

Investigating learning in RE

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Abstract

In this paper I will present an assessment of some of the key theories arising from the work of Piaget and Vygotsky and investigate whether they might meaningfully apply within the context of the secondary RE classroom. Drawing on experience from my IEP (Initial Experience Phase) as well as the formative literature, I will present a case for the primacy of Piaget and Vygotsky among recent determinative pedagogical theories and illustrate how conversance in the language of both theorists, more so than with other theorists, prompts the trainee teacher or NQT to look beyond the mechanics of each theory and carve their own valid methodologies (the validity of which depending ironically upon their instinct for abandoning theory and acting according to the situation). In this way I will argue that Piaget and Vygotsky present the most 'meaningful' pedagogical theories in a climate of theoretical excess. Beyond the remit of a 'typical' lesson, I will illustrate how this mind-set has enabled me to envision a radically reformed version of religious education which underpins a hypothetical model for education where the holistic development of children takes precedence over governmental agendas aimed at tailoring education to serve industry and the economy and that such a model might manifest via a 'spiritual revolution'.

Introduction – *Bad Apples*

"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so".
 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

What is it to think of something qualitatively, in terms of its being good or bad? "This apple is bad" might be thought a reasonable communiqué about the wince inducing tang of a moribund Cox's Pippin, but what are the implications of such an account? We may certainly say that the unfortunate consumer has personally and uniquely encountered the apple and that their experience of it was principally defined by their taste buds, which were likely offended by the acidity resulting from the fermentation process, now in effect. We might also deduce, by tracing further back, that our pitiable gourmand must have formed an initial impression of the apple, deemed 'good' enough (either consciously or otherwise), to pique their interest and to prompt them to greedily pick and excitedly pierce its malefic skin; an irresistible sheen perhaps? Furthermore, might we not also conjecture that this individual must have had prior experiences of apples, and that these (or at any rate the individual's secondary perceptions of apples formed by their possessing a mere awareness of their existing) also factored in their decision to bite? Here, by 'secondary perceptions' I refer to the indirect formation of ideas about objects, i.e. ideas formed in lieu of personal and tangible experience(s) of an object (s).

Beyond these extrapolations, what does this synopsis of judgements tell us about apples? Is it rational to infer an inherent goodness or badness in apples, from this account? No – this little story suggests nothing at all of the quality of apples but merely hints at some of their qualities; in fact we learn only of an individual's perceptions of one apple in particular in the context of their idiosyncratic ideas about the *purpose* of apples and the values of good and bad. From where are these derived? Do they originate in this experience? Not according to Piaget and Vygotsky, whose

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respective theories on cognitive development and social constructivism I have elected to assess within this paper. Piaget might say that this experience reflects an ongoing internal narrative about the world that is personal to this individual. This narrative, however distinct, is cultivated via paradigmatic stages of cognitive development, giving rise to ceaseless processes of assimilation and accommodation within mental schemas, of continuously updated and revised data pertaining to: goodness; badness; pleasure; displeasure; hunger; satiation; and apples (Piaget, 1952, p. 42). I will attempt to elucidate Piaget's conceptions of assimilation and accommodation later in this paper. Vygotsky might contend that the individual's conception of bad apples manifests comparably, but it is procured and not autonomously developed, stemming from societal interactions. Vygotsky negates the pre-eminence of paradigmatic stages of cognitive development, asserting that constructs are perpetuated (Daniels, 2001, p.37).

My rationale for comparing these seminal theories is rooted in an instinct for their inherent compatibility within professional praxis and their didactic relevance to RE, particularly as MKO/ZPD (More Knowledgeable Other/Zone of Proximal Development) relate to pluralist student cohorts. I believe this relationship supports an argument for a return to spirituality in education; the overarching objective of this abridged study. Two caveats emerge here: my contention as to the potential for abstraction in each theory; and the essential elusiveness of 'spirituality' as a concept. By the first monition I mean to purport that both theories are inherently arbitrary without a teleological *raison d'être* and in the absence of both a clear definition of *pedagogy*, as well as an explicit and rarefied objective for it. For the purposes of this paper, my perspective of pedagogy is largely in line with Best (cited in Daniels, 2001, p.31) and is general and non-didactic, referring to the "philosophy, sociology and social psychology of education", although I will also make some reference to each learning theory in a didactic context.

