1940. Some students will be similarly jolted to find David Brewster, in the mid-nineteenth century, stating that John Flamsteed, in the mid-seventeenth, was unable 'to pay the expenses of a computer for reducing his observations.'[24] What Flamsteed lacked, of course, was not a Linux box running Mathematica, but a hired man to do his arithmetical drudge-work. Untangling this confusion yields historical insight: the expectations which clients had of their human computers informed those which eventually surrounded machines.[25] Similar mileage can be

[22] Marshall, John, 'The Sense of Place, Past Society and the Oral Historian', *Oral History,* 3:1 (1975), pp.19-25, on 21.

[23] Quoted in Farrar, Wilfred Vernon, 'Andrew Ure, FRS, and the Philosophy of Manufactures', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society,* 27 (1973), pp.299-324, on 305.

[24] Brewster, David, *Memoirs of the Life… of Sir Isaac Newton*, (1855), ii: 162.

[25] Grier,David Alan, *When Computers Were Human*, (Princeton: Princeton

had from the literature on such mutable terms as *energy*, *Newtonianism* and *infectious disease*—and, of course, *philosophy*, *science*, *scientific* and *scientist*.[26]

The next step is to consider that the sources used may be utterly guileless, representative and comprehensible, yet will still misdirect the enquiry if they are irrelevant, or insufficiently relevant, or even sub-optimally relevant. Throughout the dissertation project, we emphasise that good time management is crucial, and depends significantly on source criticism: students must prioritise finding and consulting the information which seems most likely to be productive, and must change course rapidly when sources turn out to be less useful than expected. It is difficult to construct particularly sharp and memorable exemplars for this point. It is straightforward, however, to assemble a selection of sources which all sincerely address a shared topic, some of which, for any given research question, are more immediately useful than others.

Thus, I proceed by degrees from a deliberately 'closed' and artificial exercise towards the awkward overlaps, contingencies and practical limitations of real-life research. To deal with these, the students must, of course, be equipped with significant new research skills. An approach to these is covered in the final section.

A semi-closed exercise in source criticism

I end the Millar exercise with a reassurance that I am going to clear up the real history of nineteenth-century taxonomy. Redisplaying the

University Press, 2005).

[26] For instance: Harman, Peter, *Energy, Force, and Matter: The Conceptual Development of Nineteenth-Century Physics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Schaffer, Simon, 'Newtonianism', in Olby, Robert et al, (eds.), *Companion to the History of Modern Science*, (London: Routledge, 1990) pp.610-626; Condrau, Flurin and Worboys, Michael, 'Epidemics and Infections in Nineteenth-century Britain', *Social History of Medicine* 20:1 (2007), pp.147-158; Cunningham, Andrew, 'Getting the Game Right: some Plain Words on the Identity and Invention of Science', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 19 (1988), pp.365-389; Yeo, Richard, *Defining Science: William Whewell, Natural Knowledge and Public Debate in Early Victorian Britain*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

'Michael Sapway Millar' portrait, I explain that it actually does depict a nineteenth-century taxonomist, William Sharp Macleay (1792-1865). I briefly survey Macleay's context and activities, highlighting his promotion of the quinarian system, with its neat hierarchy of sets of five taxa. I then break off, much as before, and ask the students whether they find *this* story convincing: to date, no student in any group has reported doubts about it. I then, of course, point out that I have recently affirmed myself to be a desperately unreliable source. For all they know to the contrary, Macleay might be another invention; the quinarian system appears less far-fetched than alphabetic taxonomy, but still runs contrary to core understandings of present-day life science. Discussion therefore moves on to how my new story might be checked.

The students tend to suggest recourse to online searching, published biographies, encyclopaedias or textbooks, but are consistently unfamiliar with particular resources such as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. At the end of the class, they are provided with an annotated list of such resources, and an exercise to complete for the following week. Given twenty factual claims about Macleay, said to be the work of 'an unreliable source', they are asked to determine which are correct.

