



## The Challenges of A-level RE: A View From the Trenches

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It was a great honour to be asked to speak at the conference, and to contribute to this journal, and also, I felt, a great surprise. The surprise lies in the fact that, as a classroom teacher and head of department in a comprehensive school, I feel that I only have a very limited strategic vision for RE; I know what I know very well, but even as a member of a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE), I don't really have the 'big vision' that I had thought was required to produce a paper like this. This is the origin of the 'trench' analogy that I refer to in my title. From my perspective, if you are involved in policy making?either through the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) or the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), then your view is like a satellite photograph of Europe; spanning an enormous area, the perfect position from which to make far-reaching strategic decisions. (This position does have the disadvantage that you are very long way indeed from whatever is actually happening on the ground!) If, on the other hand, you are a university academic, then your view is like that of the artillery observer flying over the battlefield; much more close up than the previous view; combining a fairly good awareness of what is happening on the ground with a good grasp of medium term strategy (you can see over the hills and forests that the troops on the ground can't). This view is not without its frustrations however; the observer will say 'Why can't A company reach that

point?' as to him it seems an obvious, clear route; but he can't see the concertinas of barbed wire and hidden snipers dug in. As the title of this paper suggests, in this analogy RE A-level teachers are like the infantry in the trenches; very closely engaged with what is going on, but with very little strategic vision at all?we can't see what is happening in no man's land! This analogy has other facets; we don't know what is happening in the next trench along (there is very rarely any opportunity for us to get together and share good practice), and of course, there is a lot of shouting, and people running round in circles!

We may usefully compare this to the episode in 'All Quiet on the Western Front' when the protagonist, Paul Baumer returns home. Here he discusses the progress of the war in his local pub, and is told that everybody there has a clearer idea of what is going on because they read the papers, and aren't limited in their view. So it is for RE teachers?limited strategic vision. The infantry are also on the receiving end of some seemingly random incoming?there are the trench mortars of government initiatives, and the day to day sniping of school policies, never mind the simple business of maintaining the trench?remember that there are very few heads of department for whom RE A level is their only, or indeed primary, concern (if you compare the competing needs of 30 A level students with 250 GCSE you can see what the number one priority has to be).

However, using such a grim analogy does not mean that it is all doom and gloom?victory is possible even from the trenches. In this paper I want to avoid a litany of complaint, and ensure that I put forward some ideas that might help us all work together for the benefit of all our students.

I thought that the title of conference was very interesting. 'Spoonfeeding or Critical Thinking' contains a clear implication that 'Spoon feeding (i.e. breaking things down to make them easy) is bad', and we want to avoid it?'Critical thinking (i.e. students being responsible, individually accountable academics) is good' and we want to encourage it. I do feel that there is a subtext present, and developed by some speakers from the university sector at the conference, that 'In the past students came up to university with all the skills that they needed, but now the schools aren't preparing them properly anymore'. Of course, in many respects this is true, but I hope that this paper will be able to suggest some of the reasons why that might be the case, as well as another way of approaching this whole issue?not as either /or but as a continuum of development.

For me the key question that we need to ask ourselves if we are going to move forward is: What is the purpose of A level RE? What is it for?

Once upon a time, everything was comparatively clear; A-level theology was there to prepare you for studying theology at university, as part of a clear process; brighter academic students did O-levels (and of course we should remember that most students did not), which prepared them by giving them the skills that they needed to do Alevels, which in turn prepared them, quite directly, for university. This process in the subject of 'theology' was generally understood to prepare them in turn, for the Christian ministry. Over time, this simple, linear model has become more complex. To start with, GCSEs are for students of nearly all ability, not for just the academic elite, and their very specific skills focus means that they do not really do a terribly good job of preparing students for A-level study. The nature of the A-level courses themselves has changed; as well intentioned individuals added bits and pieces. This was partly to reflect the changes in academia as religious studies began to branch off as a distinct subject from theology (although as one might expect there are a lot of permeable boundaries there), and there were also conscious attempts to broaden the A-level subject's appeal, to make it more relevant; less 'fuddy-duddy' and more 'cool, hip and groovy'?so to the original biblical studies and church history over time we have added the philosophy of religion, then ethics, eventually even a limited study of 'other religions', and most recently 'Religion and the Media'!

