

Having a go at the *RE-searchers* approach to prepare for quality RE

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Abstract

In this article, I outline the rationale for the introduction of the *RE-searchers* approach in training my students for Religious Education (RE) in an Initial Teacher Education course at Birmingham City University, England. As part of the contextual information, I will articulate the intended outcomes that I aimed to achieve and how this approach is linked to the course philosophy. Thereafter, as a model for how to introduce the *RE-searchers* approach to students, the delivery of the session is critically delineated. I highlight the usefulness of giving future teachers an opportunity to experience both dimensions of the approach (i.e., enquiring and teaching). The final section offers reflections which are informed by student feedback and personal observations. In my context, time constraint has been the main challenge. Nevertheless, I am confident that I now have a practical session at my disposal for the whole year group which has proven to be an immersive, relevant and thought-provoking learning experience for them. In turn, my students have a pedagogy to add to their existing ones.

Introduction

For some time, RE in England has been facing a host of challenges. To begin with, its aims and purposes are contested. Beyond this, RE is historically entangled with legislation and policy (Fancourt, 2022; Mogra, 2025). Questions are raised about whether it should have a national syllabus or continue to have locally agreed syllabuses (Mogra, 2024b). There are issues related to non-compliance (Ofsted, 2024) and others note human resourcing and funding as problems (Larkin, et al., 2019). Demographically, England is experiencing religious, social and cultural changes (ONS, 2021). Given this evolving landscape, I adopted the *RE-searchers* approach with a pedagogical commitment to fostering critical, dialogical and contextually relevant learning experiences that reflect the complexity of religion and belief in England today.

In addition to these external factors, RE communities have unresolved conceptual, theoretical and methodological debates (Chater, 2020; Aukland, 2024; Marshall, 2024). The debate over what knowledge to teach in RE has also plagued the subject (REC, 2018). The RE subject review by the Inspectorate of education, Ofsted (2021), is influencing the evolution of types of knowledge in RE. They suggest that a high-quality

RE curriculum integrates substantive knowledge, ways of knowing (disciplinary knowledge) and personal knowledge. The integration of methods of learning with subject knowledge is problematised as well. Wintersgill, et al., (2022) believe that questions of methodology distracted them from their main concern, although they seem to remain open to developing methodological questions. Following the on-going review of the national curriculum and assessment in England, the recent Interim report has highlighted that an absence of national agreed content standards as leading to national disparities in the quality of provision of RE (Francis, 2025). An approach seeking to address some of these concerns is the *RE-searchers approach* (Freathy, et al., 2015). Its core idea is that religions are complex phenomena that can be studied from multiple disciplinary perspectives.

Context

The context for the application of the *RE-searchers* approach is a three year Bachelor of Arts Honours in Primary Education with Qualified Teachers Status programme (BA QTS), taught in Birmingham, England. Students experience a wide variety of learning and teaching approaches that are designed to develop their confidence, knowledge and skills as they progress through the course. They also complete three school-based placements over the course. Religious Education is taught in alignment with the subjects of the National Curriculum in England.

Several years ago, I first began teaching this approach on the Post Graduate Certificate of Education course with students who had selected to specialise in RE. Later, sometime after Covid 19, I integrated it into a BA (QTS) humanities module, which limited its exposure to students who had selected this module only. These were student teachers who had selected humanities as their specialist area consisting of history, geography and religious education. I was mindful that the rest of the students were missing out. However, the successful outcomes and enthusiastic reception from the PGCE group and some structural changes to the course in 2024-2025 motivated me to expand its application. I therefore decided to incorporate this approach for the first time into a module which is taught to an entire year group, so that all student teachers of the year were included. The responses have been highly positive.

Pre-session theoretical orientation

To help build students' background knowledge about this approach, I set them a pre-session reading task. The chapter by Freathy (2024), rather than Mogra (2023) was chosen, as the former has practical ideas on how to plan a sequence of lessons, which aligned with the module outcomes. It also supported the programme philosophy which aims to engage students with a diverse and dynamic range of strategies to motivate and inspire pupils in their learning of the foundation subjects.

