Starting to Teach Theology and Religious Studies Workshop

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Report on the Workshop Held 16th June 2001, University of Leeds, Mary Hayward

1. Introduction to the day

Hugh Pyper (Leeds)

HSP welcomed participants, who briefly introduced themselves and indicated their areas of interest within TRS. These represented a wide range of concerns indicative of the breadth of TRS: Hebrew; OT and NT studies; Christian Theology; Pastoral Theology; Applied Ethics; Bible and contemporary culture; religion and popular culture; Buddhism, Japanese religion; religions of Asia and Africa; Hinduism; Islam; Psychology of Religion; Philosophy of Religion; theory and method in the study of religion.

HSP introduced the PRS Subject Centre and responded to a question concerning the motivation for the Centre contextualising this in current interest in teaching, which is shared with other bodies, but also indicating the degree of independence the PRS Subject Centre enjoys.

2. 'If only I'd known': Problems encountered when starting to teach

Hugh Pyper and Christopher Rowland (Oxford)

HSP highlighted the opportunities which now existed to acquire skills in relation to teaching; within the group such opportunities were clearly not readily available in all institutions. Participants were encouraged to consider the source(s) of their own model(s) of teaching and to identify issues of concern to them eg time management; conducting small group work; value of being observed/ observing others in learning to teach. One delegate observed the gulf between our experience of learning and the nature of students now; it was unlikely that we could simply replicate the teaching we had received; the world is simply different now.

Christopher Rowland offered the key input in this session.

He spoke first of his own experience of Oxford/Cambridge, recognising that this had been one of inculturation, in which the one to one teaching of the tutorial system was a positive and formative experience.

Second, whilst in Newcastle, he had experienced the open-ended participative approach of adult theological education in the churches. [Attention was drawn to ACATE and the possibility of the PRS Subject Centre bridge building between this kind of activity and academia]
Third, four visits to Brazil had made him aware of the sophisticated pedagogical methods of the favela; here there was a commitment to participative modes of education.

A fourth influence came from counselling and group analysis; both might contribute to understanding one to one and small group teaching.

Reflecting on his current teaching in Oxford CR spoke of working with a graduate seminar; this meets to set its own agenda and programme and takes responsibility for its sessions. In this CR enables engagement with the subject; there is an excellent exchange of information within the group.

In Oxford, CR also works with the Institute for Learning and Teaching; he provided course members with an outline of a typical training day on Small Group Learning before proceeding to share some key aspects of working with such groups. The following notes closely follow his own summary of this:

**Small group teaching**

Encouraging staff and students to take classes seriously involves:

- Use and analyse information already assimilated, building on lectures and tutorials
- Learning techniques of interpretation
- Co-operative skills (encouraging these)
- Developing confidence in sharing ideas

Role of learner/facilitator:

- Not there primarily to communicate information 'I' know
- Offers different model of learning to complement tutorial and lecture
- Ensuring supportive environment so that participants feel safe to 'stick their necks out'.

Getting things going/managing the group:

- Pairs - working on an issue/question
- Provocative question (not usually one's own)
- Getting the feedback from pairs
- Criticising a text
- Dealing with the talkative (awareness of what is going on important here)
- Criticising wayward opinions by eliciting comments from the class rather than taking on the role oneself
- Importance of getting members to summarise discussion

Group process (awareness of this):

- Basic facts about group formation: bonding; interactions in the group; endings
- Continuity of membership (very important in the Oxford situation)
- Clarity of expectations
- Helping the group to come to terms with the facilitator's role
- Getting used to silence
Institutional factors - awareness of how they constrain or facilitate group work
Problem of spasmodic attendance
Justifying the existence of classes (this was important in CR's Oxford context)

In summary, from small group teaching, what CR felt he had learnt especially was the different role of the teacher.

