

Evaluating the impact of the Hampshire agreed syllabus: ‘Living Difference’ on teaching and learning in religious education

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This article sets out the findings of an exploratory study which looked at the impact of the Hampshire Agreed Syllabus, ‘Living Difference’, on teaching and learning in religious education. The research was carried out in Hampshire, Southampton, and Portsmouth, UK, between April and June 2008. Twenty teachers were interviewed, all of whom were using Living Difference and all of whom had reported that they were finding the syllabus effective in relation to their previous practice. The aim was to find out what it was about Living Difference that these teachers felt was producing more effective teaching and more successful learning in RE and why. The study also examined what might need developing or changing in the syllabus and its implementation. The author compares with other pedagogies of RE aspects of Living Difference including contextualising and evaluating religious material, using concepts, assessing and measuring progression in religious education, differentiation, having one attainment target, developing higher order thinking skills, and enabling student voices to be heard. It also looks at issues in training teachers in using the Agreed Syllabus. The author suggests that Living Difference supports teachers and students primarily at the pedagogical level of objectives, or setting intended learning outcomes, using a framework of understanding pedagogy in RE at three levels: the level of aims, the overall aims of the subject; the level of objectives, of setting intended learning outcomes; and the level of methodology, the activities which enable and support students to achieve those learning outcomes. The article ends with some questions for religious education nationally. Does Living Difference offer a pedagogical model at the level of objectives which could underpin the National Framework for RE and RE in the primary and secondary curricula? Is one attainment target better than two in practice? Does initial teacher training and continuing professional development need to give greater emphasis to learning theory? Should all agreed syllabi provide a pedagogical framework at the level of objectives, like Living Difference does? Should local authorities support training of the kind which is going on in Hampshire?

Keywords: assessment; concept; contextualise; pedagogy; progression

Introduction

This article sets out the findings of an exploratory study, made during 2008, investigating the impact of the Hampshire agreed syllabus on teaching and learning in religious education (RE). The full text of the research report can be found at <http://hias.hants.gov.uk/re/course>.

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Called Living Difference (LD) and introduced in 2004, the Hampshire agreed syllabus is significant because it provides a prescriptive and systematic pedagogical framework. It gives a process for teaching and learning and a conceptual analysis of religious material. This structures curriculum planning, assessment and progression. There is also a systematic and ongoing process of syllabus implementation.

The aim of this study was to find out about the impact of LD on teaching and learning in RE. Specifically, it looked at planning, measuring progression, assessing attainment and the impact of LD on attainment in RE. It also looked at the training teachers received in using LD.

The following two figures give a brief summary of the syllabus. Its key elements are the five-step cycle of learning and the hierarchy of religious concepts. The syllabus also gives level descriptors for assessment. These specify learning skills for each level: skills for Level 1 are ‘identify and talk about’; for Level 2 ‘describe in simple terms’; for Level 3 ‘describe’; for Level 4 ‘explain’; for Level 5 ‘explain some connections between concepts’ (see Figures 1 and 2).

In December 2006/January 2007, the RE advisors in Hampshire undertook a quantitative survey to find out how far teachers were implementing the agreed syllabus and whether teachers could see evidence of the syllabus raising attainment RE. This was just after the syllabus handbooks had been produced. The survey asked a number of questions about teachers’ implementation of LD, including two key questions

