

MAKING MUTINEERS? Reimagining religious education for the promotion of virtuous digital citizenship



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MSc in Education (Digital and Social Change) 2024

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Abstract

A growing body of research shows the dangers of digitalisation and datafication, not just for individuals but for our species and the planet as a whole. Young people increasingly need new skills and knowledge to navigate this digital world morally. By drawing on literature around digital citizenship, literacy and other associated terms, this dissertation develops the concepts of *virtuous digital citizenship* and *practical digital wisdom*, employing the metaphor of sailors navigating a complex world. This is used to distinguish between digital instrumentalism and digital citizenship and as a way to consider the role of curriculum designers in helping young people not simply understand the digital world, but make it better – by mutiny, if they must.

The case is then made for a reimagining of religious education (RE) in England to lead the way in this. I argue that RE could do this while still retaining its academic credentials and its crucial role in personal development and community cohesion. By focusing on RE's contribution to educating young people to be active and engaged adults, RE can also set an example for other subjects across English secondary schools. This is supported both by a comprehensive review of the literature and through the thematic analysis of fourteen qualitative interviews with fifteen professionals working in RE curriculum design in England.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my participants for their time and their enthusiasm for RE and for this study. Special thanks also go to Nigel Fancourt and Liam Gearon for their guidance and encouragement, as well as Amy Harrison and Emily Dorrington for their suggestions on the text. I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Jeremy Knox, for his support and advice throughout this process, and to my parents, Julie and Gareth Tridgell, without whom this would not have been possible.

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Introduction

Finding a metaphor: two sailors on the same ship

Imagine two sailors, both working on ships from early childhood, surrounded by the sea on small worlds of wood, iron and sailcloth. The first sailor is good at his work. He knows the rhythms of the ship and what is expected of him by his superiors. He does not engage much with the rest of the crew, focusing on getting what he needs out of his time aboard; nor does he ponder the trade that supports him, its ecosystem of wealth and exploitation. His maritime knowledge is shallow, except where it directly affects him, as is his concern for how his life might affect the cultures that crowd around and upon the ocean. He accepts this ignorance, consciously and unconsciously. His approach to the sea is purely instrumental, a means to an end.

Like the first sailor, the second knows her work well, but she pays *attention*, not just to the ship, but to the crew as well. She knows the patterns in the waves and the weather, where her ship comes from and where it is going, the intricate system of trade routes that sustains her and it; she knows what cargo her crew are stewarding, whose money is being risked and whose is being earned. She dreams of and plans for a world that is fairer and better; she will be a captain one day – by mutiny if she must – and in this becoming, she will draw deeply on her seagoing citizenship.

Here, the world of the sailor represents the digital or online realm, navigated by anyone who accesses the internet. Schober (2014) has shown the richness of the ocean as “one of the leading metaphors for the internet” in her analysis of Castells’ *Network Society* (2004, p3), citing terms like *navigate*, *surf* and *cyber* (derived from the Greek ‘steersman’), arguing that this is because the sea is both enlivening and dangerous, like the internet itself. The first sailor, with his competencies and his skill, represents digital instrumentalists, those who use the internet and digital media under the assumption that such use is (a) morally neutral (b) independent of anyone or anything else. This person either chooses to ignore the issues of justice in their online life, or perhaps has been blinded to it through long exposure, indoctrination or lack of education, but otherwise exists quite ably, even successfully, using

Google and Office and maybe even ChatGPT, accepting cookies and signing away data. He might be aware of some of the personal dangers that come with being online, the risks from the sharks, storms and pirates that might be seen in malware, catfishers and hackers. The second sailor represents the virtuous digital citizen, a term that is itself contested, but that I argue offers the best way of encapsulating a panoply of terms related to a critical awareness of what it means to be online, including those related to literacy. This kind of internet-user is aware of more than the first. She recognises the power structures underpinning her life online and the ways that she impacts others, as well as the deeper dangers she might face herself. She has not turned away from this, but seeks to make it more just. She exhibits the “radical digital citizenship” described by Emejulu & McGregor (2016) and the Aristotelian practical wisdom applied to technology by Vallor (2016). This citizenship goes beyond membership of a country, to that envisioned in Ancient Greece, where citizenship implied power and responsibility (Román, 2010).

I will use this metaphor throughout this dissertation. However, I recognise that the use of metaphors can be complex, especially when they are uninterrogated, as shown by Botha (2009), who counsels care in their use. Weller (2022), specifically considers those used in edtech, arguing that these can be used to make sense of complicated ideas, even if there are some risks of oversimplification. However, Sfard (1998) warns against becoming so committed to a metaphor that theory becomes distorted. Metaphors should be contested (Cowan & Rault, 2022) and in using mine, I am aware that I am potentially setting up a binary model along the lines of good user/bad user, instrumentalist/citizen. This is evidently reductionist, given that most people will exist on a scale between these two extremes. Moreover, the second sailor is highly aspirational – it is important not to see anyone who falls short of her as immoral. Indeed, this is a challenge found in the use of virtue ethics – Aristotle recognised that achieving this practical wisdom was exceptionally difficult (nd). This metaphor should be seen as a useful way of imagining digital citizenship, but no more than this.