Ensuing discussion raised the following questions:

- The problem of the 'entertainment' value of lectures in the present
- What is the role of the lecture now? Are we in danger of moulding teaching to 'relevance', to the student, to diminished attention span of our culture - of watering down our teaching? CR responded that his small group teaching arose from conviction, not 'fashion' or any outside agency's requirement. At the same time the nature of the lecture had changed - they had to be more concise and 'punchy' than 20 years ago, but lectures provided a core supplemented by tutorial and classes. It was also important to recognise that whilst students may lack depth, they now bring a wide range of skills. HSP suggested that this might prompt us to reflect on the standards to which we expected students to aspire.
- The matter of watering down again - look for example at the disappearance of Hebrew and Greek - how might one regain depth - by longer periods of study for a degree? Other participants noted the wider range of studies in which students are now engaged, perhaps this had to be set against the loss eg. of languages.
- Asked about his experience of pedagogies in Brazil and how they might inform teaching here, CR responded that their contextual nature made direct transplanting unlikely, but that they were largely underpinned by the kind of thinking exemplified in the work of Paolo Freire.

Using the Internet in Teaching TRS

Jeff Dubberley (Leeds) and Eva De Visscher (Leeds)

JD and EDV introduced this session highlighting the importance of discrimination is drawing on the Internet and of helping students to develop skills in its use in academic study; these concerns and had underpinned the development of the RDN Virtual Training Suites for Philosophy and Religious Studies http://www.vts.rdn.ac.uk

During what was an interactive session, participants were invited to reflect on:

- Issues of concern to them in their own/student use of the internet:
  these included:
  - Anxieties about plagiarism
  - The identification of worthwhile sites and differentiating between the good and reliable and those which are not sound
  - A tendency to assume that students know how to use the Internet; in QAA's view this is not sufficient, they wish to know how students are being trained to use it
  - Referencing
  - These matters were picked up in subsequent discussion - see below.
- What makes a site a good website: here the matter of differentiation became the key focus. Among the 'credentials' which might be looked for in relation to websites were:
  - Who owns the server
  - Named authors, plus details of their credentials and affiliation
Looking for the use/citation of primary sources, scholarly discussion, referencing in materials

Additionally, students might be directed to sound gateways as starting points (participants were provided with a handout of selected gateways); they should be alerted to some of the problems in using web material eg argument/opinion represented as fact. There was a feeling among participants that use of the net required more discernment than the use of books (everyone can publish on the web!). Drawing on an example on Creationism, Jeff and Eva highlighted the need to be aware of the apparently academic presentation - a site might be well referenced and have many features regarded as desirable, but still be questionable. We can help students not only by recommending good search engines (eg. Altavista; Google) and gateways, but also help ourselves and them by developing techniques in refining searches (eg use of wildcards). The RDN Virtual Training Suites offer help with these matters.

Referencing

Help on this can also be found in the RDN suites. Fundamentally students should be aware of the importance of accuracy in recording the URL; they should record the date the page was last updated and also the date of their access to the site.

Plagiarism

Assistance is to hand in checking out suspected plagiarism: see plagiarism.org. It may also be worth typing essay titles into sites selling papers, or typing in phrases and searching.

- How to incorporate the internet into one’s teaching. There was some hesitancy from participants here in view of time involved, training and expertise needed, access to equipment, a feeling that this was just supplementary to teaching, institutional constraints, teacher's loss of control. Beyond these problems, discussion of the potential of ICT in teaching focused on
  - Making lecture notes available to students
  - Use of discussion groups
  - Active searches in context of group work, where computer cluster available; developing critical skills in this context
  - Students creating a website - but staff expertise/assistance needed here

4. Plenary: Reflections on being a successful teacher

Participants reflected on their good and bad experiences in teaching and went on to consider what being a successful teacher involved. Key points noted included

- someone who helps students to think for themselves
- who has enthusiasm - cares about his/her subject; is excited about it; is well prepared; is lively vocally!
- is still thinking and learning him/herself
- is open (in TRS) to others' traditions (including students' commitments); has sensitivity/empathy
- who is 'in charge' - in the sense of being confident and appropriately assertive
- has clear aims, is focused
- is approachable (outside the lecture room)
Are qualities/skills of the above kind generic or subject specific? Can they be learnt?

Concluding the day HSP drew attention to the Benchmarking Statement for TRS and the standards to which it aspired - what were the implications of this for teaching and learning strategies, for teachers and for students?

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