To encourage the students to reflect on both the cognitive and participatory aspects of this reading task and to provide me with insights into its effectiveness or otherwise, the students reflected on how the pre-session reading task influenced their understanding of the key concepts and vocabulary introduced in the *RE-searchers approach*. Overall, there appeared to be enhanced engagement, improvement in student teachers' retention of the main features of this pedagogy and it encouraged their independent learning. Students mentioned that they were prepared to encounter a complex pedagogical approach which reduced their cognitive workload during the session and allowed for more in-depth discussion and analysis. For some, it prepared them mentally and contextually for what they were going to experience in the session.

Journey through the session

In this section, I present the proceedings of the session by highlighting the main activities and student learning. To begin with, self-assurance was warranted in terms of the clarity of the two concepts.

Session Plan

Learning Objective/s: Demonstrate an understanding of subject knowledge and pedagogical approaches in RE	Success Criteria: To use the <i>RE-searchers</i> approach to learn. To apply the <i>RE-searchers</i> approach to teach. To work collaboratively to enhance learning. To reflect on learning, processes and outcomes. To demonstrate secure understanding of the <i>RE-searchers</i> approach.	Prior Learning: Three forms of knowledge: substantive, disciplinary and personal knowledge. Right of withdrawal from RE. Locally Agreed Syllabus. National Plan for RE.
Resources: Display both character posters or provide a set on each table.	Key vocabulary: Ways of knowing, discipline, multi-methodology, phenomena, theology, interview, experience, reason, narrative.	Organisation for Learning: Organise the class into groups of four per table. If not, create a pair or else use six as a maximum.
Learning sequence within the session Introduction to the session Retrieve previous learning focussing on disciplinary knowledge. Explain the lecture objectives and the expected learning outcomes. Introduce the session outline and state expectations of learning and doing. Talk about the word play in <i>RE-searchers</i> title. Enquire about pre-session task, its usefulness and make links to the session. Main part of the session Critical analysis: Show a quote from REC (2018) [see below], invite analysis, draw implications for teaching RE. Group discussion: (1) What do you understand by the phrase ‘Ways of knowing’? (2) What do you understand by the term discipline? Introduction: the authors, their problems and solutions. Show and explain the purposes of (1) A Quick Start Guide (2) A New approach. Show evidence, informing them that some teachers have welcomed it. Explain that it intends to give pupils knowledge and methods of learning, emphasise the latter by giving examples from the disciplines discussed earlier. Show publications as a theoretical foundation and for assignments.		

Pause for thought. In pairs discuss: Why is it important to know that religions are complex? Q2. Is it necessary to study religions from multiple perspectives? Q3. Are these methods neutral?

Inference: Using the images of the four characters on a single Ppt slide, invite student teachers to infer how Derek, Ava, Suzie and Hugo might learn. Take feedback and clarify/probe/consolidate each approach. Explain the additional material available in the Quick Start Guide (differentiated character descriptors, information sheets on the character's preferred activities and values, profile poster, self-assessment tool).

Pause for thought. Invite them to reflect on the quotes from pupils about the value of the *RE-searchers* approach. Explain the purpose of the warmup activities by using only two examples (A1 p. 48; H7 p. 71; cf. Freathy, 2016).

Application: Explain the four *RE-searcher* enquiry wheels and the additional contextual information related to a specific topic of investigation (e.g., sacred books).

Cycle of Work: Show and explain the process of the tasks to complete for the rest of the session (Fig.1).

Tutor adaptations and digging deeper. Visit each table to scaffold, feedback, assess, challenge, consolidate, exemplify, listen to them, contrast methods and discuss key questions.

Plenary

Invite them to reflect and evaluate their learning and the potential of using the *RE-searchers* approach in primary schools.

Key questions

Are you able to recognise the features of your chosen character's method?

Are you able to identify any advantages/limitations of your chosen character's method?

Are you able to distinguish between the methods?

Can you notice the type of knowledge created by each method?

Next Steps (what will be the key learning in the next lesson?):

How will you use your learning from today in your next teaching?