This might be called a 'semi-closed' exercise. It is designed to have a definite outcome in the series of true/false answers, which the students are encouraged to discuss among themselves. (In keeping with the exercise's progression from obvious artifice towards realistic simulation, most of the claims are in fact perfectly valid; a few display inaccuracies of a kind that could plausibly arise through carelessness.) Yet they are also directed to make a note of the sources used, the order in which they approach them, the time taken, and any problems encountered: the aim is to get accurate answers efficiently.

The follow-up discussion session, in fact, dispenses with the answers almost completely, focusing on the 'open' question of how best to approach the research. Topics which have come up in the past include the limitations of googling, the use of library catalogues, the exact situations where full-text searching is useful, the value of skimming a broad overview before looking at more detailed sources, and the usefulness of research record-keeping itself.

By policy, when setting such tasks for students, I perform them

myself. The result is never particularly authentic, because, of course, I design the exercises to have workable solutions and know what they are; but the process gives me some sense of how far the students might get within the time limit, and where further guidance might be useful. After the students had completed the Macleay task, I encouraged them to compare their results with my own—or rather, with what I was careful to admit was a heavily polished version of my research notes. I typed these up, preserving the order of the investigation, but adding text to clarify the thought processes and make the references traceable, with hyperlinks to the online finding aids. An introductory note stresses that mine is not the only solution, and that others might be better.

With the aid of the free screen recording package CamStudio (**camstudio.org**), I was able to take this a stage further, producing a video of the computer-based parts of the investigation with commentary. This was an instructive experience: simply setting the recorder going and working as normal resulted in unwatchably tedious footage. Again, it was necessary to simulate. Using my research notes as an outline script, I worked through the exercise with one finger on the key that paused and unpaused the recording, adding material only when I had something coherent to do or say. The result was a useful example of the use of, for instance, Web of Knowledge and the HistSciTechMed database (now bundled into FirstSearch in a particularly inconvenient fashion). One complication was that, in real-life research, the most efficient research path often takes the researcher away from the screen: the audio commentary is full of references to the need to visit the library or check the access arrangements for remote documents.

The lessons of these group-based classes are followed up, on a one-to-one basis, by the students' dissertation supervisors in the context of the specific research tasks involved. Supervisors have generally reported that the exercises are helpful; the comments we have received from students, though rather infrequent, are likewise entirely positive, usually focusing on the breadth of skills acquired, the flexibility of the approach, and the 'real-world' nature of the enquiry. It is worth noting that there is inevitable selection bias here: students who undertake a final-year HSTM project do so at their own request. The acid test would be to apply the approach to a required course on a science programme. The abovementioned literature on science education, however, leaves me hopeful that this would be productive.

Beyond Active-Stasis:

Reflections on Philosophy, Education and 'Life Satisfaction' in the United Kingdom

Lawrence Harvey

Philosophy Department
Peter Symonds College

Against the backdrop of the current economic downturn, the coalition government in the UK is poised to implement an initiative which seeks to gauge the national mood in terms of happiness. Indeed, despite a degree of 'nervousness' in Downing Street at the prospect of testing the national mood against the backdrop of deep cuts and student unrest, the Office of National Statistics is set to produce quantitative and qualitative procedural measures so as to facilitate the aforesaid government initiative. Some seven years prior to the present economic downturn, the previous UK Government published an analytical paper entitled, 'Life Satisfaction: the State of Knowledge and Implications for Government' (December 2002). The paper,

written by Nick Donovan and David Halpern, constituted a discursive interrogation of government policy initiatives in relation to the issue of happiness. Although a wide-ranging report, it also addressed the issue of happiness in relation to education. To my mind, although the report addresses education, it does not fully draw out the positive effects of education in relation to happiness. The purpose of my reflections here will be to demonstrate that the subject I teach, philosophy, can have a positive impact in terms of 'life satisfaction' in a significant manner that goes beyond the economic or vocational factors prioritised by government commentators such as Lord Leitch (Leitch *et al*, 2005). Of course, as a philosophy teacher I am unashamedly partisan and, as such, make no claims in terms of objectivity or professed impartiality. Nonetheless, I will argue that the abovementioned government initiative is somewhat myopic and contains caveats that can be redressed within the context of my teaching specialism. I will therefore bring to the fore the shortfalls with regard to the on-going emphasis on what Lord Leitch terms economically valuable skills.

