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Feeding Others, Feeding Oneself: reflections upon a Westhill Seminar

Georgia Prescott

REsource is aimed at the 'reflective practitioner' – that kind of person who, despite the pressures of their work, wants to dig deeper into purpose, value and meaning. Yet, the pressures are such that the time or the disposition to reflect can be elusive. Georgia Prescott tells us of how a 'Westhill Seminar' held in Glasgow in November 2009 provided her with just the opportunity that she needed.

Introduction

For me, this Westhill Seminar proved to be both spiritually and professionally nourishing. The focus of this seminar was 'Teachers' Lives, Pupils' Lives in RE' and it was a packed and intense weekend, but one which left me feeling refreshed and revitalised. I would like to express my gratitude to the Westhill Trust for funding the seminars, and to the contributors who were **without exception** thought-provoking and interesting. I will share some of my reflections from the weekend **with you** here.

Seminar Programme

Friday evening

- Welcome **Bob Davies – Deputy Dean, Glasgow University**
- Professor Vivienne Baumfield on 'Looking in the mirror: reflexive RE'

Saturday

- Lat Blaylock on 'Why do people choose to reach religion?'
- **Julie Marshall** of LTS Scotland on 'Curriculum for excellence'
- Maria James on 'Relational RE'
- Professor Julian Stern on 'A matter of life and death: why the real lives of teachers and pupils matter in RE'

Sunday

- Judith Everington on 'I'm an RE teacher! How did that happen?! Exploring the relationship between the personal and professional lives of beginning teachers of RE'
- Stephen Pett on 'RE, well-being and happiness'
- Professor Jim Conroy on dissemination, action and development

Feeding ourselves?

Firstly is the important role that these seminars play in providing a valuable opportunity for stimulating and **soul-searching** personal development. I find it so enriching to come and spend a weekend with people who are as passionate about RE as I am! It creates an important space to reflect on my work and to allow new ideas to develop. Late on the Friday night, Vivienne Baumfield talked about the importance of 'reflexive RE' and how teachers can only 'feed others' if we first 'feed ourselves' spiritually and intellectually. I often say this to my ITT students and realised this weekend how much I also need to live by this code. It can be so easy to say you are too busy / have no

funding / can't get away, but we all continue to need a fresh impetus to keep our teaching alive at whatever level we work.

Defending RE

The other refreshing thing about spending a weekend with RE teachers is that I didn't need to keep defending my subject. Judith Everington talked about her research into beginning teachers' lives and one of the things that they found difficult was continually having to defend their decision to become an RE teacher. I realised that I too have spent much of my time defending this decision. I have to fend off comments such as 'I didn't realise you were religious' (I'm not!). Often these come from people outside the profession and I can cope with that.

The thing I do find difficult though, is continually defending RE at a professional level. Every time we revalidate a new degree we have to fight to keep in the hours for RE and, despite this, they are slowly being whittled down. No-one quite knows where to put us. Are we a core or a foundation subject? Where do we fit in the Rose Review curriculum model? With decreasing face-to-face teaching across the board in QTS courses, we are fighting very hard to get space for RE and SMSC and to convince colleagues of their nature and value. So, it was refreshing personally and professionally to spend a weekend with people who understand the crucial importance of RE as much as I do, and I hope this will strengthen me for the inevitable new battles ahead.

Why teach RE?

Lat Blaylock and Judith Everington both raised questions about why people choose to become RE teachers or how they come to be in the profession and this caused me to reflect upon my own journey. Judith had found through her research that many of her beginning teachers had come into RE by chance rather than design. I realised that at two different points in my life this was also true of me. It was only due to two deaths the week before my A Level exams that the whole course of my life was changed. Bereavement for different reasons can cause major changes in our life direction. I ended up studying theology and religious studies as opposed to languages as I had originally planned. It was having this degree that later, after working as a primary teacher, led me to becoming a lecturer in Primary RE. I had not specialised in RE as a primary teacher until my last few years, so it did feel like a long-awaited and somewhat accidental return to RE. I felt I had come home!