We know from our own experience that this process of adding bits and pieces here and there in response to change is not the most successful way to create something beautiful or efficient. Think about the back of your lovely new computer?just a few wires connecting you to your external devices, and everything neat and tidy. We all know that the back of our fantastic new machine will, after a year or so, look like a technological plate of spaghetti?as we struggle to keep up to date with changing technology, we add things on & bodge it with workarounds. The result is not pretty,

although it does work?sort of, most of the time! This is a good analogy for A-level as it has been very interesting to see the way that different boards have responded to the challenge of producing a new A-level by basically producing 're-jigged' versions of the 'same old same old'?a 'religious studies' A-level that is, to all intents and purposes, pretty much a fairly standard 'theology A-level' with some additional options. It is impossible, for example, in most syllabuses to just do 'study of religions', these must usually be combined with something else (philosophy, ethics, biblical studies etc), and it is impossible in all boards to study two different Dharmic or Eastern traditions. It is also worth pointing out that these new A-levels are coming on stream in the same academic year as we are making changes to GCSEs and the KS3 curriculum?presumably this is a result of the famous 'joined up thinking' that we hear so much about.

So I think that these days the purpose of RE A-level is much more complex. It is certainly not part of a smooth linear progression, and the pressure of preparing students for higher education is only one of a number of significant pressures. Some of the key ones are outlined below (and I'm not even going to mention SACRE, OFSTED or the 'Social inclusion agenda').

Under the direction of the QCA, **exam boards** have a huge effect upon the delivery of A level RE, not just in terms of what we cover, but inevitably the way that we cover it?with a knock on effect of influencing the skills that we have to emphasise, and thus the preparation that students have. Currently the QCA have decreed that there will be no coursework component at Alevel in RE, which means that consequently no A-level teacher needs to teach students how to do extended writing?and with exam timings which mean that students have between 30-45 minutes to do most of their essays. Clearly the key skill our students need is to write those short essays under a strict time limit. We have to spend a lot of time on this because it is actually a difficult skill?consider the title '(i) Examine the main teachings and practices of two types of yoga. (ii) Comment on the significance of these contributions to Hinduism'. I wouldn't want to be assessed on that in 30 minutes! Many students find these limitations frustrating?they are at an age when the depth of their knowledge and understanding is such that they want to be able to write more, and express difficult ideas clearly. When asked about their synoptic paper (90 mins for one essay), my year 13s unanimously described it as 'fun'.

Coursework is sorely missed?writing at length enabled students to really fly, and enabled A-level teachers to prepare them for the experience of writing 'proper essays' at university. My experience, both of preparing and marking coursework, suggests that the much hyped issue of plagiarism is not the key issue. Out of about 4,000 or so courseworks that I marked, very few contained plagiarism, but a lot were overprepared or over-supported by staff?it was more common to get a block of sixteen courseworks from one centre, all on the same topic, all using the same subheadings, same quotes, and a great deal of the same information. This tends to bring everything to the middle, apparently helping those who are struggling, but certainly limiting those who could fly. Other courseworks?from surveys of Wahabi theology to a comparison between a Wiccan Esbat and Tantric Chakra Puja?have been simply superb, as students' own interests have driven them to research and write up some really fascinating ideas.

In my opinion the fact that students can do something of interest to them, that they must learn how to do different kinds of research (some of mine even did fieldwork), and they must learn how to plan and write at length, means that the gains that coursework has to offer?to the students, to staff, and to universities?should far outweigh the perceived difficulties, and thus just saying 'no coursework' seems a draconian over-reaction. We need to address the problem, to solve it, not pretend that the skills gap doesn't exist by removing the problem altogether, and pretending that everything is just fine.