Why this, why now, why me?

Patel (2015) proposes these questions for all researchers engaging in justice-oriented work. They offer a useful framing not just because digital citizenship is a social justice issue (Emejulu & McGregor, 2016), but because they allow me to articulate why I have chosen this topic and to situate it within RE. “Why me?” will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Why this?

Much of everyday life is experienced digitally; this is evident in how people communicate, shop, consume media, even date. This is closely related to the rise of datafication, which Cieslik & Margócsy (2022) describe as the “reduction of phenomena into abstract entities into a database...[that] can be used and reused for new purposes across surprisingly long periods of time.” (p355) Simply put, datafication refers to turning material actions and individuals into numerical, non-material forms that can be analysed. Most people today have an online layer to their existence, which requires a new way of thinking about ourselves and how we interact with and through the digital, especially as many people are unaware of their own data shadow (Zuboff, 2019), never mind the potential repercussions of their digital life (Emejulu & McGregor, 2016). Research has also shown that young people are often overwhelmed by technology and in need of support (Aagard, 2022), and the riots following recent tragic events in Southport have shown, once again, the dangers of engaging uncritically with the online world, especially when this intersects with the abuse of AI and racist rhetoric (Quinn & Milmo, 2024).

Why now?

Scholars have written on datafication (e.g. Zuboff, 2019; Eubanks, 2019) and the need for new ways of thinking about this (e.g. Emejulu & McGregor, 2016; Vallor, 2016). However, there could be more guidance that links these explicitly to curriculum design and teaching children to be moral users of digital technology. Religious education (RE) offers an exciting way to think about this. Although I am an RE teacher, I have chosen this subject primarily because of its unique “liminoid” position in the curriculum (Lundie, 2018, p2) and the potential affordances this might allow.

Structure

Chapter 1 of this dissertation reviews the literature in two parts. The first focuses on how digital citizenship has been imagined, beginning with the key challenges associated with digitalisation and datafication, then analysing different ways of approaching the way we understand or engage with this, including the “Digital Native” trope, digital literacy and digital citizenship, before finishing with Emejulu & McGregor’s (2016) *radical digital citizenship*. The second considers the current landscape of RE in England, different views of the subject’s *telos* and how this might be linked to digital citizenship. In Chapter 2, I begin with the theoretical framework for *virtuous digital citizenship* and my research questions, followed by my methodology, drawing on critical realism, non-extractivist epistemologies and feminism. I then explain my decision to use semi-structured qualitative interviews as testimony (Ahmed, 2021) and the codes I generated through thematic analysis. In Chapter 3, I discuss the findings from my interviews through four core themes: *Every job is RE’s job*; *Regulation, regulation, regulation*; *All roads lead to...*; *Learning about digital, learning from digital*. This is followed by my conclusion, which explains how RE can be reimagined to lead the way on digital citizenship considering the literature and my research.

Chapter 1: A Review of the Literature.

A range of terms exist to describe or make sense of existing online, of which “digital citizen” is only one. An analysis of how this has been imagined¹ and how this compares to other terms is the focus of the Part 1 of this literature review. As noted by Pangrazio and Sefton-Green (2021), most of these have developed in parallel, rather than in dialogue, which means that there is often a great deal of overlap.² Though some of these distinctions may seem semantic, their use does matter; the words researchers and policymakers choose are never neutral, especially in discussions around power and justice (Dewandre, 2019). Each of these terms carries discursive characteristics; they are not merely descriptive (Selwyn, 2009) and assuming they are ignores the way that they have been used by policymakers and other actors from qualification providers like Pearson (Deegan and Martin, 2018) to financial technology innovators (Davies et al, 2022). In Part 2, I will examine the role of RE in English secondary schools and how this might relate to digital citizenship education.

Part 1: How has digital citizenship been imagined in the literature?

Sharks, storms and pirates: the dangers and challenges of living with digital technology

The urgent need for digital citizenship education is most clearly shown in concerns related to digitalisation and datafication. These range from risks for individuals to the ways in which inequalities for marginalised people and the suffering of people in the Global South are exacerbated.

Selwyn (2009), in his evisceration of the “Digital Native” trope, found that young people are often left disempowered by new technologies, a view recently corroborated by Aagard (2022). Children and adults are also increasingly shaped or manipulated by technology. Algorithms can negatively discipline our minds and bodies (Dixon-Román et al, 2020) and

¹ I use the term “imagined” here to emphasise the way these terms are created or made – this term better captures this than “described”, a view influenced by Alcoff’s (2022) understanding of knowledge as *made* and by Becker and Bronk’s (2022) discussion of narrative.

² There is some debate over the use of the word digital in this context. Carmi et al (2020) prefer the term *data*, while Garcia & Lee (2020) use *computational*. I am using digital because for me it encompasses both the algorithms implied by *data* and the physical technology associated with *computational*.

the advent of surveillance capitalism raises concerns about individuals' privacy, as their data is recorded, collected and sold, often without their informed consent (Zuboff, 2019). The digital world expedites misinformation, malinformation and disinformation (Carmi et al, 2020), especially through social media (Agosto & Oltmann, 2022). This has been made even more apparent in riots taking place across England, ostensibly triggered by tragic events in Southport but driven by online misinformation (Quinn & Milmo, 2024).

