

Editorial Introduction

DISKUS Teaching and Learning Special Edition

Welcome to a Special Edition of DISKUS focusing on Teaching and Learning.

Teaching and Learning within Religious Studies has undergone a dramatic shift in both focus and sector support in the last decade. Within the UK, the work of the Higher Education Academy, particularly with regard to the now disbanded Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, has grant-funded projects across a diverse range of HEIs and run successful annual conferences. As a part of the transition to close the subject centres and re-align subject-specific support within the main body of the HEA in 2011, legacy funding awards were made to organisations such as the BASR to ensure the continuance of pedagogic research for our subject. With this money, the BASR has updated their website to include the Teaching and Learning material previously held on the HEA-PRS website, run a successful Teaching and Learning Panel at the 2012 annual conference at Winchester, published a regular 'Teaching Matters' section in the Bulletin, and founded the BASR Teaching and Learning Committee, which has led to the production of this special edition of DISKUS. It is not just the restructuring of pedagogic support at a national level which necessitates a re-focusing upon pedagogy, however, but the changing landscape and reorientation of our very profession. With the post-fees (and indeed increased fees) reality now facing both students and institutions, Universities across the sector (both 'old' and 'new') are reorienting their delivery of an 'education product' with a greater emphasis on undergraduate experience (including the quality of teaching and learning), in direct response to the impact of the National Student Survey, the wider choices of institution available to students at the application stage, and the repackaged understanding of higher education in a marketised economy. The importance of this shift to how we approach Teaching and Learning, and the role of students themselves in this process, is highlighted by the growing number of teaching-focused professorships, the uncertain funding implications of post-REF research initiatives which necessitate a concentration on undergraduate numbers, the increased vocality of students, and the changes in curriculum focus and design which have sought to respond to this evolving situation.

In this special edition, we include seven articles on varied aspects of teaching and learning within the discipline(s) covered by the study of religions. The quality of these papers is a testament to the growing interest in pedagogy in higher education and the applied knowledge and

research being undertaken within our field(s) of study. As working academics in the study of religions the interactions of teaching commitments are as 'experience-near' as any anthropological study. As sources of research and critical engagement though, teaching and learning are a growing field for study and publication. Reflective review and enhancement were, of course, implicit in all classroom teachers' practices before they were made explicit in the plethora of quality required questionnaires, annual and periodic reviews and student online surveys rating their lecturers. Equally, reflections on the role of the teacher are as ancient as the Socratic dialogue while journals and texts on pedagogy are profuse. Some of these reflections are highly theoretical, others phenomenologically descriptive - of key contexts, concepts and historical impetuses - while others yet emphasise practical pedagogy and focus on the implementation of curriculum design theory and techniques. Worldwide there has been a significant growth in research on generic pedagogical theory and subject-specific practices. The systematic study of such theory and practices is the focus of these papers.

Dominic Corrywright opens this special edition with 'The Landscape of Learning and Teaching in Religion and Theology: Perspectives and Mechanisms for Complex Learning, Programme Health and Pedagogical Well-being' an important overview of the current state of affairs in the UK. Focusing on the strategic importance of Teaching and Learning, relevant to the changing nature of the HE landscape, he provides a rationale for 'complex learning' as a restorative remedy for the challenging situation facing UK HEAs at present. Far from a negative assessment of the subject's future possibilities, Corrywright highlights the centrality and importance of developing engaged pedagogic initiatives to the future health of both Religious Studies as a subject and for the modern University departments which engage with the teaching of Religion.

In the first of two papers providing reflective narratives on curriculum and programme development Catherine Robinson and Denise Cush's 'Religions, Philosophies and Ethics: Curriculum Change in the Marketised Academy' examines curriculum design in a new undergraduate degree. They outline the issues and considerations for programmes investigating religion in a 'marketised economy'. Reinforcing the challenges presented by declining student numbers they argue for extending the interests of academics to pre UG courses such as A levels.

Stefanie Sinclair continues the theme of curriculum development in her examination of 'Digital Literacy in Religious Studies'. Her analysis of digital platforms, new technologies, cyber worlds and the graduate attributes of digital and information literacy identifies the 'complex

impact of digital technology'. Her study of digital pedagogical practices in the study of religions uncovers the careful balance required between teaching using both electronic platforms and online resources and sources with the nuances of understanding required by students in using such sources.

Bernadette Brady and Alie Bird provide the second narrative reflection on curriculum development in 'A Niche Degree: a Case Study of an MA (in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology)'. They uncover the processes and pressures on a Masters level programme over ten years. Moreover, they develop a sophisticated theory of specific pedagogies that extends the notion of 'niche degrees' within an environment where the standard model is relevant only for large degree programmes. They show how academic practitioners can be successful pedagogues and insiders in the development of an online programme and identify how this can lead to the growth of an extended community of students and scholars.

In a paper investigating theoretical issues, on 'reported, represented and lived religion', alongside practical issues, on teaching using fieldwork and study visits, Stephen E. Gregg and Lynne Scholefield develop a schema for successful practical pedagogy. Their paper, "Changing the 'Subject' in Religious Studies": Reflections upon "Learning outside the Lecture Theatre" in the Undergraduate Study of Religion', re-emphasises that the practice of teaching and learning requires the engaged pragmatism of organising student experiences of living religion and underpinning these experiences with sound academic perspectives on the objects of study.

Deirdre Burke, in "Feedback was very helpful": The Benefits of Feedback on Drafts for Students' Learning' provides a practical longitudinal case study of a small-scale pedagogic development initiative within an undergraduate programme of Religious Studies. By focusing upon the student's learning journey from the first year to the second year of study, Burke is able to offer an understanding of student's motivation to respond to feedback, and to empathise with their need to develop skills to negotiate their responses to feedback, asking us challenging questions as tutors as to how we may more effectively facilitate our students' progression through formal and informal feedback.

We finish this special edition with a theoretical article from Almut-Barbara Renger titled 'The Allure of the "Master": Critical Assessments of a Term and Narrative'. This paper focuses on the developmental shifts that have occurred in understandings of a 'Master' as a guide to learning, or transfer of knowledge, both within religious traditions and also with the study of religion. Exploring 'Masters' as, amongst other views, conduit for 'self-exaltation' and 'transmitters', Renger's work is not only a fascinating examination of the concept of the 'Master'

within religious worldviews, but also a timely and thought-provoking narrative on which to reflect our understandings of our own roles as teachers within the Academy - whether as the 'sage on the stage' or the 'guide on the side'.

The continual evolution of the study of religion is informed through theoretical research, practical fieldwork and challenging accepted pedagogic norms. Without the latter, the seismic shifts in understanding in our subject developed by our current generation of scholars cannot be handed on to a new generation of researchers and teachers. Supporting theoretical and practical developments in Teaching and Learning is at the very heart of the BASR's engagement with our subject in the modern University environment. We hope that this special edition of DISKUS is a constructive part of this developing conversation.

Dominic Corrywright & Stephen E. Gregg (July 2013)