The question that springs to mind here is 'why are some teachers over preparing their candidates?' and the simple answer is that they are under pressure from their SLT (which is the current acronym for senior management in schools?Senior Leadership Team), who want you to justify your existence in line with accepted measures (league tables)?your students have to get the good grades, or you won't have a course to run. They also have considerable say over the allocation of resources and timetabling. The growth in A-level courses also puts a great deal of pressure on time-tablers. In my own college we have lost 1 period every two week cycle in year 12, which increases the difficulty of covering the material in sufficient depth in the time. It would also be true to say that the attitude of an SLT to a particular subject is also very important. Subjects that aren't perceived as 'sexy' by an SLT can be lost from the

curriculum very easily. Now the SLT are on your back because of...

**Parents**, who want their sons and daughters to do well. Not because they are middle class, precious and pushy (though there are a few of those about), but out of legitimate and very deep concern. They care about league tables, they talk to one another, and are very frequently biased against certain subjects 'Why do you want to do RE? you don't want to become a nun do you?' is a refrain that every RE teacher will be familiar with from parents' evenings at almost any age. For some reason RE carries a particularly heavy bag of negative associations.

The next key pressure that I would like to examine is the **students** themselves, and there are several key points here. Firstly, as we know, there has been an enormous increase in the numbers taking AS and A2, and the fact that this does not automatically translate into increased uptake at university has much to do with the fact that students may be taking this course as a course in itself, with no intention of further study in the subject. It is important that we provide an experience which is valuable for them, which will obviously not focus upon preparation for further additional study? it has to stand on its own. Secondly there is an oft repeated refrain amongst many of the cynical corner of every staffroom (and I daresay in the SCR of any university) that 'things ain't what they used to be'. Let us consider the fact that schools are becoming increasingly good at helping students achieve at GCSE? more are getting higher grades, and wanting to stay onto A-level? which of course means more are coming along to university, in line with the policy of widening access. More students inevitably means a greater spread of ability and experience, and this may be at the heart of the perception of a spoonfeeding / critical thinking dichotomy. Many teaching staff look back to a time when all A-level students (and first year undergraduates) were just fantastic, highly skilled, keenly focused academics. In all honesty there are some pretty thick rosetinted spectacles being worn here. A-level has always been a challenge to teach!

Thirdly, we need to remember that students are also from a wider range of backgrounds with a wider range of interests. An additional significant point is that, where RE in schools is good, all their previous experience of the subject will have been non-confessional, i.e. it will not expect them to share a faith position, but the historical forces that have shaped A-level RE means that this is not the case here; 'Philosophy of Religion' (lets face it, probably one of the most common options) is really 'Western, Christian Philosophy of Religion'. (Or as Ralph Norman suggested, 'The study of John Hick'.) You can really only get worked up about Hick's replica theory if the idea of resurrection has some meaning for you. (As for Biblical Studies and Church History, the fact that these are not balanced elsewhere by in-depth scriptural studies from other traditions tells us a lot). Finally, when considering students? I teach in a comprehensive, and take that attitude onto A-level? I will take anyone who is prepared to give it 100%, and have been prouder of some of my E grades than some of the As and Bs! I've sent students off enthusiastically to study religious studies at university whom others predicted would never get their five GCSEs? and while they might not be the intellectual paragons of myth, they have done amazingly well to achieve! In transition between institutions, we should be meeting students where they are? in many cases with a great deal to offer, and with a lot of hard work behind them, and we should be celebrating their achievements!

The situation in which RE A-level finds itself now is thus a very different one? not a simple part of an on-going process? and if students ever really were those intellectual paragons, the changes in the broader sixth form system mean that they aren't now, and they won't be. But they are very often individual thinkers, who are prepared to actively engage with the ideas. So I think that we have to deal with that, we have to be creative and adapt, and learn from each other because all the complaining in the world isn't going to change it. I'll be exploring some of the changes that we have made in more detail later on.