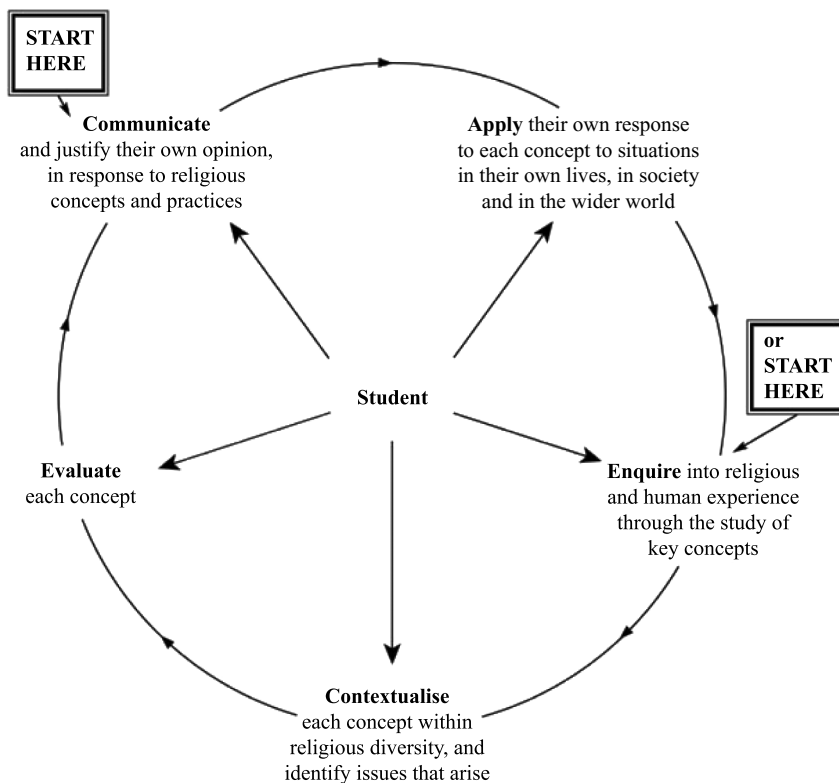


Figure 1. The five-step cycle of learning in Living Difference.

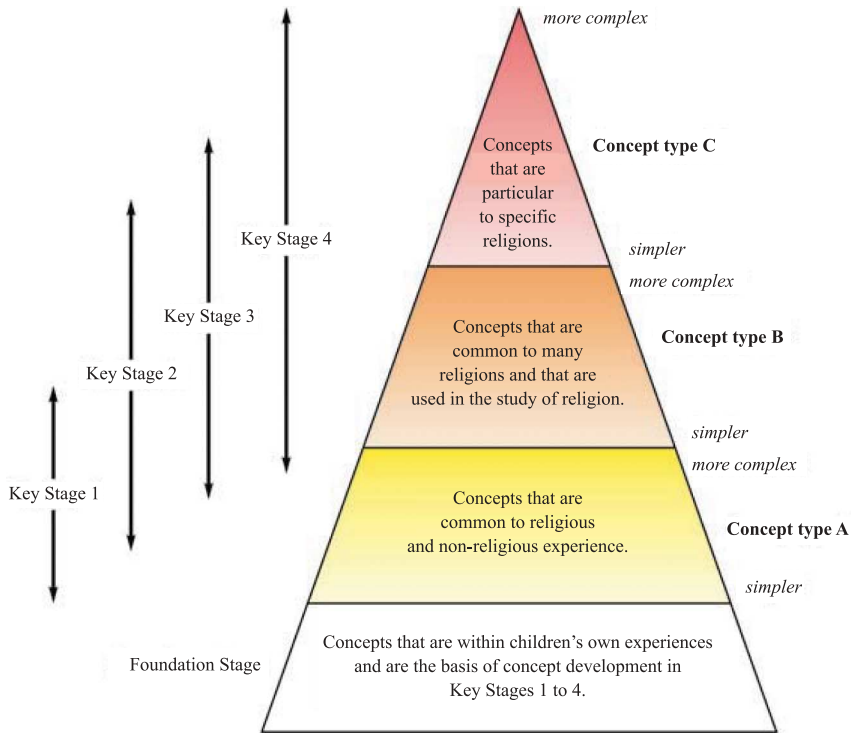


Figure 2. The hierarchy of concepts in Living Difference.

about improvements in students' attainment. The results are reproduced below (see Tables 1 and 2).

The exploratory study set out here was a qualitative follow-up to the 2006/2007 survey. The aim was to find out what it was about LD that some teachers felt had caused improvements in students' attainment. The aim was also to see what might need developing or changing in the syllabus and its implementation. In viewing the findings of this study in relation to the survey results, it is important to bear in mind the time gap between the survey and the study, during which teachers were developing their use of the syllabus and the units of work in the handbooks.

Table 1. Primary schools survey: 129 responses in total.

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
There is evidence of enquire, contextualise, evaluate, communicate and apply resulting in improvements in progression in pupils' achievement in RE	11.9	44.0	38.8	3.0	0.7
There is evidence of improvement in attainment as pupils progress through a key stage, as a result of implementing Living Difference	5.2	34.3	50.0	9.0	0.7

Table 2. Secondary survey: 28 responses in total.

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
There is evidence of enquire, contextualise, evaluate, communicate and apply resulting in improvements in progression in pupils' achievement in RE	17.9	50.0	28.6	3.6	0.0
There is evidence of improvement in attainment as pupils progress through a key stage, as a result of implementing Living Difference	7.1	42.9	50.0	0.0	0.0

The sample

A random sample of 20 teachers was chosen: all teachers who were using LD and who had reported that they were finding the new syllabus effective *in relation to their previous practice*. The teachers in the sample were not chosen because they were seen as 'best practitioners' but simply because they were finding LD effective compared to their previous practice. This was the only common feature among them.

The study sampled seven teachers of Key Stage 1, five teachers of Key Stage 2, one primary teacher and seven secondary teachers. One teacher was interviewed per school. The majority of primary phase teachers were non-specialists but they were the RE managers. All the secondary phase interviewees were specialists and heads of departments.

