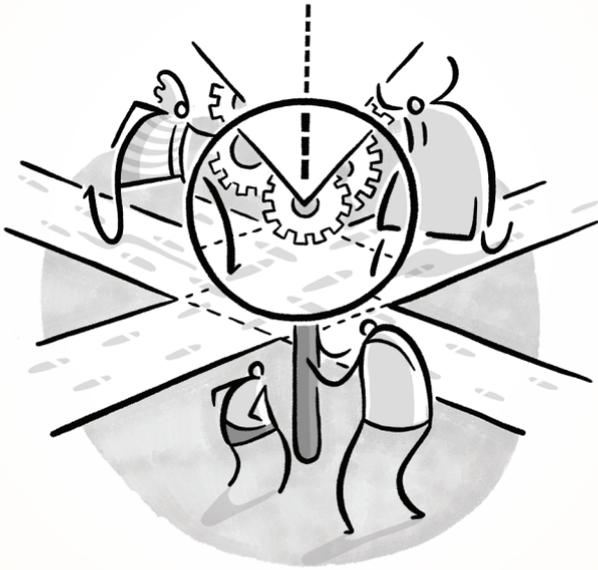


Making every RE lesson count



*Six principles to support
religious education teaching*

Louise Hutton and Dawn Cox

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Introduction

Why are we here? What a question! We are here in lots of senses. Let's start with two stories.

Louise: I had my first existential crisis when I was about 11. I really want to tell you that I was at the top of the Grand Canyon, or reading Keats, or immersed in the words of the Bhagavad Gita, Torah or Bible. I wish I could tell you it changed my life forever, but that isn't what really happened. However, I do remember it as vividly as if it were one of those great stories. It was a pretty miserable day, cold and wet. I was a greasy haired, lanky, spotty, almost teenager. Locked out because I had forgotten my keys, I had taken to the garage for shelter. Garages, it turns out, are great places to think. And a thought, out of the blue, hit me straight between the eyes. What if I don't exist? How do I know I exist? I stood, panicked, almost frozen in time as I pondered the metaphysics of the universe. And that is where this journey started for me. I know that every RE lesson counts because it helps our students to ponder these big questions.



Dawn: I love to travel and see how other people live their lives and how this may be different to how I live mine. During my travels I've experienced real people living their everyday lives with religion and with fascinating levels of diversity in beliefs, practice and adherence. I've lived in many different communities, including with Bedouins in the desert and with Druze in the mountains near

where Elijah slayed the prophets of Baal, and I have climbed Mount Sinai in the middle of night wearing the most unsuitable footwear possible! These experiences made me realise that studying what people believe is not only about the past but also about the present and the future. For me, teaching RE is about opening up this world to our students, some of whom may never have had the opportunity or inclination to see it first-hand themselves. Religion is fascinating and it is our job to teach students about it, regardless of their own beliefs and experiences.



This is why we know that every RE lesson does count. RE gets to the heart of what it means to be a human, to live and to be part of this amazing and wonderful planet. It provides a framework and a structure to help students unpick the big questions of religious belief and practice, of life and death, of society and culture, of morality and philosophy – all the things that make us human and help us to understand the shared identity of what it means to be human. In *Living with the Gods*, Neil MacGregor says that ‘one of the central facts of human existence is that every society shares a set of beliefs and assumptions – a faith, an ideology, a religion – that goes far and beyond the life of an individual. These beliefs are an essential part of a shared identity.’¹ RE helps students to explore those beliefs. What could be more important?

1 Neil MacGregor, *Living with the Gods: On Beliefs and Peoples* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), p. vii.