Theory in Practice - Prefacing Piaget

Before I proceed I am bound to volunteer a confession, which I make hesitantly, yet I am hopeful that it will service a point I wish to put across; I have never read *Hamlet*. Why mention it then? The fact is that I could have read *Hamlet* and understood nothing of it, failing to empathise with the protagonist and missing the everyman element that makes the Dane so compelling an archetype. Nonetheless, I would have read *Hamlet* and in so doing my social currency may have accrued a little interest. Even if my understanding of the play were, by now, refined enough to afford me certain insights however, the assimilation of that data within my 'Self schema' is not necessarily implied. Here my social currency still increases, whilst my social awareness gathers no benefit. In this instance, my selecting the quotation is desultory and superficial, any relevance to the topic of cognition and the nature of thought, a mere coincidence. In each case, the quotation would be entirely without meaning, beyond that inferred by the reader. This raises the issue of the meaning of meaning which ought to be reserved for another paper.

I would contend however, that such a token reference has semiotic value to the author's credibility, suggesting scholarliness, however inaccurate this may be. Such an inference by the reader might impact on their assessment of the paper, i.e. the reference implies scholarliness ergo the paper will likely be scholarly. Had I selected an alternative and less pertinent quotation, I might still have hoped to hoodwink the reader, my apparent eruditeness (apparent only in what would have been a superficial citation of a major work of literature) suggesting a deeply considered piece of work. Do I in fact 'know' *Hamlet* after all? Does this touch upon what Piaget would have called knowledge and what an urban dictionary might term 'street smarts'?

Despite my inability to make verbatim references to *Hamlet* beyond the introductory quotation, the cultural and literary significance of the work have afforded it sufficient exposure, that I might glean a cursory understanding of the plot and the characters at a distance. Consequently I have

accommodated data in my Hamlet schema, assimilated this into my Self schema and via a process of thinking, been able to reference the play in a manner which is meaningful to a disparate piece of work. Is this recalibration and application of knowledge not therefore true knowledge in evidence? Is this not the Piagetian view of knowledge?

Strategies - Emergent philosophies within my professional praxis, stemming from investigative approaches, pertaining to social constructivism and cognitive development theories and conducted over the course of multiple sessions.

I pose the previous question with a case study in mind. In the observation phase of my IEP I was patently aware of a disconnection between lessons that also manifested in intra-curricular schisms and was palpable in the very atmosphere of the school. In response to this observation, I sought early on in my placement to bridge gaps. I worked hard to gain a sense of my pupils beyond the RE classroom and to invest my interest in theirs. Before long I had formed mental profiles of my students that enabled me to engage with them in meaningful terms. I knew the mathematicians, the biologists and the philosophers, the cynics, the romantics and the strategically disengaged. I made conscious attempts to elicit contributions in the 'language' of each student. Drawing on Mary Grey's argument for the "importance of story" (Thatcher, 1999, p.20) and the call from Nixon and Parffrey for mystic educators (Thatcher, 1999, p.79), I attempted to "resurrect the contemplative" in the RE classroom and lead a guided search for the numinous within each child's context. One might say that I did not conduct my classes exclusively in RE, but encouraged cross-curricular discourse, or as Sheldrake might put it, "conversations", typified by the relationship between literature and spirituality (Thatcher, 1999, p.70).

Piaget Emerging

In the formative part of this paper I cited a cynical year nine student, whose questioning of the relevance of RE to his experience, seems in the province of contemporary religious education, almost archetypal. For this student and others like him, such 'conversations' presented a free pass for engagement. A self-professed unbeliever, this particular boy is a dextrous inquirer with a fervent curiosity and lucidity of thought that in my view demonstrates cognitive maturity. After all, Ginsburg and Opper suggest that the logical models of the formal operational stage are qualitative not quantitative (Ginsburg and Opper, 1969, p.200). He possesses a unique gift for equilibration, by which I mean an ability to make conceptual leaps that others might not, as he is occasioned to swift recalibration of existing schemas, by huge strides of dizzyingly compelling logic (Ginsburg and Opper, 1969, p. 172). The utility of Piagetian cognitive theory could have been obscured here, had it not been for a recalibration within my own schemas relating to cognitive theory. "RE isn't about believing in God", I appealed to the boy before a session, "it's about asking questions and you're very good at that".

