WHAT ARE THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF DIALOGUE IN SECONDARY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION?

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Hella and Wright's 2008 paper critiques multicultural approaches to RE, proposing instead 'critical religious education' based on a social realist ontology: that 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion' should be intertwined in "the pursuit of truth and truthfulness" in relation to "the order-of-things". This draws on the "Variation Theory of Learning": that students must engage with the tensions within a faith in order to understand it. This paper highlights the strength of their critique and of Variation Theory, but proposes that these are in contradiction with a social realist ontology - and that a dialogic ontology, rooted in Bakhtin's theory of polyphonic truth, provides a more powerful alternative.

This position is advanced through the case study of four secondary school RE teachers who undertook extended CPD in dialogic education, and put it into practice in video-recorded lessons. They were then interviewed individually using the critical incident analysis technique, and subsequently discussed together in a focus group both the effect of the course on their practice, and their understanding of the nature of dialogue in the discipline of RE. A thematic analysis of this data was undertaken in relation to the following questions:

1. What impact does a CPD course in dialogic teaching have on secondary RE teachers' informed practice?
2. Is there evidence of distinct characteristic features of dialogue within the discipline of secondary school RE?

Analysis of video data shows different forms and levels of dialogue in the recorded lessons, ranging from 'teacher as gatekeeper' scenarios to entirely independent student enquiry as part of extended group studies. A range of benefits from the CPD are cited, including providing a language for critical reflection on previously existing skills, and valuing students' identification with the dialogue itself (Wegerif 2011). Evidence from the interviews and focus group suggests a distinctive nature and role of dialogue, supporting Bakhtin's view of multiple truths avoiding contradiction through 'mutual addressivity', and that such dialogue benefits from a move away from multicultural tolerance towards transcultural 'solidarity' (Bauman 2002).

Together these findings contribute towards Higham, Brindley and van de Pol's (2013) contention that there are both generic and subject specific affordances of dialogic education in secondary schools that have value.