Every teacher thinks that their subject is special; we know that ours is. All subjects have challenges, but some are unique to that subject:

- ◆ RE does not have a national curriculum; instead, locally agreed syllabuses across the country outline different content and different ways of teaching RE.
- ◆ Debates surrounding the name of RE continue. In this book, we have chosen to use religious education (RE) to refer to any and all RE teaching, although we will also refer to religious studies when referring specifically to the GCSE and A level specifications which have that name.
- ◆ Parents have the right to withdraw their child from any or all religious education.
- ◆ RE has been removed from the curriculum in many schools. The National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) report that almost 40% of community schools and 50% of academy schools without a religious character do not meet their legal or contractual requirements for RE at Key Stage 4.²
- ◆ The GCSE religious studies examination includes the option of short course and full course entry, with some schools giving time allocation on a par with other subjects and others having reduced contact time.
- ◆ Some schools offer Key Stage 4 core RE, while others have no provision or minimal contact time as part of a carousel with other humanities subjects, personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education or citizenship, or drop-down days.
- ◆ Frequently, RE teachers are in small, one-person departments.

² National Association of Teachers of Religious Education, Number of Schools Flouting Religious Education Laws Rises [press release] (27 September 2019). Available at: <https://www.natre.org.uk/news/latest-news/number-of-schools-flouting-religious-education-laws-rises>.

- ◆ RE departments are often formed from teachers with other specialisms.

We wanted to write a book that would be helpful for all RE teachers in all contexts. We think that it is unique because it brings together the latest curriculum developments with evidence-informed practice and provides practical strategies for use in the RE classroom. We hope, therefore, to appeal to those who are new to teaching and those who have been teaching for some time but would like to develop their practice and keep abreast of recent changes. We also wanted to write a book for those teachers who may suddenly have been given five hours of RE on their timetable! Because now, possibly more than ever, every RE lesson *does* count.

What Makes Great RE Teaching?

Two factors that lead to the strongest student outcomes are outlined in the Sutton Trust's report, *What Makes Great Teaching?*:

- 1 (Pedagogical) content knowledge – effective teachers have deep subject knowledge and understanding.
- 2 Quality of instruction – reviewing learning, providing models and ensuring there is sufficient time to practise are all important.³

This book brings together these two strands: what we teach and how we teach it. (Pedagogical) content knowledge includes what is taught as well as guidance on how a subject is structured. We will consider this through the disciplinary lenses of theology, philosophy and the social sciences – and, in doing so, we are placing ourselves at the forefront of discussions surrounding content knowledge. The foundations

³ Robert Coe, Cesare Aloisi, Steve Higgins and Lee Elliot Major, *What Makes Great Teaching? Review of the Underpinning Research* (London: Sutton Trust, 2014), p. 2. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/What-makes-great-teaching-FINAL-4.11.14-1.pdf>.

laid out by Shaun Allison and Andy Tharby in *Making Every Lesson Count* – challenge, explanation, modelling, practice, feedback and questioning – provide an effective framework to consider how we teach it.⁴

When thinking about what to teach, many schools are moving towards a knowledge-rich curriculum – with a considerable shift in emphasis towards coherent curriculum design. Schools are also working hard on developing a sequential curriculum where knowledge and skills build over time. This means that there is more of a focus on the knowledge that we want students to learn. A knowledge-rich RE curriculum approach recognises that:

*All children need to acquire core knowledge and understanding of the beliefs and practices of the religions and worldviews which not only shape their history and culture but which guide their own development. The modern world needs young people who are sufficiently confident in their own beliefs and values that they can respect the religious and cultural differences of others and contribute to a cohesive and compassionate society.*⁵

While the head of RE may have responsibility for curriculum design, we think that it should be a collaborative exercise for the whole department to undertake, so throughout the book we will be exploring how the six principles can support all teachers to get involved in curriculum development.

In order to consider what we want our students to learn, we need to think about what RE *is* and what it *isn't*. Clearly, an

4 Shaun Allison and Andy Tharby, *Making Every Lesson Count: Six Principles to Support Great Teaching and Learning* (Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing, 2015).

5 Michael Gove, Foreword. In Religious Education Council of England and Wales, *A Curriculum Framework for Religious Education in England* (October 2013), p. 5. Available at: https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/RE_Review_Summary.pdf.

