



The Influence of Christian Ethos on Teaching and Learning in Church Secondary Schools

RESEARCH TEAM

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

What If Learning is a pedagogical approach designed to support teachers in creating a learning environment that is framed by a Christian ethos. Both the Church of England and the Catholic Church aspire that their state-funded schools offer this. The purpose of this research project was to investigate the influence of *What If Learning*, working with teachers as co-researchers, on their approaches to teaching and learning in their classrooms.

What If Learning was developed by an international team of American, Australian and British educationalists and has the following features:

- Premised on the assumption that no classroom is belief-neutral.
- Committed to the purpose of Christian education as shaping the development of Christian character
- Focused on pedagogy as the prime responsibility of teachers.
- Based on the belief that Christian learning is primarily a matter of how the curriculum is framed rather than the content of the curriculum.
- Draws on the work of Etienne Wenger (1998) and David I. Smith and James K.A. Smith (2011)¹, who have all highlighted the importance of the practices used by teachers in shaping students' imagination as to the ultimate purpose of their learning
- Provides a three-step approach which enables teachers to frame their pedagogy in terms of Christian virtue development and to design the learning practices of their classrooms to promote that.



Full information is available at www.whatiflearning.co.uk

¹ Etienne Wenger, (1998), *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press and David I. Smith and James K.A. Smith, (2011), *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith & Learning*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA: Eerdmans.



OUR RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our primary research question was:

Can *What If Learning* be seen to lead to a more distinctively Christian pedagogic approach and the distinctive Christian formation of students in a church school?

We employed a case study approach with 14 classroom teachers from three state-funded, church secondary schools in England between September 2012 and July 2013. The three researchers made 5 separate visits to each school during the year, spending 11 days in each.

The main features of the research were:

- The intention of this qualitative research was to provide conclusions that are indicative of the challenges and opportunities revealed by the 14 teacher case studies rather than to offer conclusions that are representative of the situation in church schools generally.
- The 14 teachers were co-researchers and conversation partners in the research rather than the objects of the research. The research team were not making judgments on their performance, but were rather working with them in investigating the research question.
- The subject specialisms represented were English, science, mathematics, history, computer studies, geography, physical education, modern foreign languages and religious education.
- In each school, the teachers were introduced to *What If Learning* through a brief training session. Then each teacher designed and taught lessons using the approach. The researchers provided tutorial support.
- Each teacher was interviewed three times. These interviews were focussed on (i) their initial perceptions, (ii) their final reflections and (iii) their judgments of the training required if teachers are to be able to frame their classroom work within a Christian ethos.
- Each teacher was observed at least once teaching a *What If Learning* inspired lesson and was asked to keep a reflective log during the project.
- Pupil focus groups were run after the majority of the observed lessons.
- 44 lecturers responsible for teacher education in three Cathedral Group universities (one Catholic foundation and two Church of England foundations) were interviewed to ascertain their response to the teacher education needs that emerged from the research with the teachers.
- Audio-recordings of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed and lesson observation notes and reflective logs were typed-up and the resulting data were uploaded into data analysis software and then coded and analysed to identify key themes
- Informed consent was obtained from all participants and all data were anonymised in accordance with the ethics approval obtained through the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at Canterbury Christ Church University.



OUR FINDINGS

The key findings reported by the teachers were that they:

1. Were able to significantly reframe their pedagogy in response to their encounter with *What If Learning*. Students were subsequently able to identify a change in their classroom experience. Three examples are given at the back of this leaflet;
2. sometimes felt that their attempts at reframing their teaching from within a Christian ethos were “weird”. Phrases like “levering” and “strong-arming” in Christian ideas were used;
3. occasionally expressed concern that the *What If Learning* approach was not “Christian enough”, as encapsulated in this observation from one teacher: “there’s a sense in which anything that doesn’t see people becoming Christians isn’t fulfilling the ultimate mission”;
4. found that the pressure to prepare students for their GCSE exams often dominated their pedagogy;
5. struggled with the demands of a crowded curriculum and finding the time and mental space for the planning work that *What If Learning* promotes;
6. relied more on the training, the tutorial support and conversations with colleagues for their access to the approach than spending time on the website;
7. hankered after off-the-shelf examples in preference to creating their own bespoke learning experiences;
8. found it easier to “tell” the students about Christian ethos rather than to design practices which enabled them to experience that ethos;
9. lacked the opportunities to work as teams on developing their own understanding of Christian ethos in teaching and learning; and
10. reported that they had never before experienced a focussed opportunity to develop their expertise in this area, either in their initial training or in continuing professional development.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS²

On the basis of these findings, our recommendations are:

1. For the Church of England and the Catholic Church

What If Learning can support the development of a distinctively Christian learning culture when introduced and used thoughtfully. However, there is a key contextual challenge to be addressed in that most of the teachers had never come across a theological approach which supported them in integrating their professional work within a Christian ethos. There is an urgent need for the development and dissemination of a Christian theological understanding of teaching and learning which overcomes both the sense of *weirdness* and the sense of *not being Christian enough* identified by our teachers when trying to integrate Christian ethos with learning across the curriculum subjects. This is a task for the two Churches.