In the Executive Summary to the 'Life Satisfaction' paper, it is suggested that there is a 'large and rapidly growing body of research that investigates what makes people satisfied with their lives' (Donovan & Halpern, 2002, p. 2). This issue of satisfaction is, as the report makes clear, complex and to a certain degree, subjective. Yet a key component of self-perceived satisfaction is happiness or what the ancient Greeks more accurately labelled *eudemonia* (holistic happiness or flourishing). In the spirit of Aristotle, economic factors are clearly pertinent to such a state of holistic happiness or satisfaction—a general point which the aforesaid report makes clear. Moreover, the allied link between education and potential remuneration is perhaps patent. However, beyond this economic correlation, the link between education and 'life satisfaction' is somewhat hazy. Indeed, Donovan and Halpern suggest that, set aside from economic factors, a variety of studies have often found, at most, a small correlation between education and life satisfaction (Donovan & Halpern, 2002, p. 24). I would argue that if this correlation is indeed small, there are serious deficiencies within the education system in the United Kingdom—serious deficiencies which Donovan and Halpern fail to address. It would seem apparent that education and holistic happiness have an interdependent link as Nel Noddings has recently argued in her study of education

practice: 'Happiness and education are, properly, intimately connected.' As she clarifies: 'Happiness should be an aim of education, and good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness' (Noddings, 2003, p. 1).

Needless to say however, happiness is a somewhat elusive and much debated term. What exactly is happiness? For utilitarian luminaries such as Bentham and Mill, happiness is what drives us all; we are driven by two 'sovereign masters'—the pursuit of happiness and the avoidance of pain (Bentham, 1962, passim). Indeed, within a utilitarian framework, it is a truism that psychological hedonism is our 'prime-driver.' With a little more subtlety perhaps, thinkers such as Aristotle propagated the idea that what is good for the individual and the community at large is a state of eudemonia—a state of human flourishing characterised by an all-pervasive happiness. As Richard Layard has pointed out in a recent study interrogating declining happiness in market economies, our financial situation is significant in relation to this all-pervasive state of happiness; however, it is not necessarily the central driving factor (Layard, 2005, pp. 62-5). Furthermore, as Shah and Marks' research seems to suggest, 'whilst economic output has almost doubled in the UK in the last 30 years, life satisfaction has remained resolutely flat [...]. Meanwhile depression has risen significantly over the last 50 years in developed countries' (Shah & Marks, 2004, p. 4). As Shah and Marks conclude, it would appear that many people are 'languishing rather than flourishing'—that is to say, they are not living the happy and fulfilling lives envisaged by Aristotle (Shah & Marks, 2004, p. 5). To my mind, an educational ideology that attaches itself, leech-like, to what are increasingly purely economic ends can only work to the detriment of what should be construed as a fundamental aim or *telos*—that is to say, an all-pervasive happiness.

Yet what we might term the 'happiness factor' in education has been traditionally put on the backburner or, indeed, extinguished altogether. As Nietzsche once put it, education is perceived as hard and disciplined: 'much is demanded and sternly demanded' and 'praise is rare' (quoted in Nodding, 2003, p. 44). Thankfully such a picture is undoubtedly an anachronism within mainstream education today. However, as Noddings claims in the Introduction to her book, such a view of education is still prevalent in the popular psyche : 'When I told people that I was writing a book on happiness and education, more than one has

responded with puzzlement, "But they don't go together"' (Nodding, 2003, p. 1). The question thus arises: how can education (and specifically my teaching specialism, philosophy) make a positive impact in terms of happiness?