What are the potential challenges you might face when implementing the *RE-searchers* approach and how can they be addressed?

Can you give an example of how you could transfer this approach to other subjects?

Ways of knowing and discipline

I conjecture that sometimes it is assumed that students in Higher Education would know the meaning of ‘ways of knowing’, the disciplines taught in Universities and their associated pedagogies involved in the production of knowledge. However, over the years, my experience has shown otherwise. Therefore, to ensure that my students had a secure understanding of these, before introducing them to the need and rationale of the *RE-searchers* approach, I invite them to analyse the quote below and draw implications for teaching RE. Pupils must be taught:

The different ways in which religion and worldviews can be understood, interpreted and studied, including through a wide range of academic disciplines and through direct encounter and discussion with individuals and communities who hold these worldviews (REC, 2018:13).

Thereafter, the student teachers discuss their understanding of the phrase ‘ways of knowing’ and the term ‘discipline’. A few expressed words such as confusion, family knowledge, being social and evidence. Others offered nuanced comments such as methods, different ways to acquire knowledge, search engines and how pupils get information.

They were less successful in delineating the meaning of discipline. They seemed to relate it to behaviour management. They mentioned self-control, behaviour, following social etiquette and adhering to religious laws and ethics. However, other comments were more accurate like a school of thought and different subjects like history, geography and art. A student familiar with Portuguese commented that it means a subject because in Portuguese it is ‘*disciplina*’. Thus it is important to explain new terms and to check students’ understanding of them to avoid misunderstandings and lay a stronger foundation for new learning.

Background to the approach

Following this analysis, students are introduced to the authors of *RE-searchers* approach, the problems identified with RE and the solutions they proposed. This is useful for contextual understanding and to inspire them to continue searching for innovative methods. It also helps them understand the re-framing of learners as researchers (Freathy, 2024).

To support their independent study and to make them aware of the theoretical foundations, I refer them to the *Quick Start Guide* (Freathy, 2016) and *A New Approach to Religious Education in Primary Schools* (Freathy, et al., 2015). I also reveal positive feedback from teachers to motivate them. Before proceeding further, I summarise that the approach intends to give pupils both knowledge and methods of learning. I

emphasise the latter by giving examples with reference to the disciplines from the earlier activity. We then pause to reflect on three points.

Pause for thought

Students shared, through oral and written feedback, that they appreciated the complexity and diversity within religions as it helps them acknowledge multiple beliefs, different interpretations and groups within religions. They appeared to recognise that knowing that religions are complex fosters a broader understanding among pupils. They suggested that it helps prevent stereotypes, especially when they will teach religion and worldviews in primary settings.

Overall, it appeared that studying religions from multiple perspectives was necessary. For them, an approach of this kind emphasised the importance of becoming open minded and valuing respect. In conversations, it became apparent that, for them, there was a strong emphasis on being able to avoid bias and foster critical thinking through a multi-perspectival study of religions.

The students were invited to think about the neutrality of these methods. Admittedly, the question was challenging for some. Nevertheless, they indicated that theoretically they could be neutral, but teacher bias might affect the way they teach. It was suggested that all research methods used together would give neutrality, but using a favoured one could create bias. This thought appears to have been informed by the pre-session reading task. A profound comment which occupied my thoughts was that single methods might portray tunnel vision which may lead to stereotypes.

Resources

As time is limited, for further self-study I draw their attention to: character descriptions with illustrations, differentiated character descriptors, information sheets to help them communicate the character's preferred activities and values, summary profile posters for each character, the self-assessment tool (Freathy, 2016) and a list of publications.

Introducing the characters and methods

At this stage a secure foundation for the approach tends to be laid out. The next step involves showing images of the four characters on a single PowerPoint slide.

Interestingly, as soon as they saw the image, students spontaneously entered into a discussion. Still, without comment, I invited them to infer how Derek, Ava, Suzie and Hugo might learn. This is fundamental to their development as critical thinkers and, as a high-order skill, it offers opportunities for deeper comprehension of the material to come. I then listen to their responses. I also clarify, probe further and consolidate the features of each character. I emphasise that the four cartoon characters have different

research strengths and interests, but are all committed to theological and religious studies (Freathy and Freathy, 2014).