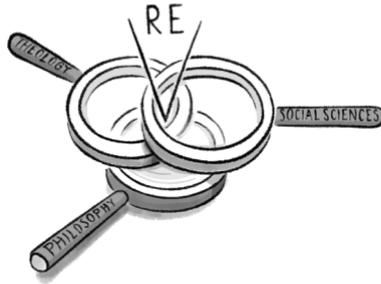
important aspect of studying RE is that students get an opportunity to think about the big questions in society and develop both their own understanding and an appreciation of the views of others. However, we believe that there are some things which fall outside the remit of RE – for example, it should not be confused with PSHE or citizenship, with the delivery of social, moral, spiritual and cultural education or with cross-curricular ideas. While there is some emphasis on individual development, it is not the primary aim of RE to make children into better people or to develop twenty-first century life skills, such as creative thinking or teamwork. These may be a by-product of learning about RE, but they do not represent the subject itself.

The disciplines of RE

RE is a multidisciplinary subject. This is why – unlike a history student who is called a historian or a geography student who is called a geographer – students of RE can be a theologian, philosopher or even a scholar of religion. There is not one all-encompassing term. To help define our subject, the RE community is currently discussing a framework of the three core disciplines of theology, philosophy and the social sciences.⁶

⁶ Social sciences can be further divided into several disciplines including, but not limited to, anthropology, archaeology, economics, law, linguistics, politics, psychology and sociology.

Richard Kueh suggests a fourth discipline called historical-critical: see Richard Kueh, *Disciplinary Hearing: Making the Case for the Disciplinary in Religion and Worldviews*. In Mark Chater, *Reforming Religious Education: Power and Knowledge in a Worldviews Curriculum* (Woodbridge: John Catt Educational, 2020), pp. 131–147 at p. 142. See also Gillian Georgiou and Kathryn Wright, *Disciplinary, Religion and Worldviews: Making the Case for Theology, Philosophy and Human/Social Sciences*. In Chater, *Reforming Religious Education*, p. 149.



This may be a new way of considering the structure of RE for some teachers. However, these three disciplines provide both teachers and students with specific lenses through which to study religions and world views. When in conversation with Richard Kueh, he made an analogy comparing the study of religion to the disciplines of ball games. Rugby, football and lacrosse are all ball games, yet they all have different rules and different languages. When you are playing these games you need to understand the distinctive terminology in order to play effectively. For example, each of these sports uses the word 'foul' or 'pass', but what constitutes a foul or pass will vary. The same can be said of the three disciplines. You can look at the same subject content from three different perspectives, and to do so you need to understand the rules or conventions, and shared discourse and language used in the different fields of theology, philosophy and the social sciences.

By using these disciplinary lenses, we can consider different types of questions to ask when studying religion and belief:



Theological lens

Questions about belief: what it is, where it has come from, how it has changed over time and how it is applied in different contexts.



Philosophical lens

Questions about the nature of reality, existence and knowledge.



Social

sciences lens

Questions about the way that religion and beliefs are lived and the impact they can have at an individual, communal and societal level.

Taking a balanced view of the disciplines helps us to create a challenging curriculum and give students the tools they need for future study. We will look further at how the disciplines can be explored across the principles in the book.

As teachers, understanding our own lens is also essential. We may have an unconscious bias towards one or more of the disciplines. A leader with an interest in philosophy, for example, may well change the name of RE to PRE (philosophy and religious education) or to philosophy and ethics, and place more emphasis at Key Stage 3 on these topics;

ditto for theology and the social sciences. We both realised when reviewing our curriculum using the Church of England Education Office self-audit tool that we were both erring towards our own disciplinary backgrounds and personal interests.⁷

Students also come with their own lens which will have developed from their life experiences and learning. We want them to understand that when studying religion no one is entirely neutral in their approach, because everyone views the world from their own perspective. As a result of developing their knowledge, students will implicitly sharpen their lens. This will provide them with a deeper understanding of the world they inhabit, and so their personal lens may change as they learn and experience more. RE also helps students to develop an understanding of their own presuppositions, their ‘epistemological and ethical biases’,⁸ which enable them to critique their own world view as well as the world views of others.