Some of the expectations of higher education were made very clear by speakers at the conference. It is clear that they want enquiring and able young people, with the study skills that they need to do well, but there are other issues of expectation to be considered here too? in particular the expectations that it might be reasonable for teachers to have of higher education institutions. Much more needs to be done to help teachers advise students as to the courses that they might want to do: it would be very useful to have easy access to some important information, such as more detailed explanations of the courses offered, and some information about the teaching time and assessments. But this

information is very hard to get; it isn't discussed on department websites, and isn't there is prospectuses either. As Natasha Pyne's paper pointed out at the conference, unimaginative, out of date or inaccurate departmental websites do little for the public image of a department (particularly when aimed at a generation where ICT usage comes naturally). Imagine that you have children at this academic level. Would the two pages in your prospectus or on the website really help them to make a good decision about the course or institution? A good decision doesn't mean that they necessarily come to your university? many of those who leave courses do so because they have picked the wrong place, and we could reduce this by helping students to make the right decisions at the start. We also need to think hard about the relationships that we have across this divide. Academics need to ask themselves, 'How many A-level teachers have I had direct contact with in the last year?' (And of course, the same is true for A-level teachers).

This business of guiding students to make the best decisions is very hard, even if you are plugged into academia. Every year I chat with my PhD supervisors about where to send people who are particularly interested in, say, Eastern religions or Continental philosophy, and every year all they are able to tell me is 'So and so at such and such is good at that', which is all very well, but we all know that the big names, the people who have written the big books are probably not going to be teaching first year undergraduates!

The final pressure that we need to consider is that of teacher expertise. This falls, I think, into two categories; firstly, the fact that no teacher was ever taught 'how to teach A-level'?you pick this up on the hoof, usually basing it on your own experiences of learning at this level and university (which frequently means lecturing). There is an element of self-fulfilling prophecy here too?it is only human nature to use the methods that are most familiar to you. You will associate them with your own success, and assume that success from others will automatically follow; hence there is a tendency to limit the breadth of individuals who can easily access this teaching. These teaching styles may be really successful for a certain type of learner, and totally opaque for another. Maybe the same is true for university teachers too?I suspect it may be. Secondly, lots of people teaching RE do not have any post A-level experience of the subject. (According to the National Foundation for Educational Research, the NFER, that is 53% of all RE teachers). You only have to look at on line fora?the Times Educational Supplement for example, to be confronted by the pleas of people who are way out of their depths teaching at A-level. Which means that where A-level teaching is not confident, it will inevitably rely on lectures (or commercially produced PowerPoints that the teachers themselves may not understand). This in turn is built upon the status of the subject that I mentioned earlier?recent applicants at my school for a job that specified teaching A-level Philosophy include missionaries with no teaching qualification and archaeologists. However, with the recent, highly publicised, appointment of Tony Blair at Yale it seems that not even universities are immune to the idea that a lack of relevant qualifications are no bar to teaching RE.

So those are some of the pressures and I'm sure that we're all familiar with them?which raises the question of how we move on from here. How do we adapt and survive? I would like to offer some ideas, and please remember, as I'm just a grunt in the trenches, these are just things that I've piloted in my department, which I would like to offer as food for thought?certainly for those of you who teach at A-level, and they may have some implications for university teaching to o.

The obvious place to start is 'learning and teaching' (note the 'right on' way I've expressed this?'Learning then Teaching', because, fundamentally, learning comes first!) At my school we have been thinking very hard about this for quite a long time. We're a high achieving institution, rated 'Outstanding in every category' by OFSTED, which has left us with the conundrum of how we continue to develop. We've had a lot of input as a staff on new ideas about learning, with INSET from Alistair Smith and Guy Claxton, and while the theoretical ideas that these speakers gave us were fantastic, we never really gained practical strategies. About three years ago, a colleague and I visited the 'Learning Brain Europe' conference, and encountered the work of the American educationalist Spencer Kagan. We were really excited by Kagan's methodology of 'Cooperative Learning'<sup>1</sup> and have been working with this in school ever since?not just within our own departments, but spreading this as good practice throughout the school. The Kagan approach to cooperative learning is one that, while based upon sound, well-thought out principles, is ideal for the classroom teacher, as there are a large number of content-free structures that enable information to be processed in various ways by students (simultaneously working on other features of the hidden curriculum?emotional intelligence, social sk