Hugo learns through physical engagement and sensory experience. Suzie is concerned with the significance of both old and new narratives in shaping how people understand themselves and others. Ava speaks directly with religious individuals to listen to how they describe themselves. Derek thinks about life's big questions and uses reason and evidence to challenge the answers he encounters.

Pause for thought

We pause again to reflect on the quotes from pupils about the value of the *RE-searchers* approach. This demonstrates real-world relevance. Thereafter, I explain the purposes of the warmup activities and illustrate only two (A1, p. 48; H7, p. 71; cf. Freathy, 2016). By knowing that teaching and planning material is available, I raise their confidence in using this approach during their next school placement and after.

Application

RE-searcher Enquiry Wheels

To make it easier for my first-time users, the four *RE-searcher enquiry wheels* are explained (Freathy, 2016: 10-14). This helps them later when they choose a method (Fig. 1), activities and structure their enquiries according to the methodological preferences of each of the *RE-searchers*. Each wheel provides a simplified enquiry tool. They learn that activities in each segment can be a whole enquiry or be combined to create stages of an enquiry. The wheel acts as a guide but does not reflect the range of activities that the characters might engage in. In addition to the wheel, I provide additional contextual information related to a specific topic of investigation, like sacred texts, to model its use.

Cycle of Work

At this point the class is ready to take action. I explain the process of how to complete the tasks for the remaining session (Fig. 1).

Selecting traditions and topics

However, first as a whole class, we discuss which tradition/s and topic/s to research.

- Option 1: All enquire about the same topic but use different religions.
- Option 2: All enquire about the same topic in the same religion.
- Option 3: All enquire about different topics in different religions.

There are advantages and limitations in all options. No group chose Option 3. Option 2 was most favoured, perhaps it was simple for them and focussed on the topic by removing the variability of religions within a group.

Second, as a group, they self-select the religious tradition and within it the topic to enquire about or suggest their own from Buddhism, Christianity, Hindu Dharma, Islam, Judaism, Sikhi and any non-religious tradition. The topics include sacred beliefs, leaders, scriptures, spaces, pilgrimage and rites, festivals, current affairs and living a religious life in England. The practicalities of the latter are discussed in advance to ensure that the chosen tradition is represented in the class. Thus, across all groups, a range of religions and topics were chosen.

Selecting the characters

Thereafter, in groups of four (requested on entry to class), each person chooses a character and justifies their preference to their group. During Stage 1 and 2, they will assume these identities in their study of different religions and pursuit of different understandings of those religions (Freathy, 2016: 6). Then they plan and prepare their enquiry in pairs. They think about the sources to use, listing questions, identifying experiences and who to interview in the class.