Despite this particular student's ignorance of religion, he had repeatedly showcased aptitude for intuitive, concrete and abstract thought, in our previous interactions. Goldman and Elkin both corroborated the assertion that "religious thinking exhibits a developmental component progressing through the classical Piagetian stages" (cited in Francis, Kay & Campbell, 1996, p.98). Hence I determined that an espousal of cognitive development theory and RE could be made in practice, but the pedagogical value of cognitive development theories is undermined beyond context. Here, I perceived a merger of Piaget and Vygotsky which I alluded to in my introduction.

Vygotsky Emerging

This boy is clearly at a developmental stage commensurate with his age and proportionate to his peers, but his social constructs are entirely his own, placing the onus on me as his teacher, to bring this into play in class. Having 'hooked' this particular pupil I determined that there was room to investigate the efficacy of Vygotsky's key ideas about the Zone of Proximal Development and the

More Knowledgeable Other. In order to keep this pupil engaged I had to facilitate participation, which in my view could be decided by two factors: his want of confidence in expressing his ideas, which would often manifest as compensatory behaviours to assert his role as alpha-male; and his ignorance of religion. By orchestrating 'play offs' with designated MKO's (in this case, faith students) in open discourse, I was able to engage him with faith perspectives, and assess in real time, his ZPD, as it pertained to AT2 (Attainment Target 2, i.e. learning from religion). A similar tactic was to spark debate between this student and a pupil whose subject-specific language and conversational fluency were both of a high standard. My role would be to mediate between the two, directing the unaware MKO to unpack terminology and high level vocabulary and positively enforcing this in the dextrous inquirer, via repetition and body language, during my précis of his contributions, thus facilitating AFL (Assessment for Learning) pertaining to AT1 (Attainment Target 1, i.e. learning about religion) .

Systemic Constructivism

In my initial reading of Grimmit (2000) I was struck by the logic of his Three Stage Pedagogical Strategy, because it seemed to encapsulate my nascent views on the utility of constructivist approaches to RE and to lay out a pragmatic methodology, which appeared to tessellate with my own intuitive approaches. Grimmit's suggestion of preparatory, direct and supplementary constructivist pedagogies prompted me to consider the composition and objectives of my lessons as equally tripartite (Grimmit, 2000, p.216). My intuition had caused me to reflect on my students' entry point for engagement, as well as their vehicles for synthesis, when exposed to new information or concepts and these are identified in the first two elements of Grimmit's system (preparatory and direct constructivist pedagogies, to which I will continue to refer as PPC and DPC respectively). However, in the early stages of my IEP I had failed to consider the tertiary aspect, i.e. supplementary constructivist pedagogies (SPD). Once the literature had alerted me to the inherent implications of transmission in the provision of "supplementary information about the item of religious content" (Grimmit, 2000, p.217), I was able to consider the ease with which I might inadvertently default to dissemination of objectified knowledge and in turn ground diaphanous ideas in ontology, which would compromise the ground-work made in the PPC and DPC stages. Grimmit insists that it is critical to continue to promote constructivist responses to new information in this third stage.

I will attempt to illustrate how my reasoning affected practice by reference to my rationales for a lesson I taught on the Ten Commandments. I divided the one hundred-minute lesson into three parts, whose purposes may be laid out thus: part 1 - reflection of personal experience; part 2 – introduction to the Commandments, focussing on two of them; part three – assessment of the commandments in a modern secular context. The first part (PPC) was designed to engage my students with notions of promises and covenants and their task was to reflect on whether these factor into their lives. The school's ethos and behaviour policy became points of reference for many of the students, who perceived a comparable institutional indenture here and were able to draw out and critically evaluate the symbiotic element. In part two (DPC) I confronted my students with the Commandments, but in deference to Grimmit, I offered no explanation of them, allowing for free exploration in group discussion (a constructivist approach that I determined serves RE well). The final part (SPC) offered a crucial insight into good practice in RE. Rather than place the onus on myself to supplement parts one and two with objective knowledge, by explaining what the Commandments mean and how they apply, I invited my students to reflect on their meaning and whether they apply in the world today. By organising groups so that they comprised eclectic demographics, my students were encouraged to explore this issue in a constructivist setting that was socially inclusive and proffered multiple points of entry. I always preface my lessons with a brief précis of the previous sessions and when I came to do this the following week I perceived that deep learning had taken place. This impacted significantly on my subsequent teaching during my IEP.