The sample size of 20 was used in order to be able to go into some depth, while at the same time indicating broader patterns of responses. A sample size of 20 cannot show statistically significant variations, but can indicate emerging themes.

The methodology

The aim was to ask the teachers what it was about LD that in their opinions was more effective than their previous practice: what impact had LD had on their practice and what effect was this having on students' attainment in RE? Was attainment higher? This research defines higher attainment in RE as: students exploring more deeply the significance of the beliefs, commitments and values in the religions they study, using skills of analysis and explanation; students engaging more creatively and meaningfully with those beliefs, commitments and values, giving responses based on clear arguments, in order to enrich and inform their own lives and ideas.

The research focused on teachers' use of the syllabus. As researcher I used the format of semi-structured interviews, sitting with teachers alongside their planning documentation and examples of students' work, asking them to talk through it to show how they used the syllabus. I asked five main questions:

- (1) Has LD had an impact on your planning in RE? If so, in what ways?
- (2) Has LD had an impact on how you measure progression in RE? If so, in what ways?
- (3) Has LD had an impact on how you assess attainment in RE? If so, in what ways?
- (4) What is it about LD that you think has raised students' attainment in RE?

- (5) What training have you received in using the syllabus? Has this had an impact on your use of LD? If so, in what ways?

The research asked the questions in this order because it was looking primarily at the practice of teachers. It looked at how the syllabus was impacting on their practice and what effect teachers thought this was having on students' attainment and why. While students' attainment is clearly the purpose of teaching, and reports on attainment start with attainment, this research started with teachers' use of the syllabus in their practice because this was the primary focus.

The aim was to ask open questions and to record what the teachers said. The points that came up were the points that teachers mentioned in response to the five questions.

Findings

The impact of LD on planning

The study found that LD has changed the way that the teachers in the sample are planning RE. Teachers see this as a positive change. Three things are new.

Firstly, teachers are planning units of work around concepts and these provide a clear focus for intended learning outcomes:

The concept is at the centre. Then you've got how you want to break the concept down. Nothing more.

Lessons are more punchy and pacy, and clear and focussed, because we're not bogged down with so much content. Discussion lessons have hugely improved since Living Difference, because we're now free to spend time on a concept. Not rushing through content. Kids latch onto the ideas better than they did in the past because there isn't the content there. For example, they can focus on Hindu ideas about reincarnation, not what happens at a Hindu burial. It's clearer. Focused on what really matters ... Living Difference inspires high level discussion because we're dealing with ideas – the nitty-gritty of RE, the concepts rather than the content.

Living Difference focuses on the concept. It was a big thing to get this across to staff. It was a different way of teaching.

You're very focused on what the concept is and that helps you to focus on lesson objectives.

I had to rethink activities. For example, in Harvest. Before LD the pupils wrote thank-you letters (a literacy activity). Now there is an RE focus to that activity. You use literacy but focus on the concept. This activity is now used for 'apply': the difference it makes to get or send a thank-you letter. The RE concept gives purpose to the activity.

Secondly, teachers are planning using the learning cycle. This specifies the 'how' of learning – what students actually do with the concept. It enables teachers to plan in more detail and with greater clarity the whole process of learning:

The fact the LD is concept-driven, and having a particular methodology: it does drive your planning. You make sure those elements are in your planning. Whereas before you think 'Oh, that's a nice little activity'. It tightens it up. Dots the 'i's, crosses the 't's. Have I, am I addressing the cycle in this? Keeps it tight, keeps it focussed.

LD tightens the whole thing of what would make an outstanding lesson; it helps to bring it all together.

LD tells you how to get there. It's a way of doing, not just an 'intention' and you have to reinvent the wheel.

Thirdly, teachers are using the level descriptors to clarify the skills that students use in their learning. They are using the level descriptors to map more clearly students' progress in acquiring new learning skills:

The level descriptors are based on skills. The level descriptors are clear. Therefore, the students understand where they have come from in their work and where they are going.

The learning objectives are tied in to how the cycle works and the levels. It took a while for teachers to twig this. 'Students will understand ...' is not a testable learning objective. Being able to explain is a testable learning objective. That is your objective and that links in exactly with the levels.

The progression is not just in 'simple' or 'complex' concepts but in pupils' response. You've got to make the development in pupil responses. It's not enough to say 'simple or complex concept'. You've got to show the students how to develop that response. Otherwise you just get Y7 responses to complex concepts, because their skill level hasn't progressed.

Teachers commented in detail about planning using the learning cycle. Points came up in particular about the Contextualise and Evaluate elements of the cycle. Teachers made three main points about Contextualise.