In his book *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, Richard Layard forcibly argues that people's happiness depends upon their 'inner-selves' and their attendant philosophies of life (Layard, 2005, pp. 71-2). Philosophical counsellors such as Ran Lahav back this up by suggesting that happiness or serenity is dependant upon a self-reflexive engagement with one's 'worldview' or personal system of beliefs and valuations (Lahav, 1995). In his provocatively titled book *Plato not Prozac*, Lou Marinoff goes so far as to endorse the words of Socrates who famously proclaimed that the unexamined life is not worth living (Marinoff, 1999, p. 11). If such commentators are to be believed, it is therefore perhaps credible that happiness is intrinsically linked to self-perception, apperception and a sense of valued being. I would suggest that this is becoming even more relevant in a material, consumer driven age which has loosened, if not severed its links to any spiritual dimension. Arguably our 'economistic' ideology, faltering as it is in the current economic downturn, has denigrated self-worth in the name of external avarice and profit margins. Education policy in the UK has been increasingly, if tacitly, complicit with this process of denigration; more and more, it has been directed towards economic ends (see for instance Alan Johnson's commitment to 'raising productivity' in the wake of the 'Leitch Report,' 2005). A significant by-product of this (perhaps necessary) economic focus has been what can be termed a 'narrowing of educational experiences' which has resulted in a 'sharply decreased ability [for education] to add to people's well-being' (Smith, 2005, p. 2). The coalition government's stringent cuts to funding in the post-sixteen sector in the UK will undoubtedly exacerbate the narrowing of the so-called 'educational experience' across the board.

However, it is my contention that both the academic and pastoral use of philosophy within the education system can have profound results with regard to what Donovan and Halpern term 'life satisfaction.' Unlike in France where the philosophy question in the International Baccalaureate makes the front page of the national newspapers, in the UK, the subject is, at least in some circles, still regarded as somewhat esoteric and marginal. In the present economic climate it

is easy to equate that which is esoteric and marginal with that which is superfluous. Yet in an age shaped by the Nietzschean departure of God; an age of relative spiritual vacuity; an age wherein depression and unhappiness are on the increase, philosophy can play a significant role: such is my claim.

Let us flesh out this claim by asking ourselves what philosophy is. In general terms, philosophy questions and explores the big questions—the fundamentals of being and value. In this manner, it has the potential to shake one free from the experience of one's 'life forces' as an 'investment which must bring [...] the maximum profit obtainable under existing market conditions' (Forman quoted in Smith, 2005, p. 2). Otherwise put, philosophy can be regarded as a key 'life skill' that can enable one to reflect upon one's life and the lives of others within the broader community. Such reflection and apperception might not have any obvious economic value, yet it has the potential to increase self-worth, self-esteem and a sense of what it is to be; especially in a post-industrial world shaped by God's absence. As Alain de Botton puts it, it is philosophy that can 'explain our condition to us, and thereby help us to be less lonely with, and confused by it' (Botton, 2001, p. 199). But more than this, the academic study of philosophy can equip students with the essential 'life skill' of rational thought. Philosophy teaches the student to apply reason and logic to life—it enables the learner to think for themselves rather than passively consuming or buying into another's preordained path. Indeed, neophyte philosophy students are often surprised to find that there are (within certain basic academic parameters) no right or wrong answers. It often takes a subtle change of mental tack for them to fully realise that it is the analytic quality of their responses which is of primary importance.

