

## **‘Teachers of RE are like Hollywood Producers – a bit’**

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Curriculum developers and teachers are producers. Maybe not of the Hollywood variety, but they design, curate, and produce educational experiences for their students. What students take from these productions is not always easy to say, but I want to focus on the activities of curricular production. These activities might include: looking for an ideal example to illustrate some significant principle; selecting an image, headline, or artefact because it is expected to generate some animated discussion; moving swiftly through some tricky piece of text that doesn't quite seem to work; etc. These activities involve teacherly judgements about how to contextualise subject matter and engage students. Those judgements are informed by knowledge of the subject domain, but also the pedagogical knowledge and experience of what works in particular classroom contexts.

Rather than think of teaching as transmitting content, I want to highlight teaching as a reflective practice by emphasising that the subject matter we imagine as being core to RE is not 'out there' but is produced by teachers and curriculum developers. Those involved in the production of subject matter, ought to be as clear as possible about the particular purposes underlying that process. So, I want to explore the criteria that lie behind judgements informing the production of subject matter. In other words, what educational logic is used? Presented as a series of questions and responses, I offer eight educational principles that could be used to inform curriculum discussions and teaching in RE.

### 1. Inclusion

- *How does the subject matter embrace all the perspectives present in the class and wider society?*
- At different times and places inclusion means different things. In RE these days, it normally means that every child should feel represented in, and engaged by, the subject matter. With over 4000 religions said to exist (never mind the so-called non-religious worldviews), inclusion can't mean that every religion and worldview is discussed, still less that every child's individual take on religion or worldview is explored. In what follows I address some of the complexities related to inclusion (e.g. selection; impartiality; relevance...) but for me, being educationally inclusive boils down to cultivating an openness to others that arises from a kind of self-awareness: reflecting on, and being up front about, the kinds of choices made, and knowing that other choices could be made. Teachers could (and often do) discuss how the representations offered in the classroom do not always mirror the student's lived experience: good movies can have something real to say without always reflecting real life.

### 2. Selection

- *How do we select from a world of potentially interesting and relevant stuff?*
- Selection is a core activity of the teacher-producer. While selection is in tension with the principle of inclusion, it is certainly very topical precisely because the subject has evolved and expanded: from being about one religion (confessional), to exploring many religions (plural), to aspiring to include non-religious worldviews, to questioning the 'World Religions' framing of subject matter. This evolution and expansion suggests that RE is

not as settled as some other curricular areas, and that selection is increasingly necessary. The clearer we can be about what we are trying to achieve, the more our selections will seem appropriate and justified, and the deeper our encounters with the particular narratives can be. As great producers know, it is through very particular narratives that general-universal stories are told.

### 3. Impartiality

- *In what ways can subject matter remain impartial while acknowledging a point of view?*
- Like objectivity, neutrality sounds like a good aspiration, but it can obscure a principle at the heart of our subject: that we all have a point of view (no one stands nowhere - <https://www.reonline.org.uk/news/nobody-stands-nowhere/>). As a concept, impartiality is preferable since, unlike neutrality, it doesn't suggest a denial of a point of view but tries to mitigate its influence. How? Just as traditions of hermeneutics invite reflection on the role of the interpreter, we can acknowledge and reflect on the limitations of our point of view while inviting encounter with others.

### 4. Relevance

- *What in the experience of the child is already related to the subject matter?*
- I suspect that many RE teachers are attracted to the profession by the love of subject; there is something intrinsically fascinating about the religious and philosophical dimensions of life. While love of subject is undoubtedly a vital and animating aspect of teaching, I want to emphasise the independence and integrity of the student's own relation to subject matter. Although teachers engage children, that engagement relies upon the fact that what is shown to the student in some way already relates to their lives. Good teaching always accounts for the images and prejudices that exist about different religions and worldviews by finding out about those background assumptions and opening them up to discussion. This is risky, but it ensures that the teaching can build on, and expand from, the intrinsic interest of the child.

### 5. Rigour

- *How is the subject matter grounded in the rigour of its academic subject discipline?*
- Some RE teachers imagine their subject as a reduced form of a university discipline like Religious Studies. The disciplinary approach to RE faces the challenge that RS and RE are multidisciplinary (drawing on theology; philosophy; anthropology; sociology etc.). This approach also faces the challenge that RS - and apparently RE too - should draw attention to the contested nature of so much within the subject; that contradictions and exceptions must be acknowledged; that subject matter is not naturally modular or constituted by neat units. I suggest that the production of school subject matter means sometimes telling stories that simplify, that gloss over exceptions, or present material in ways that essentialise even when we know that is not how things truly are.

### 6. Preparation

- *How does subject matter prepare children for engaging with and in social life?*

- While RE has intrinsic value, it is also very much concerned with the future through, for instance, its contribution to the capacities of future citizens to work and to engage in other social and communal activities. The educational experiences of RE should help children consider how to make these contributions in ways that are personally and socially meaningful. Therefore, the selections we make as teachers should also take account of the future opportunities that any understandings make available to them.

#### 7. Suspension

- *How might an encounter with the subject matter suspend or interrupt our present circumscribed views of things?*
- This one is tricky! I realise that talk of curriculum production might sit uneasily with those who passionately affirm that RE offers opportunities to encounter something other, something that interrupts our plans and intentions, and that may suspend us within something more existentially charged. Whether you think RE has a particular contribution to make when it comes to talk of what is ultimate (and there are reasons to question this), curriculum production as I have described it does not need to define the sum of the educational experience for the child. In other words, constructivism – the idea that learners construct their understanding of the world – is not the whole educational story. But like many divine things, I am not sure I should comment further on this.

#### 8. Humility

- *Are our selections and intentions enough to ensure a good outcome?*
- We can't avoid the fact that education is about attempting to influence someone, that the activity of teaching always promotes something. This needn't be (and probably shouldn't be) promoting a particular worldview. That's called confessionalism! Rather, I have in mind the idea that teaching might legitimately promote (for example) better knowledge, understanding, empathy or patience. There is always some purpose in view that drives the process of production. However, the limitations of our own point of view should alert us to something important: although we can't avoid promoting something, we should always do so with a measure of humility. After all, what is promoted is probably not the whole story. How do we show students that other understandings are possible, that different selections could be made, that other paths might be taken? Encouraging students to develop their own relation to subject matter is key: students could research stories of relevance to their lives to see for themselves the processes of selection and representation that they make, and that make them.

These principles underpin the work we are currently doing on a project entitled 'After Religious Education': <http://www.afterre.org/>