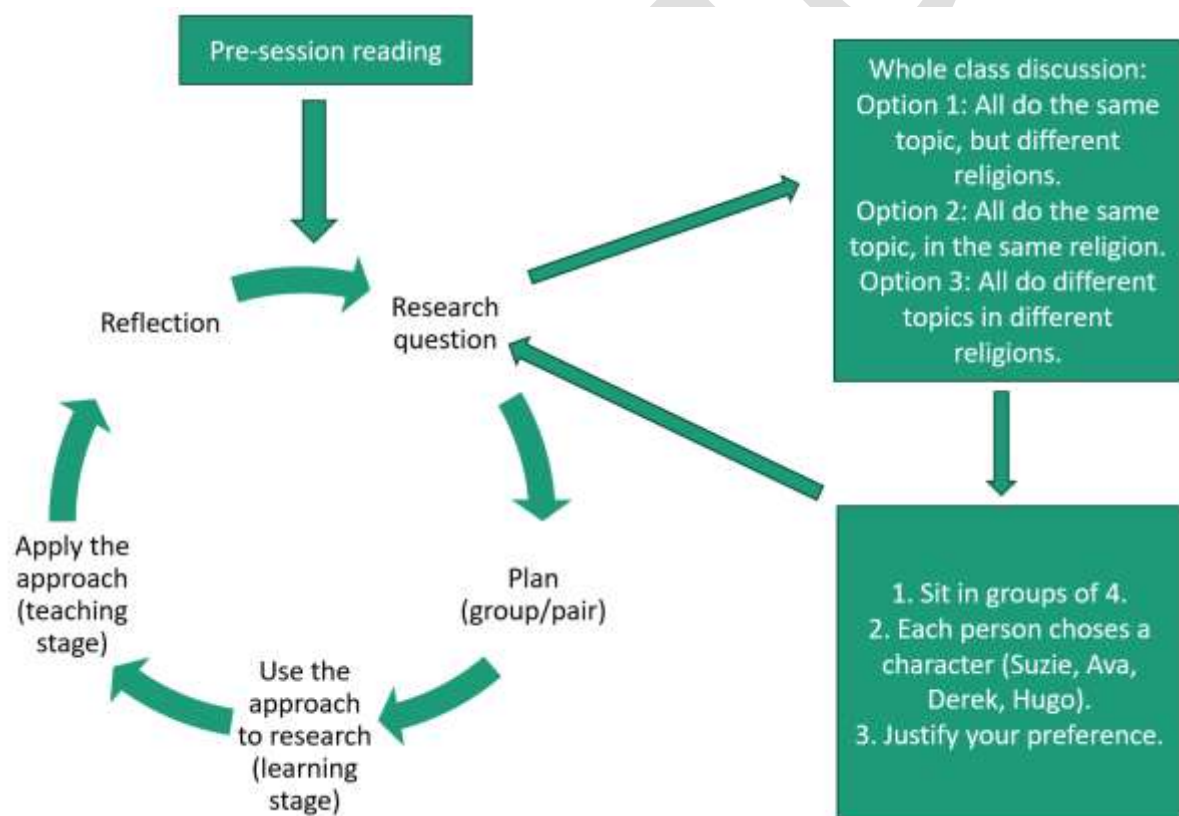


Fig. 1: Cycle of Work

Generating research questions

Having decided their method, tradition and topic, students are now ready to generate their research question. At this point, they learn about the importance of developing

researchable questions or Big Questions. A well-crafted question can offer a clear focus and ensure that the research becomes purposeful and relevant. I also take the opportunity to link this activity to the research module which they study in the following year. To enable them to see the differences between generic and well-formulated questions, I first ask each student to write one. I then invite them to use generative tools such as ChatGPT or any other that they had registered with and compare it with their original question. The goal was not to replace their thinking but to enrich it through dialogue with AI. Table 1 shows some of their questions.

Original questions	AI questions
How Easter Sunday evolved in time?	What is the significance of Easter in Christianity and how has it evolved over time?
What do Buddhists believe about suffering?	How does the Buddhist concept of suffering (Dukkha) influence attitudes towards illness and health care?
How is Diwali celebrated now compared to how it was celebrated in the past?	How do people celebrate Diwali in the UK and how is it different from celebrating in India?
What is the difference between Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha?	What are the religious and historical differences between Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha?

Table 1: Comparing research questions

After establishing their research question, they are ready to enquire about their topic and use the methods. Bruner's notion of discovery learning posits that behaviour modification is achieved through actively participating in the learning process rather being given information (Bates, 2019).

Operationalising the methods

I had considered three models in implementing the use of the four methods. The circles denote students. The letters PETE refer to the methods. P represents a philosopher, E an ethnographer using interviews, and T a theologian, and E an ethnographer using observations. The colours are topics.

In Model 1A, all four students would enquire about their topic using one method and teach it to their group using that method. This would enable them to learn through and gain teaching experience of a single method (P) only (Fig. 2.1). It would defeat the aim and distinctions of a multidisciplinary approach, i.e., studying a single topic through different disciplines. Nevertheless, in Model 1B, it can be valuable if the topics for each student are varied, in which case students would recognise the consistency in the kind of knowledge produced by a single method (Fig. 2.2).