Firstly, Contextualise has to be deep and stimulating enough to drive Evaluate. Depth at Contextualise enables students to evaluate the concept at a deeper level: students have a deeper and richer appreciation of the significance of the concept in that context:

It became clear working with LD how important the context is. If you've got a really good context, evaluation becomes much simpler. Something to really pin [evaluation] on in terms of the value of the concept for believers. If you've got a good context that really goes to the depths of this, then students will understand that this isn't stupid, that this has real meaning for these people. Even if the concept doesn't mean much to you, it doesn't mean you can't appreciate the value of the concept to other people. That's what good enquiry, based on good context, allows children to see.

Secondly, Contextualise has to involve higher order thinking skills in order to drive Evaluation. Students need actively to apply the concept in that context. Only then can the students successfully evaluate the concept's significance. Not all the teachers were using higher order thinking skills in Contextualise:

[In the Year 3 unit on angels] ... We go on to Contextualise and we're then looking at Christmas cards that have got angels on ... And they put them into categories and again that's quite interesting because I've got loads ... and they'll categorise them into angels that are playing trumpets or musical instruments, or angels that are wearing party frocks, or angels that are in a white dress, or angels that are praying ... it's their ideas, I don't do any input in that at all, it's their decision. And then we go on and we look at the gospel versions of the Christmas story and where angels are mentioned ... and they have to highlight all the angel bits ... and then they compare the different angel bits in the different gospels, which again, they can do it, they don't have to have a lot of input from me ... then we go on to evaluate the purpose of the angels in the story.

The question becomes 'What's the important part of this story [of Zacchaeus]?' ... Some children will immediately say 'It's where he changed'. That's because you have built up

‘what is change’ and you’ve talked about change ... they’re using what they have learned to apply it to a story.

Contextualise in the LD approach contrasts with Contextualise in the Gift to the Child approach (Grimmit et al. 2006). The Gift approach contextualises, within its faith community context, a tiny, concrete, piece of religious material, not a concept. Its exploration of meaning in Contextualise emphasises the evocative and experiential aspects of learning and may go no further than identifying concepts. LD’s Contextualise starts with a concept and finds out more about the significance of that concept within a faith community. However, where students are not using higher order thinking skills in Contextualise, but doing activities like retelling a story, Contextualise in LD becomes an exemplification of the concept, not an analysis of it.

Thirdly, the context teachers choose is an important element in progression. The context in which you present a concept can raise more or less complex issues. The context therefore affects the skills that students need to analyse the concept:

It’s what you use to contextualise the concept that develops their response. For example, Forgiveness. In Y7 the context is Jesus’ death and resurrection. In Y9 Abortion and Sanctity of Life: will God forgive somebody who has had an abortion? Forgiveness is not black and white and there are different Christian viewpoints. The much more complex issue gives the different response, because as they grow older, you are giving them more complex situations to deal with.

Contextualisation drives the progression. How simple or difficult the concept is depends on the context. The complication is not the concept but how it impacts on people. This is how you get the progression.

Thus, the work in Contextualise affects attainment in the Evaluate, Communicate and Apply elements of the learning cycle. Evaluate works well when Contextualise has been deep, stimulating, at an appropriate level of complexity, and involves higher order thinking skills.

Teachers commented that Evaluate can be challenging to plan. Teachers need to know the right sorts of questions to ask. LD clarifies what teachers are trying to do with questions in RE: to enable the students to evaluate the concept from within the religious framework and beyond the religious framework. However, it can be challenging to set questions which enable the students to do this. It is important for teachers to analyse a concept in depth before planning a unit of work, in order to see how it might be interpreted in a secular context. Some teachers were doing this consciously. Some were doing it without commenting overtly on the process (e.g. in the unit on angels). Some were not unpacking the concept sufficiently for the students to be able to evaluate the concept’s significance beyond the religious framework. The following quotes indicate teachers’ difficulties and show that in one case, the teacher is using Trevor Cooling’s ‘Concept Cracking’ approach to support the delivery of LD (Cooling 2000):

Evaluate is harder to assess than other steps. You have to know what kinds of questions to ask. Clive came to see a lesson and gave some examples of questions you could ask. Evaluate is the part that people don’t do ... just a feeling.

LD helps you formulate key questions. You focus on the concept, and on the process that makes the kids see a problem, a controversy, two or more sides. The key question needs to reflect a dichotomy. I ask ‘does the key question do justice to the concept?’ The

plenary is kids answering the key question ... If the question helps the kids understand the concept in its fullest implications, then it's done its job. If the question is too hard you find the cycle hasn't answered it.

