

## Going Beyond the Textbook

### Implementing Philosophy in the RE classroom

“In the Phaedrus Plato has Socrates say that *true philosophy cannot be done through the written word*. After all books can’t answer back, they can’t qualify or clarify or reply to objections. No, for Socrates, true philosophy can only be done through a living, breathing, conversation.”

(Peter Worley ‘Plato not Playdoh’, TEDx Talks)

In November 2014, Tim Oats wrote a paper ‘Why Textbooks Count’ which prompted the now Minister of State for Schools, Nick Gibb, to call for a “renaissance” of high quality textbooks in England's classrooms. Textbooks are certainly to be found lacking in this country. I would argue that it is not a ‘renaissance’ which is needed, but banishment.

One of the issues I have found teaching Philosophy within the framework of Secondary Religious Education is that textbooks over-simplify material. Don’t get me wrong. Textbooks are a brilliant *support material* for pupils’ learning and teachers’ planning. But. Textbooks often over-simplify material and this can leave pupils without the chance to engage with more complex ideas and terminology.

It is a problem which goes beyond my subject. As teachers, getting the best out of our pupils means spending time extending and reinventing existing support materials so that our lessons might give them access to their content in an imaginative and relevant way.

One philosophy textbook I, regrettably, handed out to my Year 11 group last year stated in its blurb that, by using it, both teacher and students can be ‘absolutely confident that that they are learning **what we want** them to learn and following the course **as our examiners intended**’. It is a sad but telling summary. Textbooks are prescriptive, containing lifeless information designed for passing the test. What love of wisdom is that?

I recently gave a demonstration on this theme at the Leeds Philosophy in Schools with Students Conference. It is essential to extend the learning of pupils beyond the textbook if genuine philosophical enquiry is to be achieved. Textbooks do a good job of packaging pre-determined content in a concise manner through words to read, pictures to look at and written exercises to complete. They do a great job of holding factual material in one place for reference. They inform my planning. They fill up my classroom shelves.

They were intended for pupils, but are rarely used by this target audience. I cannot imagine what radical change in their content would persuade me to change this. Ultimately they would still be books; useful vessels for the history of ideas. But no more use than that.

Kath Jones, founder of Blooming Minds, touched on this point in her talk earlier in the day. She called philosophy an ‘outlaw subject’. I agree with this description. Indeed, it is a dangerous game to create a methodology for teaching philosophy as this would require learning objectives and assessment outcomes; things which seem dangerously in contention with the critical nature of such

enquiries. In other words, if we take the nature of philosophy to include being 'Responsive, Reflective, Reasoned and Re-evaluative', the textbook falters.

The same is true for subjects other than philosophy. An English Language textbook cannot extend the learning for the gifted and talented. A Science textbook cannot break down concepts more simply for those receiving learning support. A Maths textbook cannot check a pupil has understood.

Going beyond the textbook enables engagement with concepts at a potentially deeper level, provides new learning opportunities for pupils and supports the understanding of each individual. Such things cannot be achieved by any 'renaissance' of the written word. What is needed is conversation.

<http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/181744-why-textbooks-count-tim-oates.pdf>

<https://philosophyfoundation.wordpress.com/2015/07/24/response-to-tom-bennett-on-tes-blog-philosophy-for-children/>

<http://www.philosophersmag.com/index.php/tpm-mag-articles/11-essays/50-how-to-philosophise-with-children>

<http://www.sapere.org.uk/>

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects/philosophy-for-children/>