Fig. 2.1: Model 1A

Fig. 2.2: Model 1B

In Model 2A, each student would enquire the same topic using four methods and teach the same topic using all four methods (Fig. 3.1). I did not use this model due to time constraints and the additional management demands it would make on students. However, it could work over a series of lessons. The advantage it offers is that each student would see how their chosen topic could be researched and experience being taught through four methods. Thus, this option seems ideal for a multimethodological approach. However, information overload about one topic would be a limitation. But, as in Model 2B, changing the topic for each student might counter that (Fig. 3.2).

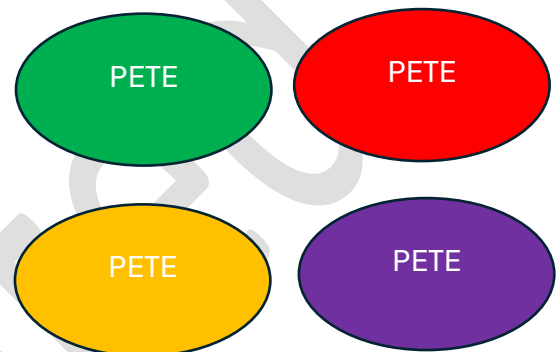
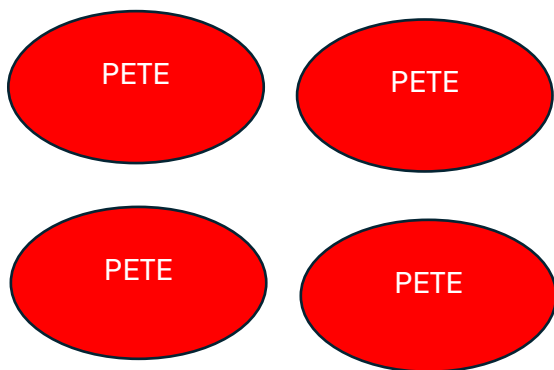


Fig. 3.1: Model 2A

Fig. 3.2: Model 2B

In Model 3, this conundrum was overcome with some student input. Each student enquired into the same topic using only one method and delivered the same topic using their method to their group (Fig. 4). The limitation was that students would only get the opportunity to enquire through one method and teach using one method. Nevertheless, the advantage was that each student would see how their chosen method yielded different information about their topic and experience being taught through four methods. It enabled comparisons of methods and the kind of knowledge acquired, but it limited them from enquiring using multiple methods. It is for these reasons that I chose this model.

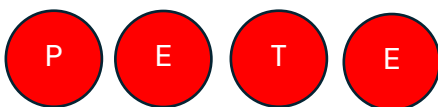


Fig. 4: Model 3

The overall approach taken to teach these students the *RE-searchers* approach aligns with the experiential learning theories of Dewey and Schön which emphasise the importance of learning through experience and reflection (Bates, 2019).

Planning, preparing and learning

In Stage 1, each student uses their selected character from the *RE-searchers* approach to enquire about their preferred topic from the tradition of their choice. They also draw on their existing knowledge and experiences. The aim of Stage 1 is to secure their understanding of learning through one way of knowing out of the four. They are given about 30 minutes to prepare and learn the topic.

Delivering and learning

Having completed their enquiry, in Stage 2 each student now teaches their topic using the method of their character to their group. The aim of Stage 2 is to secure their teaching of information gathered using their method. Simultaneously, each student experiences being taught the same topic through the other methods. They are given about 30 minutes to teach.

This organisation supports metacognitive development by allowing these future teachers to reflect on and compare different pedagogical strategies. Critical reflection, in turn, is related to both metacognition and transformative learning (Harvey, et al., 2016). It enhances cognitive flexibility as they learn to adapt their knowledge according to various disciplinary perspectives. It promotes interdisciplinary learning, critical thinking, and aligns with constructivist theories of learning (Bates, 2019). Additionally, teaching their pre-established group fosters better peer teaching and showed how knowledge can collaboratively be constructed.

Reflections

In this section, I discuss the reflections offered by students.