When planning, you've got to concept-crack at the start of the cycle. Unravel what the concept fully means. Then you appreciate how the secular world understands or doesn't understand the concept. It's not all just about what this means in the religious tradition. [The RE advisors] and I go very deep into the meaning of a concept. For example, Trinity as a conception of God: Incarnate God, God the Father. 'Do you think that only Christians could truly understand God?' would be a question that would get to the depths of the Trinity idea and how you take into consideration other views. You have to spend time thinking about all the different manifestations and implications of a subject. The next stage is to think 'What are the implications of that idea?' You've got to do this level of unpacking before you can set the key question and the first Communicate and Apply activity.

We had to unpack what 'prayer' is (e.g. about asking for help). There can be a tenuous connection between the pupil and the religious material.

'Umma' is the least popular unit. There are lots of complaints. It's not of the children's experience. There is scepticism amongst teachers. Some of them. A few of them. They say it's hard. The Umma label – some feel it doesn't relate to kids here. In the Umma unit, we start with Enquire. We brainstorm 'community'. In Contextualise, we do three Pillars in three lessons. We look at prayer mats, Eid, Hajj. There is lots of Contextualise. We think about why it's important for Muslims to participate in these activities – why/why not. What if a Muslim didn't feel part of Umma? Might there be situations where you don't want to? What communities do the children belong to? Is it important to feel part of a community? There is not a great deal of response from the children. It's not a big thing for the kids. Not much to say about it. They have little experience of community. 'Belonging' in Y3 does work.

In terms of planning RE for the abilities of all children, varied conclusions emerged. LD gives more scope for more children to achieve. It encourages the use of a wide range of learning activities because it separates out the learning process. The Communicate and Apply elements in particular encourage teachers to listen in discussion to what students are saying. LD also requires more demanding thinking skills when students apply a concept in another context and some teachers felt this could be difficult for lower ability students. LD does not guide teachers in the kinds of activities which will enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes:

Kids can achieve even if they're not high achievers in Contextualise. Using LD there is more variety of task and this flags up things pupils are good at. The five elements flag up what kids are good at. A lot of assessment is what kids say. LD furthers personalised learning. This was not the case before LD. LD has separated out the learning process. This has opened up teachers and pupils to more ways of working. The pupils do more challenging work – for example, taking photos, using computers, making clay angels. This greater variety of ways of working has resulted in higher attainment from pupils with lower ability. More stuff is part of RE. It suits more children's learning styles than before. It enables kids to demonstrate achievement, capturing more kids' attainment.

LD has enabled children who wouldn't have achieved to achieve now. Because it isn't all 'write in your books'. So much discussion, cross-curricular, drama, art, speaking and listening. Some of those children who never write anything down have astounded me ... LD embraces all children, all children's skills, and gives every child a voice.

The less able find it difficult to grasp. It's difficult to make the leap of how belief impacts on the life of believers. Difficult to say 'If I believed in this how would it affect my behaviour'.

We're hindered by the fact that these concepts are beyond their personal experience. We use numerous examples, for example, football teams, to try to relate it, but it's still a struggle. With middle and high achievers it's easier.

There were numerous responses to the question of resourcing LD. All said that it was less textbook-based. Some saw this as liberating, some as more of a challenge.

LD demands a depth of thinking through questions, materials and activities. The majority of units used by most of the teachers were from the syllabus handbooks and/or developed in collaboration with other teachers at syllabus development groups.

The impact of LD on measuring progression

LD has a positive impact on measuring progression. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, LD separates out each element of the learning cycle: students enquire into, contextualise, evaluate, communicate and apply concepts. Secondly, the level descriptors then identify a progression of skills: identify, describe, explain and so on. These are the intended learning outcomes. Because teachers focus on one aspect of learning at a time, and because each level specifies skills for learning, it is easier for teachers and students to see progression in learning:

The level descriptors are brilliant because of the key words – identify, describe, explain, etc. These words are the learning objectives. With every other subject you have a whacking great paragraph and have to go for 'best fit'.

The kids know that 'describe' is Level 3 and 'explain' is Level 4 and that the way to get into Level 5 is to make links between concepts from a sequence of lessons and identify issues raised.

This contrasts with the attainment targets in the National Framework for RE (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2004). The National Framework gives a number of skills at each level. Some skills are repeated at several levels. Therefore, progression is more difficult for teachers and students to identify using those attainment targets. It is also more difficult to pick out which skill to set as an intended learning outcome when planning units of work.

The concept hierarchy is being used by all teachers in the sample to plan progression. The concept hierarchy does not pinpoint individual students' progress but guides the planning of units across key stages. However, some teachers pointed out that the complexity of the context impacts on the complexity of the concept and that therefore the conceptual hierarchy is not a simple progression.