Several important studies have shown how digitalisation and datafication can exacerbate inequalities, leading to manifest harms. Noble (2018) documents how Google racialises and sexualises Black girls, while Eubanks (2019) shows the ways that being repeatedly datafied puts disadvantaged or poor families under much greater scrutiny than others. D'Ignazio & Klein (2020) examine how women's experiences are hidden in datafied societies, allowing one group's experience to be promoted over another; this is worsened when oppressions intersect (ref. Collins, 2009).

Even if the first sailor has a rudimentary awareness of some of these immediate issues, there are other areas that are left invisible, often because they are happening far away to other people. Emejulu & McGregor (2016) describe the growing impact of server farms and technological waste on the climate crisis, as well as the human rights abuses associated with extracting resources like coltan. This distance is also temporal, with this process likely to have enormous ramifications for future generations, whether that be through climate disasters or the impact of AI (MacAskill, 2022).

Despite the breadth of this research, there is strikingly little engagement with the dangers of a life online. As Eubanks notes, the "cheerleaders of this new regime" have systematically failed to even acknowledge these problems, let alone attempt to offer solutions (2019, p9).

We can be better: a warning against skills-based narratives

It is tempting, given this litany of woes, to be pessimistic in the face of these challenges and dangers – to simply let the storm hit. However, while the literature can be bleak, there is room for positivity. Teaching young seafarers to emulate the second sailor is itself a hopeful endeavour, an attempt to mitigate these dangers and build a safer, fairer and kinder world.

The literature reflect this, for example in Selwyn & Facer's (2021) call for non-stupid optimism in relation to technology and education. However, this is undermined by narratives which ignore the challenges posed by digitalisation and datafication in favour of a skills-based, uncritical approach that valorises the first sailor's attitude to the ocean.

The term "narrative" is deliberately chosen, inspired by Becker & Bronk's (2022) contention that grand stories like capitalism are imagined, not fixed, arguing that "the future envisaged is not, as is commonly assumed... a straightforward shadow of the past" (p279). Castells (2004) similarly rejects deterministic views of technology, arguing "historical evolution is an open-ended, conflictive process." (p14)³ This also coincides with other critiques, e.g. Oliver (2016), who notes that technology/tools are reifications of human values, not neutral artefacts. This is significant for discussions of digital citizenship, given that this term, as used by Emejulu & McGregor (2016), is oriented to social justice and critiques of inequality, directly challenging the examples of Prensky (2001; 2012) and Deegan & Martin (2018) critiqued below.

Prensky's (2001) controversial "Digital Native/Immigrant" dichotomy positions the digital as a skill to be possessed and that this possession is a definite and uncritical good. This view of digital skills has become endemic (Selwyn, 2009), despite its flaws. Prensky (2012) argues that young people are "Natives", able to confidently use digital technology in a way that older generations ("Immigrants") cannot. Indeed, when older generations do attempt to do so, they are mocked for their laughable accents, though "smarter Immigrants" will try and become digital anyway (2012, p71). Not only are the xenophobic overtones of this framing disconcerting (Bayne & Ross, 2011), but it is also untrue – young people are often overwhelmed by technology and may well be relatively unskilled in its use, while teachers and adults have relevant and applicable skills and knowledges (Selwyn, 2009). They need education on existing digitally. Prensky's framing sees the digital as neutral in itself, with no recognition of the dangers of this for the "Natives" who use it.

³ There are interesting links to philosophy here, especially the work of libertarians like Sartre (1947) or the relationship between religion and technology discussed by Weber (2001).

As Selwyn notes, being a “Digital Native” becomes a prerequisite for employability, thus shifting the focus of digital education from social change to providing a service. It is useful to consider the role of skill-development and career preparation on the concept of digital citizenship. Certainly, I do not envisage digital citizens being without these workplace skills; both the first and second sailor are skilled in their work, after all. However, the literature shows that an account of digital citizenship needs to contend with the more instrumentalist approach of the first sailor, which sees digital education as primarily about economic productivity. In *Demand-Driven Education*, a report funded by Jobs for the Future (a US-based not-for-profit) and Pearson (a multinational profit-making education company) Deegan & Martin (2018) champion the development of digital skills, with no consideration for ethics or responsible citizenship. Like Prensky (2001), they position digitalisation as inevitable and always desirable, with a strong emphasis on preparing young people for the world of work rather than democratic engagement or personal development (ref. Biesta, 2006; Poquet & De Laat, 2021). This is problematic for how we teach young people about living digital lives and for education more generally. Prensky (2001) and Deegan & Martin (2018) offer a reductionist digital education that lacks any critical depth.

Digital citizenship: beyond literacy and passivity

“Digital literacy” is a common term in the literature; this can be useful, but is ultimately less helpful than citizenship. This is partly due to the challenge of using linguistic metaphors given the pervasiveness of Prensky’s “Native/Immigrant” (2001). Moreover, speaking in terms of literacy, given the ways in which literacy is used in UK schools as a proxy for skills like reading and writing (e.g. DfE, 2018), arguably promotes the problematic skills-based emphasis critiqued above, even if this is not how the term is used by scholars.