It is not the purpose of RE to develop a ‘better’ lens in our students in a direct way, which might be seen as character development or as confessionalism, by promoting an obligation to a particular religion. We should not try to measure our students’ lens through assessment either, because we believe it is unquantifiable. It is also not to be confused with some interpretations of attainment target 2 (AT2 – learning from religion), which assumes that learning about religion makes people better or more moral. A student’s lens is not their opinion on an aspect of belief or practice, rather it is an understanding of what has formed their opinion or perspective. For example, a student may hold the opinion that

7 This self-evaluation tool aims to help RE teachers and subject leaders assess how well balanced and suitable their RE curriculum is for all contexts: see Jane Chipperton, Gillian Georgiou, Olivia Seymour and Kathryn Wright, Self-Evaluation/Audit Questions (Secondary). Church of England Education Office (March 2018). Available at: <https://dioceseofyork.org.uk/uploads/attachment/4000/self-evaluation-audit-secondary-sept-18.pdf>.

8 Rebekah J. Atkins, Teaching the Language Not the Phrasebook, *Psychagogia* (4 June 2020). Available at: <https://psychagogia.org/teaching-the-language-not-the-phrasebook>.

abortion is wrong. This in itself is not a lens. The lens is about recognising that this viewpoint has been formed through many things: the way they have been brought up, conversations with others, personal experiences and the impact of other beliefs will all have helped to form their view. In the classroom, talking about our own lenses alongside the disciplinary lenses helps young people to understand the plurality and complexity of religious and non-religious beliefs.



Once we have reflected on what to teach through curriculum design, we will then consider how to teach it through the six Making Every Lesson Count principles. These principles, while simple to follow, are not a plan for every lesson or series of lessons. However, we believe that high-quality RE teaching happens when we think about how, when and why we use these principles. They help us to focus on the important things that are happening in the classroom and dispense with the superfluous.

Each chapter explores a different principle in theory as well as in practice. This is significant. Sometimes teachers try things in their classrooms because they have seen someone else do them or because they have been told to do them. However, they do not always understand why they are doing them. Dylan Wiliam argues that asking teachers to practise their craft without explaining the theory is like ‘treating each teacher as a kind of “intellectual navy” who is told

Writing in the practical, engaging style of the award-winning *Making Every Lesson Count*, Louise Hutton and Dawn Cox provide teachers of religious education with the means to help their pupils unpick the big questions of religious belief and practice, and of morality and philosophy – the things that make us human.

Making Every RE Lesson Count is underpinned by six pedagogical principles – challenge, explanation, modelling, practice, feedback and questioning – and shares simple, realistic strategies that RE teachers can use to develop the teaching and learning in their classrooms.

Written for new and experienced practitioners alike, *Making Every RE Lesson Count* will enable teachers to improve their students' conceptual and contextual understanding of the topics and themes explored across the breadth of the RE curriculum.

Suitable for RE teachers of pupils aged 11–18.

This book is precisely what the RE community needs.

Mary Myatt, education thinker, writer, and curator of <https://thesoak.education>

I implore every single RE teacher to get a copy of this book.

Andy Lewis, Deputy Head Teacher, St Bonaventure's School, and author of *100 Ideas for Secondary Teachers: Outstanding RE Lessons*

This is essential reading for all RE teachers whether they are NQTs or experienced subject leads.

Nikki McGee, Subject Specialist Lead for Religion and Philosophy, Inspiration Trust



Louise Hutton is an experienced teacher of RE who is currently an assistant head teacher at a large comprehensive school in Poole, where she also leads on staff development and teaching and learning. She is passionate about ensuring that her colleagues are research-informed and focused on high-quality teaching strategies in their subject areas.

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