ills, etc.) The key ideas of these structures are that students benefit from working with each other, that they are accountable for taking part, that everyone takes part equally, and that all this goes on at the same time. Anyone who has taught at any level will be familiar with what Kagan calls the 'hogs and logs' who crop up in the classroom and seminar room where group work is happening?the hog is the one with all the opinions and enthusiasm, the log is the one who will sit there and let the hog get on with it (in both cases for a variety of reasons). Using Kagan structures enables teachers to empower students by getting rid of the hogs and logs in their class, and ensuring that everyone takes part.

There is quite a lot of specious reference to neuroscience in education at the moment (the recent 'discrediting' of brain-gym being an example), but there are many ways in which the Kagan approach enables students to learn in a 'brain-friendly' way, that is, in the way that their brains are naturally inclined to learn, rather than enforcing something from outside. We use them across all age ranges, and I've been amazed that they work so well with sixth formers, but we do have two advantages here:1) some aspects of the structures are so uncool that they are cool, and 2) you can take a meta-learning approach and explain to sixth formers why these techniques will help them learn.

At this point in the conference presentation, in order to give participants at the conference the experience, we reviewed some of the points made above about the pressures on A-level RE, using a Kagan structure called 'Timed Pair Share'. (The following description, while accurate, does not really get across the experience). Having paired the participants up, pairs were asked to identify who would be Person A and Person B (Person A being the person whose birthday was nearest). Person A was asked to speak for thirty seconds on some of those issues, while Person B listened. At the end of the time, Person B would then have to praise person A for their participation, paraphrase what they had said, and add one thing that was missed. Roles were then reversed, and at the end of the structure, participants were given a 'farewell gambit'?asked to shake hands and say 'Thanks, I really enjoyed working with you'. Now, we need to think about why this is a good way to work. To begin with this structure embodies all of Kagan's principles? everyone takes part (compare that to your last seminar experience) for a set amount of time, in a structured way?but there are many other features as well.

It is important to note as well that this technique enables students to take part safely, in the sense that by only working with one other person students will feel less exposed. When teaching in a whole class it is easy to forget that speaking in public is a great fear (indeed, according to a recent poll in America, the greatest?even more so than death). Brain science suggests that a reason for this lies in the amygdala, the body's threat sensor, that triggers the fight or flight reflex (with the resulting hormonal release that causes increased respiration and heartbeat, as well as a lowering of cognitive function). One of the main things that trigger this process is the experience of being surrounded by faces, particularly unfamiliar ones. If we expect students to be able to overcome this perfectly natural process, and speak confidently to large groups, then this kind of technique is vital method of desensitizing, which can have a huge effect in increasing confidence.

This technique also helps with learning?in Stahl's model of the mind<sup>2</sup> there is a 'place' called the 'working memory', where we can hold and manipulate a very limited number of ideas. Information from here is either rejected, or placed in long term memory (for our purposes as teachers?'learned'). By revisiting material using this kind of structure students are given the opportunity to process the ideas that they have been taught, which in turn will increase the likelihood of them learning and understanding. Common sense and our own bitter experience tell us that the best way to learn something is to repeat it over and over again. These structures enable us to do this in a comparatively painless way.

Without this opportunity to process, students will find it comparatively difficult to learn, and it may also militate against further learning. We all have the experience of arriving at work on a Monday morning, all stressed as we have a thousand things to do. Our tactic for dealing with this is to write a list, which makes us less stressed (because we have emptied our working memory?not because we have actually done anything about those things!)