Pangrazio has demonstrated not just the amorphousness of this term’s origin (Pangrazio et al, 2020) but also that the variety of terms have developed simultaneously (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2021). This is central to the problem of “digital literacy” as a term. In some senses, it can be seen as the underpinning for digital citizenship, that which allows the individual to become a critical engager with the online world in which they participate, a view

that seems to be taken by Pangrazio & Sefton-Green (2021). Carmi et al (2020) also frame literacy as the basis for citizenship. However, literacy is also shown to go beyond skills to include critical thinking, e.g. in Pangrazio et al's (2020) comparison of the English "digital literacy" with the Norwegian "bildung", a term that carries a far greater connotation of coming into adulthood than we might associated with the term "literate" in English. This sense is also found in Garcia & Lee's (2020) use of "critical computational literacy". However, this critical sense is better found in digital citizenship, given the way that this encompasses the democratic requirements of education (ref Biesta, 2006; Poquet & De Laat, 2021), as I will explain below.

Like literacy and other similar terms, there are different interpretations of what is meant by "digital citizenship." Much of this incorporates the criticality used in some of the works on literacy above but can also go beyond this. Pangrazio & Sefton-Green (2021) argue this comes from older discussions about what it means to be a citizen, noting that there is no agreed definition of citizen, though it carries connotations of being part of something beyond the individual. This is especially important in English schools, where there are requirements to promote "fundamental British values", citizenship and spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) education, even if these make no explicit links between existing digitally and citizenship (DfE, 2013; DfE, 2014). Pangrazio & Sefton-Green (2020) show that expectations for democratic citizenship have moved from simply voting to actively engaging in society, as well as how people see themselves as more than citizens of a single country – they are members of many groups or demographics, often supranational. This is both a strength and a weakness of "citizenship" as a term: its broadness could allow individuals to think of themselves as citizens of the "world" rather than one nation, challenging parochiality with the assistance of global connectivity via the internet. However, this can also mean the concept becomes increasingly meaningless while demonstrating just how hard it is to regulate supranational organisations. In this sense, citizenship is more of a philosophical than legal term; it becomes "as much a question of ontology... as it is a question of beliefs, understandings of actions" (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2020, p21). This is not necessarily a

problem, but it does require clear explanations for how this might be enacted, especially for educators.

Radical digital citizenship as a challenge

Emejulu and McGregor (2016) propose “radical digital citizenship”, a version of digital citizenship that may meet this requirement. They begin by examining the global challenges of the digital technology industry, as mentioned above, but go on to reimagine digital citizenship as radical action challenging hegemonic power structures for emancipation (Emejulu & McGregor, 2016). This challenges deterministic and skills-based narratives and builds on the criticality discussed above. They argue that digital citizenship has been depoliticised to become merely about navigating online, a view they argue is “synonymous with digital literacy” (Emejulu & McGregor, 2016, p132), though this does not necessarily seem a fair reflection of the literature. They claim that “by focusing on what is ‘new’, oftentimes the field of digital education has failed to ask, ‘who has power?’” (p133). They define radical digital citizenship as:

“A process by which individuals and groups committed to social justice critically analyse the social, political and economic consequences of digital technologies in everyday life and collectively deliberate and take action to build alternative and emancipatory technologies and technological practices.”
Emejulu & McGregor, 2016, p140.

This view aligns with Andreotti’s (2015) critique of movements that seek only “soft” or “radical” reform; she argues for “beyond-reform” that fundamentally alters the system, not acting solely within it. While this is laudable, it does raise practical questions, as does Emejulu & McGregor’s call above. Firstly, it overlooks the difficulty of even soft or radical reform, and that educators may have limited capacity to bring about “beyond-reform”; secondly, it does not make it clear what this would look like in practice. Emejulu & McGregor (2016) advocate for critically analysing existing technologies and building new ones based around emancipatory practices, but what does this mean for educators and curriculum designers? By looking at RE, it is possible to think about how this might play out in any subject, but also how this subject’s unique statutory framing could allow for it to lead the way in doing so.

Part 2: How could the telos of RE make it a unique site for promoting digital citizenship?

In the first part of this literature review, I have focused on the concept of digital citizenship. Here, the emphasis is on RE in England, in particular the challenges and affordances of its status within the curriculum and what this might mean for digital citizenship.

How does the landscape of English RE affect curriculum design?***The statutory landscape***

RE holds a unique “liminoid or threshold status” in England (Lundie, 2018, p2), which directly impacts on curriculum designers in secondary schools. This is reflected in the often confusing statutory landscape.

RE in England is statutory until the age of eighteen, though parents have the right to withdraw their children from lessons, but it is not a national curriculum subject (Fancourt, 2022). Standing Advisory Councils on RE (SACREs), made up of regional networks of faith leaders, educators and policymakers, develop locally agreed syllabuses which seek to mirror the makeup of the area, as well as national requirements that RE reflect that Britain is “in the main” a Christian country (Fancourt, 2022). There are 174 locally agreed syllabuses in England (Lundie, 2018), but this is not the limit of extant curriculums. England also operates a dual system of faith and non-faith schools (Fancourt, 2020). There are many types of faith schools, though the majority are Christian (Clayton et al, 2018). While statutory regulation on the provision of RE affects both types of school, faith schools can also offer confessional RE, i.e. RE that promotes a specific religious view (Clayton et al, 2018). The 2010 Academies Act further confuses matters, allowing academies (schools that are state funded but independent of local authority control) the right to choose or develop their own syllabus (Fancourt, 2022).