They thought about how the *RE-searchers approach* enhanced their understanding of different pedagogical methods. Some indicated that it had significantly enhanced their understanding of different pedagogical methods as it emphasised diverse learning strategies and perspectives. They noted that it fostered an appreciation for various ways of acquiring knowledge such as reading, asking questions and visiting places. For them, this approach highlighted the importance of exploring different viewpoints and methods, which is critical for teaching complex subjects like religion and worldviews. It encouraged open-mindedness and immersion in different faiths, as exemplified by living like a Muslim or engaging in religious practices. The approach also underscored the value of collaborative learning, where group feedback on different research methods led to a deeper understanding of how diverse approaches yield varied information. Additionally, it emphasised the need to present multiple perspectives to

students, helping them appreciate the complexity and evolving nature of religious beliefs. Overall, the *RE-searchers* approach broadened trainees' pedagogical toolkit, enabling them to support diverse learning preferences and foster critical thinking.

While using the approach they encountered some challenges such as not having an opportunity to experience religion in an immersive way, not finding people who have been on pilgrimage or inaccessibility of historical books to read. For some students, I scaffolded their learning as initially they were unsure of how Derek's role could be fulfilled but after giving them different exemplar questions, they proceeded. Using Hugo was probably the most challenging as not all religious practices can be performed or some actions might be considered inappropriate, e.g., when Hugo does not identify as Christian so they may not have the cross of ash.

The *RE-searchers* approach promoted interdisciplinary learning and critical thinking as it allowed these students to enquire about a topic and then teach it to others which resulted in interdisciplinary learning. They found answers from different peers and asking personal questions gave them a deeper understanding and experience which helped them immerse themselves in the situation. Critical thinking was also promoted as it focused on a specific religion allowing it to be accessed from different perspectives. For some, their session allowed them to follow a religious festival in the same way as people actually do in the religion, so they experienced the same frame of mind but without the actual practice. This engagement allowed them to question parts of the rituals but also developed an understanding of how and why.

They conveyed some changes that they noticed in the way they now understood religions. It was suggested that religion should be understood holistically using different approaches and perspectives to get a good understanding. They understood that there are different ways to approach learning about religion and it is not only about experiencing it for yourself. It made them think more deeply about religious phenomena, religious beliefs, spirituality and values.

They reflected on the collaborative learning experience of the session and how it impacted peer teaching and group dynamics. It worked well because they all had their own focus and could feedback their understanding of their topic using their character and learnt from each other's perspectives through other methods. They had firsthand experience, and it deepened their emotional and social understanding through raw discussions. For a few, it was effective but a little stressful until they understood the simplicity of what the character had to do. For others it was a very eye-opening experience.

Moving forward

The feedback has been very positive from these students. It follows from this that providing future teachers with an opportunity to experiment and experience the *RE-searchers* approach is useful for knowing, understanding and applying a multidisciplinary and multimethodological perspective in RE. Freathy (2016) has mentioned the need for well-trained users to make this approach effective. It was pleasing to note that many indicated that they were intending to use it in schools.

In future, I intend to continue with minimum input on the theory underpinning this approach. I hope to increase the time allocated to them for teaching. I will consider asking them to teach their topic to a different group (Stage 2). After Stage 1, to extend their awareness of the activities which they could use at Stage 2, I will ask them to become familiar with other activities of each character (see, p. 26; p. 35; p. 46; p.59; cf. Freathy, et al., 2015).

Summary

In this article, I have analysed how I applied the *RE-searcher* approach in my teaching of religious education to trainee teachers. I have highlighted the usefulness of giving an opportunity to future teachers to experience both dimensions (i.e., enquiring and teaching). They enquired and taught using one method and simultaneously were taught through other methods. This model demonstrated to them that different research methods could lead to different answers to the same research question. Time constraints led me to give little attention to the theory underpinning the approach and to giving each student the experience of using multiple methods to enquire and teach. That said, the feedback received for this first iteration of the approach has been highly positive.

I am delighted to have shifted this approach for the whole year cohort. It has provided my students a pedagogy which they can add to their existing ones. I will continue with this practical session which has proven to be immersive, relevant and a thought-provoking learning experience for my students.

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