The attainment targets in the National Framework for RE include comments on the complexity of the material students study. The higher the level, the more complex the material studied. Neither LD nor the National Framework specifically identifies this as a variable in measuring students' progression.

The impact of LD on assessing attainment

Teachers in the research sample identified four reasons why assessment is easier and more reliable using LD. Firstly, teachers can assess each element of the learning cycle

separately. Secondly, teachers are looking for evidence of specific skills identified in the level descriptors. Thus, the workload of assessment is cut and the intended learning outcomes are much more specific and easy to identify:

Over the year [staff] assess all the parts of the cycle but they wouldn't necessarily assess all five [in one cycle] ... I think it's unrealistic to expect them to assess all five.

Staff are starting to assess across the five elements ... not just 'what they've learned about RE'.

It's easier to get the level the child is working at using Living Difference – key words in the level descriptors focus you on the learning objectives. With the cycle you can pull the key words out more. The key words for each element in the cycle directly link to your learning objectives.

Thirdly, teachers are using a wider range of assessment methods than they had done before, because the learning process separates out elements of learning and invites a wider range of activities. This enables students to show achievement, who previously might not have done.

Fourthly, assessment and teaching are dovetailed – you teach in the same way that you assess and therefore the aims of assessment are clearer for students and for teachers:

The level descriptors are dovetailed into the methodology: this is the biggest impact on students. LD is so assessable. Students can see that they've been taught, and learned, in the same way that they're going to be assessed. They can remember the lesson in which they did that element. You're assessing one or more parts of the cycle.

There has never before been a tallying up of teaching and assessing. There have been levels and awareness of skills in those levels. But if you're taught in a completely different way, I don't see how remotely scientific any assessment can be, because you've probably used different language with the kids when you were teaching them. So you might have evaluated something, but if you didn't make that explicit, which LD makes you do, I think it's always been very difficult for students, and to set an assessment, but it's not any more. The importance of language again. For example, 'when we did Evaluate' or 'when we did Contextualisation' – this is now what you're going to be assessed on. On the assessment itself you can give them reminders.

There is one single learning objective per lesson, along with the step. I changed the learning objective to 'can do' and share the 'can do' with the pupils.

Teachers felt that moderation is still difficult, but easier than it would otherwise be, because LD specifies the skill required for a student to demonstrate attainment at a particular level:

I need more clarity about what constitutes each level in the level descriptors.

Moderating is made easier by the focus of work. There is the concept and you're looking at how far the pupil is describing or explaining the concept.

Moderation is difficult because it is subjective – but generally moderation is subjective. Assessment is always subjective. LD lessens the subjectivity, because you've got the three words [i.e. identify, describe, explain] ... it's very subjective and impossible to put a template on children's work. Each one is a permutation. But because you've got those

key words [in the level descriptors] you're asking yourself the question 'are they identifying, describing, or explaining?' It's as easy as you can get it in the real world.

The four teachers in the sample who commented on having one attainment target said that it improves assessment. The attainment target in LD has a one-to-one correspondence with the learning process. Teachers know they are addressing the attainment target when they follow the five steps of the learning process. They assess just one aspect of learning at each stage of the learning cycle. Intended learning outcomes are the skills students use to enquire into, contextualise, evaluate, communicate and apply the concept and thus 'interpret religion in relation to human experience'. This is why assessment is easier and more reliable using LD than in these teachers' previous experience:

One AT is great. There is less for colleagues to have to assess. LD contains the two ATs of the Framework. With one AT and the tight methodology you're only assessing one thing, or five within one thing.

AT1 and AT2 – that awful dilemma – 'What do I assess – is it this or is it that and what level are they?' Now it's so clear. It's all there in the same thing, you don't have to worry, it's a holistic approach. AT1 and AT2 were a nightmare.

The impact of LD on attainment in RE

All the teachers felt that the focus on ideas, skills and students' voices in LD improved students' attainment in RE and their enthusiasm and participation. Teachers pointed specifically to eight reasons why they felt that LD raised students' attainment:

- (1) The concept focuses the students on the meanings in the religious material they are studying – it gives significance to the material and purpose to their learning. In Contextualise, students have the opportunity to use higher order thinking skills – to select what is significant in the material in relation to the concept. This stimulates students' own ideas and questions. Students are able to take away from their learning just one really meaningful thing, the concept, rather than lots of bits of information:

Just give them something they can understand, and they can pin on, and then they can take that away with them; that'll make a real difference to the way they view other faiths, other people, and build on it. Instead of 'I can't remember a thing she was talking about because there were so many things' they take away the concept and its application to that faith. The tiny bit they can take away with them that really means something.