A Summation of Strategies

My motive was never to conduct surreptitious studies in cognitive and constructionist theories, but rather more to incorporate them in a manner which Carl Rogers might have called 'instinctive', with a broader definition of pedagogy in mind and with the individual child as my focus. I was by now convinced by the attestable logic of Piaget's paradigms and certain that each of my students was at the same stage of cognitive development, yet crucially also an individual. I was also acutely aware of the subsumption of latent pedagogies arising from inherited ethno-sociological narratives, by now embedded in the collective mindset of my students (Daniels, 2001, p.20). In consideration of this fundamental aspect of Vygotsky's definition of pedagogy, I felt an imperative for the sort of emancipatory constructivism cited in Grimmit (Grimmit, 2000, p.224). Here it strikes me that educators are impelled not only to emancipate children from received prejudices in the provision of access to learning but, more profoundly, to unlock the shackles of 'progress', liberate young minds from the pressures of arbitrary objectives and illuminate the numinous. This need not be confined to RE and it ought not to stem from a theological agenda, but in the broadest sense should promote awe and wonder, irrespective of the arena. I am haunted still by the moment my mathematics teacher swiftly abated my interest in the subject when she told me that "the concept of zero isn't important".

A Dichotomy Arising Between Theory and Practice

There appears to be a potential disparity between true knowledge, (by which I refer to the aggregation of data leading to higher order thinking) and applied knowledge. In the secondary classroom the latter may help 'progress' a student through the education system, for want of evidence of true understanding, e.g. the tactical quote learned by rote; *"though this be madness, yet there is method in't"*!

However, a more insidious affront to the student's holistic development lurks here and this is the potential for learning without context. In the context of a secular classroom it is neither valid nor ethical to justify teaching a topic/subject (as I observed repeatedly during my IEP) on the grounds that it "will get you an A at GCSE". Systemic education cannot be justified within an internal loop of self-reference. Any such justification is vapid, manipulative, morally reprehensible and in my view tantamount to child abuse. Here, the Socratic midwife becomes a quasi-matron character from a Gerald Thomas 'Carry On' film, whose matriarchal tyranny represents the sort of draconian, unenlightened and arbitrary conformity of Edwardian England, that was so commonly satirised in post-modernist 1960's British popular culture. As this image relates to learning theories, a suggestion of the primacy of rationales is implied, which is to say that it is first necessary to justify to oneself as a teacher, why a subject is taught, with an emphasis on its pertinence to the holistic development of the child, before considering how. This must be constantly addressed in open pupil/teacher/whole-school discourse. Here I begin to touch upon the spiritual aspect of education, whereby the whole of the child's experience is taken into account and teaching responds to as much as it informs it. This seems to be in line with Best's definition of pedagogy which I cited earlier and would place both Vygotsky and Piaget in the realm of didactics.

Conclusion - A case for combatant liberal spiritual pedagogy

In preparation for embarking on the PGCE programme, the student cohort was asked to ponder some of the 'big questions' that educators are obliged to ask. Before the 'how', one must consider the 'why' as well as the 'what' and indeed one would be entirely remiss to neglect to consider the 'who'. My response to the big questions came (as is often the case) in the form of a poem, which I offer as the introduction to my conclusion because I believe subsequent revelations procured via 'real' time in a classroom, are inherently linked to my initial ideal and the most profound of these is the realisation that good teachers will maintain a discourse with their younger, greener selves.

To Catch a Mammoth

By Andrew Clark

“No!” Said the first caveman
“Heed what I say! I’ve been around three score years and a day.
So please understand that I know this first-hand...
One can’t catch a Great Woolly Mammoth that way!”
“Indeed.” Said the next caveman
“That couldn’t be truer, but I’ve been around here two scores years fewer.
And maybe, through trial, I’ll patent a style that’s quicker and cleaner and better and newer!”

“How bold!” Said the third caveman
“Yet plausible still. Don’t they say that a way is born of a will?
Now I’ll wrestle and wrangle and ponder each angle before I go in for the kill”.

No word came from the fourth, his absence now noted
But the first three, still hungry, dismissed it and voted
And as they went to elect which approach is correct the prodigal fourth returned,
Smiling and bloated!