2. For Higher Education Institutions and other Teacher Educators

Our participants identified a lack of educational spaces where teachers can develop their expertise in framing pedagogy within a Christian ethos. They needed contexts where they can work with colleagues, with the support of expert guidance, on this task. Creating these spaces is a task for those responsible for leading initial teacher education and continuing professional development.

3. For School Leaders

A National College publication states that in church schools “school leaders are the interpreters of faith to the community”³. Our teachers reported many pressures that hinder their aspiration to frame their classroom work within a Christian ethos. They need targeted support in integrating theological and professional concerns. As the interpreters of faith, school leaders hold the responsibility for creating strategies that will achieve this.

4. For Classroom Teachers

The main barrier to using *What If Learning* in the classroom was the tendency for teachers to resort to telling students about Christian content rather than reframing their students’ learning experience within a Christian ethos. In the end it is the classroom teachers’ responsibility to make this transition, with the support of the two Churches, teacher educators and school leaders.

Further Planned Work

As an outcome of this research, the *What If Learning* website will be redesigned and a Toolkit will be included to support schools in using it.

²We intend to address these in greater detail in the book arising from the project. This is scheduled to be published by Peter Lang in their *Religion, Education and Values* series in late 2015. The provisional title is *Conversations with Christian Teachers: understanding the place of Christian faith in Church school classrooms*.

³*Leadership and faith: working with and learning from school leaders*, 2011, NCSL



THREE TEACHERS' STORIES

THE RE TEACHER

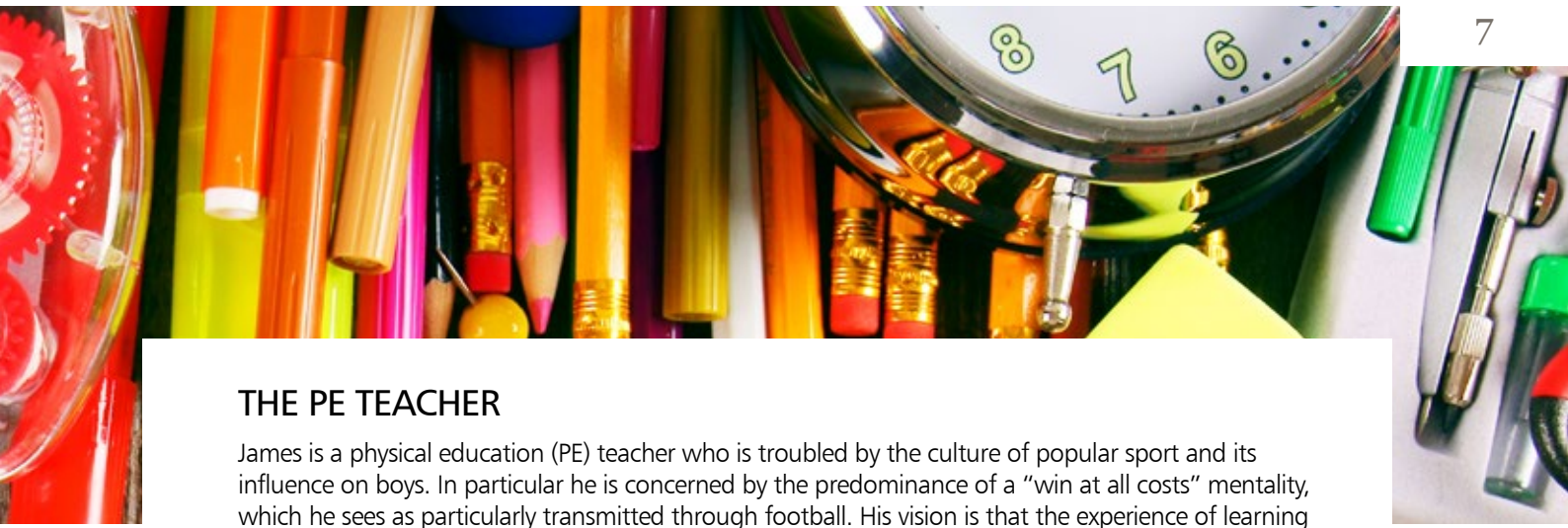
Angela teaches religious education (RE) and in her lesson focussed on her Christian ethics course. She taught her students to produce answers that would score well in the externally-set exam. Her lesson was focussed on end of life issues. She explains her thinking:

"So I kind of sat down with what I'd normally do which at the end result was very much *fors and against* abortion, euthanasia etc... (but) what would I really want to say as a Christian about these topics? .. a Christian wouldn't necessarily sit there and go *fors and against*."

Previously her classroom practice meant that students experienced Christian ethics as a conflict between two opposing sides; in effect they were being inducted into seeing Christian ethics as primarily concerned with winning ethical disputes. Angela decided to reframe her pedagogy in line with the notion that the primary obligation in Christian ethics might be to show love to one's opponents rather than to win an argument.

She tried a new approach on the topic of assisted suicide by introducing the class, through story-telling and pictures, to an energetic rugby player and sky diver with an active family life. The students were then asked to engage in learning activities which explored his quality of life. Then she told them his name, Tony Nicklinson, and the story of his stroke in Athens in 2005 which left him, at the age of 50, with locked-in syndrome. He subsequently became a high-profile campaigner for the right to die. In the light of this new knowledge, the class returned to their consideration of his quality of life. Eventually they had to distil three arguments for and three against assisted suicide as required by the exam and to offer what they understood as a Christian response.

In this example Angela has redesigned her pedagogy to offer a formative experience which nurtured virtues of empathy, openness to ambiguity, listening etc. rather than perpetuating the adversarial approach of "*fors and againsts*" that is embedded in her GCSE syllabus and which promotes the notion that Christian ethics is mainly about winning arguments.



THE PE TEACHER

James is a physical education (PE) teacher who is troubled by the culture of popular sport and its influence on boys. In particular he is concerned by the predominance of a “win at all costs” mentality, which he sees as particularly transmitted through football. His vision is that the experience of learning in PE will form an alternative character in his students, the vision of which derives from the school’s Christian ethos. He described his aim as “love within a team framework”. One thing that he was very clear about was that he didn’t want “to compromise the curriculum” by using PE as a vehicle for Christian sermonettes or epilogues. He had decided that his approach to teaching would be to emphasise learning to coach, rather than winning with its association of attaining personal glory.

The PE focus of the observed lesson was learning the push-pass in hockey. Certainly the idea that there is a Christian way to do this would seem very “weird” to most PE teachers. In the lesson James first demonstrated the components of a good push-pass, then he split the class into pairs and they had to perfect their technique together. When asked subsequently what they thought they were learning in the lesson, the students said straight away that they were “learning how to be an encourager”. The reason for this was that the focal task of the lesson had been to coach their partner in the skill of the push-pass and to record what techniques were used in encouraging them in their skill development.

James’ comment on this lesson was that without the challenge to reframe his teaching within a Christian ethos, “I would have just taught the push-pass and individually as performers, so the thing that definitely had to change was that there was a coaching element”.

THE MATHS TEACHER

Julie entered teaching following dissatisfaction with a career in banking and its shift from a service to a sales culture. She had a strong sense of vocation, which embraced both a love of maths in its own right and a sense of responsibility for herself as a role model for the students. At first her perception was that incorporating Christian ethos into maths meant putting “a big chunk of something” into the lesson, which she found difficult to conceive of. In discussion with the research team, she took up the idea that the Christian ethos could be about the sort of mathematician that emerged from her lessons, rather than her as teacher talking about “Christian chunks of something”.

For the observed lesson, Julie decided to redesign her approach to a revision lesson on averages. The students had previously learnt about the different types of average and in the observed lesson were asked to calculate the average price of a shopping basket for four different supermarkets. The task was to work out which was the “best” supermarket. Once the calculation of mode, mean, median etc. were completed, Julie led a carefully scaffolded discussion where whole class teaching was interspersed with small group work. In this students were asked to consider the truthfulness of the different supermarkets’ use of averages in their advertising. Her aim was that her students did not just treat maths as a tool for generating answers required by the answer book, but as an aid in the making of virtuous decisions. Learning maths in the context of a Christian ethos in Julie’s class is, then, about making virtuous judgments and may involve challenging the prevailing consensus (as she did in discussions of the cheapest deal). It is about, for example, making virtuous judgments when we shop.



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