It was her answer, I was so gobsmacked, she's not five yet, she's not five till August and it was when we were doing Change, which was in the Spring term. We were doing Zacchaeus ... and how did meeting Jesus change him. And she said 'Well he had a cold heart before he met Jesus and then because Jesus loved him he had a warm one' ... she was so there on board with you ... and she doesn't go to church ... and she went on to say 'Because if nobody loves you, you have a cold heart'.

- (2) The concept links students' experience with the religious material. It enables students to have a grasp of religious material which is beyond their own experience:

The concept really means something to the pupils. So they are interested and keen and find the work exciting and relevant and so the quality of work goes up.

When we went to the church – and the children in my class aren't Christians – my class were so engrossed because we'd done so much about specialness and their special place and what's special for them, when we got to the Contextualise bit and what's special for Christians, they could then relate that to their experience of being quiet or peaceful.

- (3) LD teaches students learning and thinking skills. It sets out the process of learning. It gives students the skills necessary to understand and use ideas. When students learn at the level of ideas they can apply their learning more broadly. It equips students with the learning skills to achieve at a higher level at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and gives students a depth of reflection which is beyond the requirements of GCSE:

LD equips the students with the skills to take a concept, to open it up, develop it, and apply it to different situations. It's not just recitation. Instead of 'a festival' and telling the students, LD gives the students much more understanding of why people were involved. Then the students have the confidence to tackle anything that comes up, rather than thinking 'I haven't been spoonfed and I don't know where to go with that question'.

Enquire, Contextualise, Evaluate, Communicate, Apply: all higher order thinking skills.

The skills in LD are frankly functional skills in today's world. I want them to be able to think for themselves, to state and justify what they think.

- (4) LD enables students to build more effectively on previous learning, because they can see how their learning skills are progressing, and because they can make links at the level of concepts between current and previous learning:

With LD, the pupils build their learning on transferable concepts. They bring their conceptual understanding from earlier units to bear on current learning. For example, they bring their understanding of the concept of the authority in the context of sacred books to understanding the concept of authority in the context of Jesus. Learning is then as it were building a wall, not just collecting bricks.

- (5) LD gives students more scope to achieve, for two reasons. Firstly, the elements of the learning process are assessed separately and students can be good at some skills and not others. Secondly, rich concepts and the separating out of each element of the learning cycle encourage a wider range of activities than before.
- (6) The learning cycle gives space to and therefore values the students' voices. Students engage more deeply with their learning because their own ideas are an integral part of the learning process. Communicate and Apply can challenge and liberate the students and connect their experience with the religious material:

The pupils are involved and receptive because they know they will be listened to. Exploring what children think is an inherent part of the cycle. My pupils don't worry about what they say – LD has made that difference.

In Communicate and Apply, the students can play with ideas themselves, they are liberated from 'right answers' ... This allows us to get into meaningful discussion. Kids gain a confidence which allows them to open themselves up to learning.

The teachers are now actually hearing what the children are saying and what they think.

- (7) LD has a positive impact on teaching. LD gives teachers a pedagogy, a model of how students learn. This helps teachers to support students' learning. Teachers' expectations of students are higher, because LD sets out higher order thinking skills that students should be using. Activities are more varied and experiential:

Teachers who develop through using this develop a confidence that's not going to be eroded.

Before LD, assessment was based on fact recall and vocabulary recall. Now in their assessment the students show understanding of why someone does something. LD has upped the ante on the level of learning – especially on Evaluation. On Contextualise it has also improved. It's not just facts, but it's what people believe and key facts that reflect those beliefs, that is, they're picking out key facts. We're getting the kids to understand why somebody does something. As a result, assessment has gone up. Much more academic, much more rigorous. The kids are grappling with key issues. For some of the kids, their assessments have improved beyond recognition.

- (8) The concept and the learning cycle make clear to teachers and to students what is being learned. Learning is purposeful because at every stage of the learning cycle intended learning outcomes are clear. Where the learning cycle, the concept and the level descriptors are being used together, this ensures that all activities have an RE purpose.

Training and its impact on teachers' use of LD

The development groups, the steering groups and the work of the RE advisors have an important role in helping teachers deliver LD. While some teachers found it easy to understand LD – 'it's not rocket science' – some nevertheless found the groups and the support of advisors helpful in actually planning schemes of work, as creating units of work is more in-depth than simply understanding LD. In the development and steering groups teachers are finding it helpful to plan and talk about units of work with other teachers. For some, it is also helpful just to have time to digest LD and clear up any misconceptions. Only a small minority of teachers have written all or nearly all units of work on their own, but many have co-created units in collaboration with other teachers. Teachers are also using units created by other people and adapting them. This is easy to do since all the units share the same process:

If I had to write stuff alone that would be hard, after one day's training.