Another important way in which philosophy can increase 'life satisfaction' is in relation to ethics. Philosophy equips students with the skills needed to evaluate and critically reflect upon what is perceived to be right or wrong—what is deemed ethical and what is not. There is of course no universal consensus here; philosophy provides methodologies and perspectives, not answers or fundamentalist apertures. Of course, lurking within this positive openness is the spectre of a state of *aporia* (*aporos*—'impassable'). In short, as more answers are offered, more confusion manifests itself and compounds self-doubt. Otherwise stated, ignorance might well be the path to proverbial bliss. True as this

might be in certain circumstances, I would however suggest that the mere discussion of such perspectives can enlighten the student as to their own ethical position and sense of value; it can bring a degree of clarity, albeit it a degree of clarity set squarely upon a subjective footing. In the most optimistic scenario, ethical philosophy can provide the student with decision-making procedures which can serve to ease evaluative doubt. In my experience as a sixth-form tutor, this has been particularly evident in classes engaged in debates centred upon the often emotive issue of practical ethics. The importance of providing students with the analytical and rational tools with which to grapple with subjects such as animal rights, euthanasia and abortion cannot be underestimated. Moreover, recently ethico-political philosophy has formed an analytical aperture through which many of my students have been able to interrogate the perceived rights and wrongs of civil disobedience set against the backdrop of the student tuition fees protests.

Aside from such life skills, I would also suggest that the teaching of philosophy can have a positive impact in terms of happiness in a slightly more tangential manner. Philosophy is largely a discursive subject; its *telos* is the truth or a sense of greater clarity within a dynamic framework that does not hold any one claim to truth as sacrosanct. In brief, philosophy can be construed as a dialogical subject—a subject that actively encourages an andragogical or self-directed approach to teaching as opposed to a didactic methodology which is, tacitly or otherwise, complicit in epistemic closure. As the person-centred therapist Carl Rogers once suggested, within such an educational approach, there is perhaps no comfort blanket of certainty, only an openness or a flowing out unto the Other (Rogers, 2004, p. 308). Such an approach does not provide the students with 'a rounded-out intellectual piece of merchandise which they [can] commit to memory and then give back' during an examination (Rogers, 2004, p. 307). At their best, philosophy classes are more open and permissive than many other areas of study. Within such a permissive environment, alienating didactic authority is jettisoned in the name of a facilitative approach designed to enable students to more freely explore the issues at hand and their genuine reactions to them. I would argue that philosophy is uniquely placed so as to encourage such an exploration—an exploration that is undoubtedly wedded to self-growth and knowledge.

Additionally, as Mark K. Smith has plausibly argued, happiness

in education 'requires the possibility of easy access to counselling and pastoral provision so that those who are troubled have a means to come to an understanding of themselves and their situation' (Smith, 2005, p. 11). Again, I would argue that philosophy can play its part here. Philosophy can be utilised as an effective counselling tool—especially if the student has an elementary grounding in the subject. Peter Raabe adeptly summarises the use of philosophy within the therapeutic sphere when he suggests that 'philosophical counselling consists of a trained philosopher helping an individual deal with a problem or an issue that is of concern to that individual.' For Raabe, the philosophical counsellor/tutor thus has a willingness to accept the challenge of taking philosophy out of the classroom and utilising it in the 'real' world of human interaction and exchange. Raabe makes it clear that the majority of students are capable of resolving their day-to-day problems by themselves or with the help of what he terms 'significant other.' However, sometimes such problems or dilemmas become too complex or composite, as in the case of conflicting values, for example, or career choices. As Raabe suggests, when values appear to conflict or one's own reasoning becomes ensnared within a circle, a trained philosopher has the potential to be a substantive helper (Raabe, 2006, p.1). A trained philosopher is presumably an expert or specialist in such areas as ethics and reasoning. Hence, if a significant problem is a 'non-pathological problem in living' an empathetic philosopher will, perhaps, be well placed to bring some sense of clarity and resolution via dialogical interaction (LeBon, 2001, p. 9). As Lou Marinoff puts it with typical aplomb, what is needed here is congruent 'dialogue, not diagnosis' (Marinoff, 1999, p. 4). Thus through a combination of philosophical tuition and Philosophical Counselling (or pastoral Socratic discussion), resolution and increased happiness/well-being can perhaps be achieved. The skills used and developed within such congruent exchanges are transferable to the student's life after they leave full-time educational; to my mind they are key 'life skills' that are not driven by the myopic economic concerns Leitch *et al* prioritise.