A common reason for people entering the profession as reported by Lat was having a good RE teacher yourself, and this is certainly the case with me. My secondary school teacher, Ken Oldfield (1944-1992), is the reason I still have a good knowledge of and enthusiasm for Hinduism. My own professional satisfaction lies in the transformation of students' attitudes to RE. Those who come to me hating RE and go away understanding and loving it are the reason I love my job, and I hope to inspire others in the way he inspired me.

Life and Death

Interestingly, linked to my own experience of bereavement having a major affect on my life journey, Julian Stern talked about 'Life and Death in RE' and a culture of avoiding talking about death and difficult aspects of life, especially with children. When we had the luxury of sixty hours of RE on an undergraduate primary ITT degree, we used to do a session on children and death (much to the amusement of my colleagues!). As hours are cut, things get missed out and now this crucial aspect of the course is gone. I resolved to look at this again and not to join the culture of avoidance.

Was it a coincidence that, in the small space of free time in the weekend just prior to Julian's talk, I went with a conference colleague to the Glasgow Necropolis? I had asked some of my students in a module on SMSC, to visit a churchyard, and thought I couldn't pass up the opportunity to see this amazing Victorian cemetery. In the cold November air as it was turning to dusk, it was an incredible feeling walking around, looking at the grand Glasgow memorials and something I was able to share with them the following week.

Spaces or Gaps?

A strong theme in Maria James' presentation (given by Julian in her absence due to illness), was that of relational RE – the idea that a teacher should be a 'fellow traveller and learner' rather than the expert filling empty vessels – a view I have long subscribed to. She talked about creating spaces in our RE teaching. The notion that the space in a vessel is what makes it useful was used. In our group we discussed the difference between spaces and gaps and how we can provide meaningful spaces in RE. This is something I do endeavour to do. However, I am interested in pursuing whether my students perceive these spaces in the same way I do, and whether the difference between a space and a gap is dependent on the attitude and application of the learner and how they use the time given?

Teachers' Lives – Pupils' Lives

A common activity I always do in early sessions is to ask students to reflect upon their own experiences of RE and summarise them in two words. The words I get are usually polarised into two groups: the 'boring, irrelevant, forced' group and the 'fascinating, interesting, varied and inspirational' group. We analyse these experiences further by exploring what sort of teaching approaches make RE a positive or a negative experience for the learner, and how they can ensure that the pupils they teach will remember RE positively. Many students who come into that first session with feelings of dread, leave feeling that they *can* teach RE. I advise them that what you need to teach RE well is an interest in yourself and in other people. After all, for me, RE involves learning about people and reflecting on your own life. RE, if done well, allows you to get to know your pupils in a way other subjects do not.

In the same way, I have also recently asked students to reflect upon their own experience of religion as I believe this also has potential to fundamentally affect their ability to teach RE. They were asked to reflect upon whether they were brought up within a faith or not and how that affected them; whether they had converted into or out of a faith and why; what other encounters with

religion they **had** had through friends, neighbours, travel and the media. (Interestingly, a colleague did not understand why we were doing this and felt that it was inappropriate). They did not share these in a group as they are often very personal, but did reflect upon it in assignments which I marked on my return from Glasgow. Again I was struck by how personal these reflections have been and how strongly people feel about religion. I was moved by their revelations, many of which were very intense. Many students reported that they had never thought about this much beforehand; but that now they were aware of it they could try to ensure that their position did not negatively affect their teaching, but would consider how it could have a positive impact.

Feeding Others?

I think all teachers of RE need to reflect upon their own experiences of both RE and religion and consider how these can affect their teaching. Judith asked **some** thought-provoking **questions** in her presentation, **including**: 'Are we all evangelical about something?' and 'what is our agenda as RE teachers?' I *do* feel evangelical about RE and need to recognise what drives me personally. I am sometimes confronted by my own prejudices and cultural perspectives in my teaching. In the closing session, Jim Conroy said that only in RE do we get such a huge range of different personal stances and intentions and this reinforces my belief in the value of what I do with my beginning primary teachers.

I think it is crucial that as RE teachers we do reflect upon our lives and seek to help our pupils or students reflect upon theirs. This seminar helped me to reflect upon my own life again, and also upon the ways in which I encourage my own students to reflect upon theirs. At times it feels self-indulgent to do this, but I believe it is an essential part of stock-taking as an RE teacher to do so every so often.

Have you got time to reflect upon your journey? Go on – indulge yourself!

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