[The RE advisor] produced clear level descriptors and checked my plans. [The RE advisors] are very supportive. They put on courses. The school could pay a bit and get ongoing email contact with [the RE advisor]. She is very efficient, responds fast and gives very positive feedback. All this helps me to feel confident.

Concluding comments

This research indicates that LD can facilitate significantly more effective teaching and successful learning in RE in a number of ways but may benefit from further development.

Pedagogy can be understood at three levels. There is the level of overall aims: what should students be gaining from their RE? There is the level of objectives: what should the intended learning outcomes be in individual schemes of work? There is the level of method: what activities will enable students to achieve those intended learning outcomes?

LD supports teachers' planning at the pedagogical level of objectives. The concept the process of learning and the level descriptors make clear what the intended learning outcomes of units of work should be and how to get there. Learning is therefore purposeful for students and this raises attainment.

LD enables teachers and students to see attainment and progression. Teachers assess one aspect of learning at a time and this is consistent across units of work. The specific skill progression in the level descriptors makes clear what students have achieved and what they need to do next to progress.

LD sets out how to enable students to learn at a higher order level. Students are investigating and applying concepts at every stage in the process of learning. This enables a far higher level of attainment than students were reaching before LD. However, teachers' planning needs to start with an analysis of the concept, using a tool like Trevor Cooling's Concept Cracking. LD does not offer guidance on this, and as a result the Contextualise and Evaluate stages in LD can in practice be descriptive and superficial.

LD does not give guidance at the pedagogical level of method. It leaves this level of planning open. Teachers need to be clear, when they use LD, about the kinds of activities which will enable students to investigate and apply concepts, to use higher order thinking skills – skills developed, for example, in the Philosophy for Children approach (Fisher n.d.).

The conceptual approach can help to engage students in their learning. The concept can link the religious material and students' ideas and experience and thus can make learning relevant and meaningful – where teachers have really analysed the concept in their planning (Regional RE Centre (Midlands) Westhill College 1991). The Westhill approach to using concepts in planning may offer teachers more support here: units of work incorporating both 'A'- and 'C'-type concepts. However, the danger here too is that without concept cracking, teachers equate religious concepts with equivalent non-religious concepts (e.g. 'Ummah' with 'Community') and lose religious concepts' power, richness and depth.

At the pedagogical level of method, the Interpretive approach (Jackson 1997) offers an augmentation to give students a deeper engagement with religious material. Its method of iterative, question-asking, conversation-based encounters over time with insiders in faith communities could make some 'C'-type concepts much more accessible to students.

Arising from the findings of this research are questions for RE nationally.

Is LD a pedagogy at the level of objectives which could underpin the National Framework for RE and RE in the secondary and primary curricula? LD is entirely compatible with the pedagogy of RE at the level of aims set out in these documents, and supplies a 'how' of how to realise those aims. Teachers in this sample valued the fact that LD does give the 'how': a process of teaching and learning, not just an intention.

Is one attainment target better than two in practice? Should RE practitioners see the concepts of 'learning about' and 'learning from' as helpful in having moved us beyond confessional RE, but unwieldy when applied to assessment in practice?

'Learning about' and 'learning from' inform an understanding of the subject at the pedagogical level of aims. LD is not incompatible with that general conception of RE. Assessment in the LD model, however, is grounded in the learning process. The learning process sets out one way in which you can 'interpret religion in relation to human experience'. There is one intended learning outcome at each stage in the learning process. Through these intended learning outcomes students attain the attainment target. Teachers in this sample are clearer than they were before about whether they are addressing the attainment target in their assessment, because they are only assessing one thing at a time and because the attainment target and the learning process together form one indivisible whole.

Does initial teacher training and continuing professional development need to give greater emphasis to learning theory? Should they give teachers opportunities explicitly to try out pedagogical approaches in practice? This could enable teachers to have a much greater critical command of the 'how' of learning, across the subjects. Students are learning to learn, in a skills- and concepts-led curriculum. Teachers can only facilitate students' learning to learn if they are clear about the processes of learning.

Should all agreed syllabi provide a pedagogical framework at the level of objectives like LD does? Planning and implementing effective RE is challenging for teachers. LD sets out good practice at the level of setting intended learning outcomes and thereby supports teachers in their good practice.

And if agreed syllabi provide underpinning guidance at this pedagogical level, should local authorities and/or other institutions support training of the kind which is going on in Hampshire, in the development groups and the steering groups and the work of the advisors? Teachers in this sample overwhelmingly benefitted from their training. Their students have hugely benefitted as a result. Can we afford to do less if we want quality RE which enables our young people to realise their abilities?

Notes on contributor

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