Lundie & O’Siochru (2021) found that not only do many school leaders fail to understand and meet the statutory requirements, concerns over the parental withdrawal of students on prejudiced grounds can mean that the quality of RE is affected. This complements findings from Smith et al (2018) that RE curriculums become focused on promoting unrealistic views of religion. This is also exacerbated by a dearth of specialists – Marshall (2023) found that

only 55% of RE teachers in secondary schools had a relevant qualification. All of this is likely to have an impact on curriculum design.

The non-statutory landscape

In addition to the often-labyrinthine statutory landscape, RE has also been shaped by non-statutory frameworks, including reports from subject organisations and Ofsted.

In 2018, the RE Council's Commission on RE published its report (hereafter the "CORE Report"): *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward – A National Plan for RE*. The RE Council has no statutory power, but this reimagining of the subject has had a broad impact on the profession and the Academy. The Report makes two central claims: first, that RE needs to be reimagined for 21st century Britain; second, that the best way to do that is to embrace Religion and Worldviews as a "new vision" for RE (RE Council, 2018, p3). More than simply a rebranding, this nomenclature outlines a new way of understanding the subject, emphasising that everyone has a worldview, whether they are conscious of this or not (O'Grady, 2023). However, there has also been a great deal of criticism of the Report within the Academy and the profession, especially in relation to what "counts" as a worldview and the ontological, philosophical and epistemological connotations of a "worldviews" approach. Barnes (2023) offers vociferous criticism, arguing this represents the secularisation of RE and a loss of the study of religion for its own sake; this view is upheld by Biesta & Hannan (2023). For some the Religion and Worldviews approach suggests a crucial and exciting paradigmatic shift, while for others it represents a rehashing of old, outdated ideas of RE (Barnes, 2023). This provides challenges for curriculum designers, especially those who may not have time or access to the various debates on this framework. It also potentially offers a new opportunity to reimagine the subject to include teaching for digital citizenship, especially given the role of the internet in shaping worldviews.

There have also been two key Ofsted reports on RE in recent years: *The Ofsted Research Review* (2021) and *Deep and Meaningful* (2024). Neither offer statutory guidance, though Ofsted acknowledges that these will be used in making judgements about RE in inspections (Ofsted, 2021). Despite this interest, RE is rarely a focus in secondary school inspections,

constituting only 5% of deep dives in 2022-2024, compared to 55% for history (Walker, 2023). *Deep and Meaningful* (Ofsted, 2024) focused on problems in RE, especially the impact of a lack of curriculum time and specialist teachers, while the *Research Review* (Ofsted, 2021) sought to give clear guidance on what “Good” RE looks like. The focus here was on the development of specific types of knowledge, as well as the use of “lenses” and “worldviews” in teaching about religion showing the role of Ofsted in shaping curriculum design and imagining RE. This is crucial for my research, showing that if RE is to take the lead on digital citizenship, it will likely need the support of Ofsted to do so, even if inspectors takes relatively little interest in RE in practice.

GCSE and A Level RS⁴ can also influence broader curriculum development and design in RE, providing non-statutory framings for what students should learn and be able to do, especially regarding assessment. Holt (2019) has shown how minority religious views are treated (or excluded) by these specifications and the subject content guidance produced by the government, and the impact of this on Key Stage 3 RE. Harris (2021) found that most history teachers were risk-averse in their curriculum design, focusing their KS3 planning on what might maximise student exam results; this chimes with the challenges of moving beyond the “big six” world religions described by Holt (2019). This suggests that any attempt to reimagine RE will need support from exam boards.

Debates around purpose in RE

In Aristotelian thought, *telos* refers to the final cause of an object – the goal with which it is concerned. The existence of a purpose implies a function, that which brings the *telos* about or is necessary for it to be achieved. This is fundamental to how RE is envisaged in the UK, especially given Ofsted’s emphasis on intent (O’Grady, 2023), so it is essential to consider how digital citizenship fits into the subject’s wider purpose(s).

⁴ GCSE and A Level qualifications are in “religious studies” rather than “religious education”. For an interesting discussion of this shift and its importance, see Cush (1999).

What are the current debates around the telos of RE?