On the most basic level, getting the students to stand up and move around, and interact will also just increase energy

in a tired group; which in and of itself can be very important. Research done in the US in the sixties suggested that social interaction would radically improve retention<sup>3</sup> and learning. This drove the vogue for 'group work' that was such a part of Western education in the seventies, but actually (mainly due to Hogs and Logs), this was not that successful. Using Kagan Structures enables us to help students drive up into the kinds of experiences that really promote extremely effective learning. This was recently recognized in our last OFSTED report, where the inspectors commented; 'The emphasis upon these methods encourages collaborative and co-operative working so even the youngest students are articulate and self-assured, and take responsibility for their learning'<sup>4</sup>. This is particularly valuable for the A-level teacher who has a great deal of material to cover in a short amount of time, but it is not without its difficulties. Some teachers will fear the democratization of the class room that follows this kind of practice? a noisy, busy classroom might be acceptable for year 7s, but is it appropriate for year 13? (Well, I obviously think it is? if there is good learning going on!)

The next significant point to consider is the all important one of study skills. Everyone knows that they're really important, and I know that most sixth form providers are excellent at helping students with this? but this seems odd, as most universities are really good at it too! If we're doing such a good job, why does it need to be repeated? There is, I think, a very simple answer to this question? because they are taught in a generic way, there is a lack of embedding. What I mean here is that study skills are taught in 'Study Skills' sessions, which are generic? so that they can be used to support study in different areas. Experience suggests that study skills need to be taught embedded into what we're doing. An example of a practice that we used to support sixth formers who are learning to write essays illustrates this principle of embedding. We will begin by working together on one bit of the essay; say the introduction. We will start with a brainstorming exercise (Kagan's 'Centrepiece' is ideal!) to establish the kind of ideas that we might expect to see; in this case, the context that an examiner might want, as well as any key ideas that might be needed to overview the topic. Having done this, students will then have a limited amount of time (about five minutes) to write their own introduction. Then we will critique one another's papers. Each student passes their paper to the left, and receives a new one. On this they will have to write one suggestion to improve it and one thing that they think is poor, (and additionally, although this is not written, think about any ideas, and this could be well-polished turns of phrase, that they might want to pinch for their own writing). By the time that their paper returns, they will have seen at least three others, and have three sets of critiques? which will then set them up for doing a good job. They are then sent home to write their own 'good introduction'. Over a period of about two weeks, we work on 'bits' of the essay (which again models an expectation that an essay is something that takes time and revisiting? rather than something dashed off for a deadline). When the final work is submitted and marked, students put their finished product up on the Moodle VLEs, and there is an expectation that they will look at, mark, and critique another five essays. These notes are then referred to as an initial step when the next essay is set. This enables more able students to really polish their work, less able students to see what a good example looks like, and everyone to improve through working together. As we move through the year some of the scaffolding is removed (certainly before writing), although the expectation of reviewing and critiquing others work remains consistent. We expect teachers to improve by sharing good practice, and my experience suggests that this helps students as well!

The same is true for research skills? we expect students to be able to gather information from various resources, and use it to justify their arguments, but how often do we give them the tools to do this? The Internet means that they are in an almost info-toxic environment. There is so much information, and they will often read things that are so clearly written that they can feel 'how can I put it better?' So they don't, they just pinch it.

I would suggest that a good approach is to work together to take notes from various sources, and then put them into a personal structure: adding the additional step of modelling extracting information will help them to break their bizarre addiction to Wikipedia. A useful tool here is Inspiration<sup>6</sup>? this software enables diagrams to be generated quickly and easily; students can be using this confidently within ten minutes? by modelling the extraction of the information that we need, then putting it into a different structure, and then using it to write, we model the addition of that extra step, and help to enable proper research. Of course this use of diagrams also helps support visual learners? and the great advantage is if you prefer a more traditional set of notes, they are only a click away.

Getting students to develop the skill of independent reading is a real toughie?and I have to confess that I haven't cracked it?although setting reading using photocopied text and expecting highlighting and notes is a good step in the right direction.