Aside from determining that good teachers consistently ponder those big questions, I am learning that the Great Woolly Mammoth who roamed the West Siberian Plain is most akin to the Lesser Spotted Adolescent found to peregrinate the musty corridors of the modern British comprehensive, which is to say that each is a rare and mythic creature, in their own way, entirely unique and to be approached with caution. More than this, the good teacher, just like the wise caveman, knows the theory and can deploy it effectively at a moment’s notice but, whilst in the throes of their peerless technique, still remembers that their subject is a living, breathing, often moving, potential exception to every rule.

Beyond seemingly substantiating the theories of Vygotsky and Piaget then, my albeit brief time in school is teaching me the indispensability of an informed yet fluid mind-set; which is to say in Piagetian terms that I perceive a necessity to assimilate, replicate and innovate. How does this look in a school whose leaders share this ethic? Well, I believe such an environment obscures the spear to illuminate the Mammoth. I believe such an environment engenders a palpable symbiosis of teaching and learning, in which the one informs the other, naturally, organically and exponentially. This is more than mere assessment for learning. I believe such an environment requires a large-scale counter movement headed by the last bastions of true education, which I would wager comprise educators who are most familiar not only with the big questions, but also their insolubility. I believe that the mainstreams of education are beginning to show signs of a leaning towards this direction and my inference is that a revolution is, if not imminent, on the horizon. However, whilst certain subjects take precedence due to industry-driven governmental supply and demand style thinking, I believe the distance between our present reality and the horizon is inestimable. I think the obstacles that must be overcome if we are to reach the horizon are formidable and myriad, because their being defeated requires a view so progressive, it looks back into the distant past, before education and industry became synonymous; and this is counterintuitive. I believe that it can be achieved however. How? I would argue that this change may be cultivated by a radical revision of our understanding of religious education, what it encompasses and its implications to the holistic development of young people. In this model, RE ceases to be a marginalised, stand-alone subject and in fact becomes the central nervous system of the education organism. In the spirit of the current trend towards ‘pop education’ which deals in pithy slogans, acronyms and clever wordplay, one might be inclined to rebrand RE as ME. A trite and jaded encapsulation perhaps of exactly the

impoverished and undermining views of 'subjects' and 'learning' which I feel abound today and which I see mirrored in posters and hear echoed in meetings. However, beyond the vapid play on words, there is true meaning, because this is the sort of religious education that might enable or at any rate prompt, full-scale enquiry of self and the business of being human, by meaningfully drawing upon and elucidating the attempts of a species throughout its recorded history. This version of RE does not make arbitrary demands of its pupils to draw a Seder meal on a paper plate last thing on a Friday afternoon (in Judaism the Seder meal is enjoyed during *Pesach* or Passover and commemorates the escape from enslavement in Egypt, which was led by Moses). Rather, it promotes self-enquiry and facilitates this essential process, merely conversing in the languages of philosophy and religion, the very existence of both being equally dependent on our sentience and self-awareness as human beings. It might be that Judaism is 'L'exemple d'aujourd'hui', but the gel pens need not get an airing. One might argue and indeed one does, that this view applies to all 'subjects'.

Having reflected deeply upon my IEP and the reading around this paper, I am tending toward a hypothesis that as educators, we ought to re-define and implement a holistic spiritual ethos in schools, without which the validity of learning theories becomes undermined. I submit that a broader view be taken of the meaning of spirituality and that it ought to be applied across the curriculum and not bound up with insipid sentimental ideas and locked away within the confines of the RE classroom.

In their book 'The Spiritual Revolution', Paul Heelas and Linda Wood submit a thesis for subjectivisation in light of their research on secularisation, during the Kendal Project. They take a broadly Rousseauian view of the uniqueness of 'I' (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, p. 11). The agenda presented by the DfE (Department for Education) in the 2014 SMSC (spiritual, moral, social and cultural) requirements for independent schools (DfE, 2014) is expressly driven by community cohesion. Need there be a disparity between the two? I would contend not. My assertion is that communities comprise individuals and so the education of young people entering into these communities needs to reflect this. Von Glaserfeld's 'Radical Constructivism' (cited in Grimmit, 2000, p.210) confronts the Platonic notion of external realities and asserts that all reality is ultimately experiential. I agree. Hence, I propose a call for radical liberalism which combats fixed *ideas* within and about any subject. Jonathan Brown distinguishes between 'I' and 'Me' (Brown, 1998, p.2), the former being the spectator of the latter, the objective subject. I assert that the art of teaching is to navigate a child to their 'I', so that they can autonomously create their 'Me'.

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