“RE faced a multitude of often competing imperatives, exacerbated by pressures on time and resources. The core elements of learning about and learning from religions were often subservient to a range of social, civic and performative agendas.” *Lundie, 2018, p2*

This observation is important, especially given my focus on using RE as a vehicle to promote digital citizenship, including whether this is desirable, given the many burdens already placed on RE. “Learning about” and “learning from” refers to ideas developed by Grimmitt in the 1980s, which are still central to “RE’s professional imaginary” (Lundie & O’Siochru, 2021). O’Grady (2023) argues these are often oversimplified; in reality, the two are entangled. For Grimmitt, “learning about” refers to students gaining knowledge about the beliefs, practices and traditions of religions; “learning from” refers to what this education might help students learn about themselves, including their own beliefs and their own experiences (O’Grady, 2023). Rissanen et al (2024) situate this within a “liberal religious education” that prioritises pluralism while centering the experience of the child (p195). However, they consider this with some caution, arguing that this can sometimes mean that students’ religious knowledge becomes superficial (Rissanen et al, 2024). There is an interesting parallel here with concerns about extractivist epistemologies and the exploitation of the Global South (Alcoff, 2022). When religions are considered only for their use to young people’s own reflection, does this fail to recognise their worth in of themselves? Fujihara (2019) is critical of English RE textbooks’ presentation of Buddhism, for example, as unrealistic about the religion and promoting its use as a way of being peaceful. However, it is important to note (as O’Grady does, 2023) that this may be an unfair representation of “learning from”, given that this requires more than a superficial engagement with religions. Lundie (2018) presents Grimmitt’s objectives as core to RE.

There is debate about what students are meant to learn or develop through RE. Chan et al (2021) note the prevalence of argumentation skills within locally agreed syllabuses and that this sits within wider purposes of education related to critical thinking and higher order skills. This may be related to “learning from” or could be considered as a distinct skill. Ofsted’s *Research Review* (2021) offers three forms of knowledge: substantive knowledge;

ways of knowing; and personal knowledge. This is a clear articulation of purpose or *telos* – the development of these three forms of knowledge is fundamental to “good RE” (Ofsted, 2021).

Democratic engagement and community cohesion are often part of the purpose of RE (RE Council, 2021; Smith et al, 2018). The CORE report’s focus on worldviews is central to ideas of tolerance, as well as the belief that engaging with others’ worldviews (and why they hold them) can lead to a better understanding of one another in a pluralist world (O’Grady, 2023). Barnes is critical of attempts to use RE as a means to an end like community cohesion (O’Grady, 2023). This drive to use RE for social integration – and even social justice – is linked to the emphasis on community cohesion that followed the 2005 London bombings and subsequent initiatives like Prevent and Fundamental British Values (Lundie, 2018).

However, the duties related to Prevent and Fundamental British Values apply across the whole school, even if RE classrooms are sometimes asked to carry more than their share of the load (Lundie, 2018). However, RE can still have a wider *telos* like preparing young people for the world that includes deep knowledge of religion and a wider appreciation of issues related to social justice, such as those situated in digital citizenship.

Conclusion to the Literature Review

How might digital citizenship be linked to the telos of RE?

RE is rarely related to the development of digital skills, literacy or citizenship. In some cases, there are references to the importance of challenging misconceptions (e.g. Ofsted, 2021), which could be linked to concerns around misinformation more generally (Carmi et al, 2020). Rissanen et al (2024) reference RE’s role in understanding the climate crisis and there is a long history of linking RE to democracy and tolerance (O’Grady, 2023; Lundie, 2018). Where the digital does appear in official documentation, it is often related to skills being developed through computing for example, or wider ideas around democracy and engagement within citizenship education. However, the liminal nature of RE shows that it has the capacity to be reimagined, as has been attempted by the Commission on RE. This could include reimagining the subject as a means of making digital citizens. While there are

many issues facing the subject there is also a huge capacity for innovation (Lundie, 2018). This could allow RE to meet the need for digital citizenship education outlined in Part 1 of this literature review. By situating digital citizenship in RE, we can also show that this is more than the job of computing or PSHE, but is a whole-school responsibility. The second sailor needs to learn from everyone.

The literature offers a range of useful insights both into what could be meant by digital citizenship and the status and purpose of RE in England. Taken together, these demonstrate that there is a desperate need for the promotion of digital citizenship – especially a form of this that rejects deterministic or instrumentalist narratives typified by the first sailor – and that there is capacity in RE to lead the way in this. In the next chapter, I will propose an understanding of digital citizenship that draws on recent scholarship in virtue ethics, before outlining my research questions and methodology.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In this chapter I seek to develop a new understanding of digital citizenship, drawing on the literature already discussed in Chapter 1, as well as Aristotelian⁵ conceptions of citizenship and virtue. I make a case for the development of virtuous digital citizenship and practical digital wisdom. This leads to my research questions, my methodology and my methods. This is framed by virtue ethics more broadly, both in my conception of digital citizenship itself, but also in my use of critical realism.