ICT offers a lot to RE, especially through videos; if we can't take students to see the evening aarti at Varanasi, we can at least find them a video of it on the Internet. The fact that most school ICT blocks YouTube is nothing short of a scandal?the potential for using video in the classroom in a really positive way is enormously increased when you have instant access to such a wide range of short clips, which can be used on the hoof if necessary. There are ways round this of course? using independent sites to produce Flash movies of a video that can be downloaded & put into PowerPoint for example (although YouTube is in the process of upgrading to mp4 which will enable direct downloading). ICT also offers us the potential to network widely?not yet officially exploited terribly well at A level (the exam boards for example have not yet caught onto the idea of 'official' online discussion boards), though my students (most of whom live in villages, remote from one another) do use MSN to communicate when they are working.

I'm beginning to develop online resources for students in Second Life?this is an online virtual world that is rapidly becoming attractive both to business and education as a new frontier that is worthy of development. Many universities are already developing materials for this, but you can make your own?!I've designed and built the Devandrashika Hindu Temple, an online, virtual temple. Clicking on features of the temple enables links to over 150 videos & webcams, notecards for artefacts and figures, opportunities to discuss with devotees, and to cooperate on essays out of class. For example, if your avatar stands next to the Linga in front of the Shiva Shrine, and you click on it, you will receive a note card about 'What a Linga is', as well as a link to YouTube video of linga puja, and the Vishwanath temple webcam. I have encountered my A-level students (or at least, their avatars) here in discussion with an American Vedanta teacher & German Iskcon devotee. This is still an experiment though?and I've yet to really integrate it effectively into the schemes of work, although I'm optimistic that it offers a great deal more than the usual VLE (which at the end of the day, is really only a sophisticated electronic way of saying 'Here's a worksheet').

To return to the starting point; I'm trying to suggest that to work effectively with the students that we are getting, we need to start thinking in a different way?spoonfeeding (or scaffolding as I would prefer to call it) is not a bad thing, but the starting point that will enable us to build up to individual critical thinking. We all need training wheels and support to begin with?to help us to reach the stage where we can crank our Ducati right over on a hard corner.

Some of the ideas that I've talked about may seem wacky, or certainly pushing the boundaries of what you might like to do in a classroom / lecture theatre / seminar room, but as Einstein said: 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, while expecting different results', so if we know that we are not satisfied with the situation as things are now, we need to do something about it! In a way, to return to my original analogy, we need to screw our courage to the sticking post, and be prepared to go over the top into unexplored territory if we are going to push forward.

Where do we go from here? I believe that establishing dialogue is the key. This conference is a good start, but we all need to make more effort to network effectively?start genuine conversations between university and school departments so we can help students make the right decisions, work together to influence policy, ensure continuity of experience and content?let us try to avoid forcing all students to repeat material that they may have covered at A-level, and share good practice about teaching and learning. We need to think about creating opportunities for genuine learning conversations?and sharing our experiences more broadly and more often, inviting academics into schools, and teachers into universities!

## Endnotes

1 Key text is Kagan, S., **Cooperative Learning**, (Kagan Publishing: San Clemente, 1994). Also see <http://www.kaganonline.com/>.

2 Sousa, D., **How the Brain Learns**, (Corwin Press: Thousand Oaks California, 2001) p 38.

3 Ibid., p. 95.

4 OFSTED inspection report 13/2/08: [http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/portal/site/Internet/menuitem.7c7b38b14d870c7bb1890a01637046a0/?event=getReport&urn=113521&inspectionNumber=311304&providerCategoryID=8192&fileName=school113s5rti\\_113\\_521\\_20080306.xml](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/portal/site/Internet/menuitem.7c7b38b14d870c7bb1890a01637046a0/?event=getReport&urn=113521&inspectionNumber=311304&providerCategoryID=8192&fileName=school113s5rti_113_521_20080306.xml)

5 Free VLE system, available at <http://moodle.org/>.

6 Download a free trial at <http://www.inspiration.com/>, a UK based blog. For examples of the way we have used this tool, see: <http://taglearning.com/blog/inspired/2008/03/03/inspiration-in-religiouseducation/#more-31>.

7<http://secondlife.com/>

8<http://slurl.com/secondlife/Anglia/91/30/21>

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