The Dalai Lama once said that he believed that the very purpose of our lives is to seek happiness. As he put it, whether one believes in religion or not; whether one believes in this religion or that religion; isn't it the case that we are all seeking something better in life? Following this line of reasoning, he concluded that the very motion of

our life is towards happiness (Dalai Lama & Cutler, 1998, passim). As I have tentatively argued, within an educational setting, philosophy has the potential to play a significant part of such a motion towards happiness; or more generally, the motion towards well-being. Indeed, contrary to the findings of Donovan and Halpern, I would argue that a philosophical education can have a significant impact with regard to future 'life satisfaction' in a manner over-and-above the obsessive acquisition of economically productive skills. Perhaps, as Layard puts it, prioritising future economic productivity within the education system places students on a 'kind of hedonic treadmill' on which they have to keep running in order that their 'happiness stands still' (Layard, 2005, p. 48). Philosophy enables one to transcend such a stagnant state of active-stasis—a fact becoming ever more pertinent in the current global economic turmoil.

Bibliography:

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Thompson, J. A. K., (trans.)(London: Penguin, 1976).

Bentham, J., *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation,* (Glasgow: Collins, 1962).

Dalai Lama & Cutler, H., *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living*, (New York: Penguin Putman, 1998).

De Botton, A., *The Consolations of Philosophy,* (London: Penguin, 2001).

Donovan, N., and Halpern, D., (2002) 'Life Satisfaction: the State of Knowledge and Implications for Government': **http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/~/media/assets/www. cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/paper%20pdf.ashx**

Lahav, R., 'A Conceptual Framework for Philosophical Counselling: Worldview Interpretations,' in Lahav, R., and Tillmanns, M., (eds.) *Essays on Philosophical Counselling*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995).

Layard, R., *Happiness: Lessons for a New Science*, (London: Penguin, 2005).

LeBon, T., *Wise Therapy*, (London and New York: Continuum Press, 2001).

Leitch, S., *et al*, (2005) 'Skills in the UK: The Long-term Challenge': **http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/pbr05_**

leitchreviewexecsummary_255.pdf

Marinoff, L., *Plato Not Prozac: Applying Eternal Wisdom to Everyday Problems*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999).

Nodding, N., *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Raabe, P., (2002) 'Professional Philosophy Outside the Academy: Philosophical Counselling': **http://.philosophy.com/ philosophy¬¬¬_article_14.html**.

Raabe, P., (2006) 'What is Philosophical Counselling.': **http.www.interchange.ubc.ca/raabe/what.html**.

Rogers, C., *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*, (London: Constable, 2004).

Shah, H., and Marks, N., *A Well-being Manifesto for a Flourishing Society*, (New Economics Foundation, 2004): **http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/z_sys_publication detail.aspx?pid=193**

Smith, M. K., 'Happiness and Education – Theory, Practice and Possibility,' *The Encyclopaedia of Informal Education*, (2005): **http://www.infed.org/biblio/happiness_and_ education.html**.

About Discourse

Subscriptions: *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies* is freely available to all individuals working in higher education in the UK and is freely distributed to all those registered as interested parties in our subject areas. You may register at **http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk**
For institutions and overseas individuals the rates are as listed below:
  • UK individuals in HE—no charge
  • Individual subscribers outside the UK—£20 p.a.
  • Library subscriptions—£35 p.a.

Submissions to the journal can be sent via our website or by post or email to the address below. Please see **http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/publications/style.html** for style guide and notes. We reserve the right to publish articles submitted for publication in both printed and digital forms unless a prior agreement is made otherwise. Articles should be no more than 8000 words and should comply with the Notes for Authors guidelines, above.
Advertising rates are:
  • Full page—£250
  • Half page—£150
Other rates negotiable, contact the editor