Part 1: Virtuous digital citizenship

The revival of virtue ethics and its application to technology

Ethics is a core consideration within debates around digital and social change, though the use of virtue ethics is still developing. While some thinkers might advocate for a more deontological or normative framing (e.g. Perrotta, 2022), the case for the use of virtue ethics has been brilliantly made by Vallor (2016) in *Technomoral Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting*. This hopeful text uses Aristotelian ideas to imagine how to not simply live digitally, but to flourish, drawing on the common interpretation of “eudaimonia.” This has not happened in a vacuum; Plaisance (2013) earlier showed how Philippa Foot’s work might be applied to a life online, for example, recognising the role of Foot (and the other members of the Oxford Four: Midgely, Anscombe and Murdoch) in the revival of virtue ethics during the 20th century. Lipscomb (2021) charts the rise of the Oxford Four and how they came to embrace Aristotelian ideas, starting from the belief that the beneath the plurality of cultural norms there are certain shared ideas that exist objectively, e.g. that rudeness is universal vice. Plaisance applies Foot’s work to digital virtues like authenticity to “sketch the outlines of a neo-Aristotelian theory of digital flourishing that, rather than asserting moral imperatives, provides a standard of evaluation for moral behaviour” (2013, p1). This reflects long-standing criticisms of normative or rule-based theories like utilitarianism or Kantian

⁵ Several scholars have discussed the challenges with using Aristotle’s work today, given the ways in which his writings have been used to justify racism, colonialism and patriarchy (e.g. Hanchard, 2018). Here, I will follow in the tradition of many modern scholars in recognising both the potential contributions of Aristotelian thought, and the difficulties that can be associated with this (e.g. Vallor, 2016).

ethics (e.g. Macdonald & Beck-Dudley, 1984) in favour of character-based approaches that focus on developing a better ethos or way of being (Chamberlain, 1984).

Digital Phronimos

Aristotle makes several important claims, including that virtue is developed through practice, that it exists between vices of deficiency and excess and that it can be recognised in the natural world (Vallor, 2018). Most importantly, he develops the concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, and of the *phronimos*, a person who, by living virtuously, has become a person of practical wisdom:

“In a fully cultivated or virtuous person (a *phronimos*), one’s habits, thoughts, and emotions have been refined and harmonized to such a degree that virtuous actions are consistent, produced with spontaneity and pleasurable ease, infused with appropriate moral feeling or belief, and above all, intelligently guided by practical wisdom or *phronesis*.” Vallor, 2018, p37⁶

However, this focus on spontaneity requires education and consistent practice to cultivate intellectual and moral virtues (Aristotle, nd) – to have moral actions become part of a person’s character (Chamberlain, 1984). The second sailor does not become great through chance or luck, but through hard work and consistent reflection; just because it may be difficult to become a digital *phronimos*, does not preclude wanting this for young people or for ourselves in this increasingly datafied and digitalised world.

Vallor proposes twelve “technomoral virtues” with the first eleven focusing on moral virtues of character, including: honesty, self-control, humility, justice, courage, empathy, care, civility, flexibility, perspective and magnanimity (2016, p120). She finishes with the twelfth virtue of “technomoral wisdom” (p120), which “encompasses the totality” of the preceding eleven and describes a person who is able, as noted, to live easily and virtuously in the digital world (p154). It is crucial to note that all these virtues revolve around learning to be a person who is compassionate and helps others; this marries with research commitments to non-extractivism, where researchers commit to not exploiting participants or their communities

⁶ Vallor also acknowledges that this conception of character development is not new – there are correlations with two of Aristotle’s contemporaries: Kongzi (Confucius) and the Buddha (Vallor, 2018).

(Alcoff, 2022), and emancipation, where researchers seek to create knowledge that will challenge disadvantage and/or improve the experience of participants (Oliver, 1992).⁷

Vallor's understanding of digital wisdom is entirely different to the way this term is employed by Prensky (2012), who sees it as a natural outgrowth of the Digital Native/Immigrant. Prensky suggests Rupert Murdoch as an example of someone who is digitally wise, claiming that "wisdom seems to refer to the ability to find practical, contextually-appropriate, creative and emotionally satisfying solutions to problems (as Solomon famously did with the baby problem)" (Prensky, 2012, pp204-205). Not only does Solomon's solution fail to be a sign of wisdom to my mind, but this conception shows no inclination to engage with social justice or with ethics more generally; it speaks more of being digitally cunning (with all its negative connotations).

It is also important to consider Aristotelian conceptions of citizenship in the development of *virtuous digital citizenship* as a goal of RE and education more broadly. Aristotle presented citizenship as more than membership of a group – it comes with duties, rights and responsibilities and is rooted in active engagement with democracy (Román, 2010). This is a useful way of considering digital citizenship, especially when taken with Vallor's describing of a modern *phronimos*. However, it is important to note that Román's account of citizenship is critical, not descriptive: he offers a searing indictment of inequality in how citizenship is applied in the United States and elsewhere. This stands as an important reminder that I should not romanticise concepts like citizenship or treat them as either universally positive or neutral.

Virtuous digital citizenship

The term "virtuous digital citizenship", which I will employ through the rest of this dissertation, offers a way of understanding the second sailor. This person has an understanding of their digital life that reflects Emejulu & McGregor's radical digital

⁷ There are also links being made between these approaches and the African concept of Ubuntu, though Matolino (2020) notes that this is itself controversial, given debates over whether Ubuntu is an ethic and the extent to which it is appropriate to equate it with (or subsume it within) European philosophy.

citizenship (2016), but she is more than this. She develops the kind of technomoral wisdom described by Vallor (2016) to become a digital *phronimos*, but she does this as an active citizen, of the kind describe by Román (2010). She exhibits a practical digital wisdom that allows her to apply these virtues to her online life in a way that seeks to enrich rather than harm. The second sailor, this virtuous digital citizen, seeks to become a person who lives morally and wisely in the world. How then, can good RE help her do this?

Research Questions

In the section above, I have sought to justify my use of the terms “virtuous digital citizenship” and “practical digital citizenship”. These terms are central to the reimagining of RE and the choice of two research questions:

1. How do leaders in English RE imagine/design their curriculum?

This question is more than simply descriptive, but includes both exploratory and explanatory purposes (Rickinson, 2005); it does this by asking curriculum designers what underpins their choices, rather than what those choices are. Answering this is fundamental to my wider focus on teaching for virtuous digital citizenship, given the potential influence of statutory and non-statutory frameworks on whether this might become part of RE curriculums, as shown by the literature.

2. Can RE be reimagined to lead the way in education for virtuous digital citizenship?

My conception, drawing on virtue ethics as well as more radical notions of digital citizenship and the purpose of education is contested, as shown in the literature review. Through my analysis of participants’ responses, I seek to investigate whether there is an appetite for this reimagining in RE and if this fits in with wider conceptions about the core purpose of the subject itself in English schools; this therefore includes reflections on the overall purpose of RE, and whether this is specifically RE’s work to do.

Part 2: Methodological and Philosophical Positioning

Reflexivity

I earlier used two of Patel's (2015) three questions to explain why I have chosen this at this time. Here, I will answer her third question – why me? – and reflect on my own positionality. The inclusion of a positionality statement is contested (ref. Pillow, 2003), though the belief that researchers can act from a position of neutrality (e.g. White, 2013) has been convincingly rejected (e.g. Elliott, 2023). It is important to therefore reflect on how my own identity has shaped my research, as well as the impact this identity may have on my participants. I have worked for several years as an RE teacher and head of department in England; this has gone alongside work I have done in social justice and decolonisation as a lead practitioner and teacher educator. This has then not only shaped the decisions around my research, but also given me a privileged insight into RE and curriculum design, rendering me both insider and outsider (Mercer, 2007). This comes with its own challenges, especially that I have come into my interviews and my analysis with preconceived notions not just about digital citizenship, but also the purpose of RE. Similarly, I have also been influenced by my study of moral philosophy, especially virtue ethics. All the above require the reflexivities of discomfort prescribed by Fricker (2003), as well as acknowledgement of D'Ignazio & Klein's privilege hazard (2020).

This has been shared with participants in line with commitments to honesty shown especially in the feminist and non-extractivist philosophical underpinning explained below. I have been influenced by virtue ethics, particularly the work of Fricker (2003) and Carpenter (2018), seeking the golden mean between vices of excess (e.g. oversharing in such a way that the data is prejudiced) and deficiency (where I am becoming dishonest). I have also drawn on the advice of Mercer (2007) to those with insider/outsider status, where she counsels finding a similar balance.

Critical Realism

Terry et al (2017) distinguish between experiential and critical qualitative research. A critical realist ontology is born of the latter, reflecting both critical theory, which considers the role

of power and subjectivity in shaping discourse and knowledge, as well as the realist view that objective truths exist that can, to some extent, be knowable. This is central to the work of the Oxford Four, who argued that virtues are not subjective; Lipscomb (2021) recounts how Foot, having watched a newsreel about Bergen-Belsen shortly after the end of the War, came to the certainty that there are objective moral truths – and one of them was that the atrocities committed in the concentration camps were wrong. This is, in part, what led her to reject the anti-realist philosophy common in Oxford at the time and to a worldview that aligns with the critical realism proposed by Roy Bhaskar (1975) in his discussion of scientific knowledge. This has been developed in relation to a variety of fields, including religious education itself (Wright, 2016). Bhaskar (1975) created this approach as an alternative to Hume’s classical empiricism and Kant’s transcendental idealism, arguing that both commit the “epistemic fallacy” (p37), in that they conflate the nature of reality itself with what can be known about it. For Bhaskar, it is foolish to reduce everything to either independent phenomena or entirely human constructs; instead, he argues that there are real structures that “operate independently of our own knowledge” (1975, p25). In short, there is a reality “out there” but our way of understanding it is constructed, a view reminiscent of the Oxford Four’s conception of rudeness (Lipscomb, 2021). This is useful for the analysis of my interviews, which should be seen not as neutral, impartial data but as constructed by me and my participants (Alcoff, 2022). Nagel memorably noted the impossibility of really understanding the worldview of another in *What’s it like to be a bat?* (1974). The experience of another can never fully be known or imagined. The critical realist view, for me, is also strongly associated with epistemic humility (Alcoff, 2022) and epistemic justice (Fricker, 2003) as well as an honesty about the impact of my own positionality.

Critical realism can be used to criticise what can be called naïve realism (Pring, 2015; MacLure, 2015), which assumes that what we perceive is unfiltered reality. It also opposes the anti-realist rejection of any universal truth (Lipscomb, 2021). By embracing a critical realist ontology, I can recognise the role of the researcher as maker of the data (Alcoff, 2022), without arguing that the researcher themselves constructs the entirety of the data subjectively (Terry et al, 2017); Pring (2015), like Bhaskar (1975), advises against the total

rejection of independent reality, a view that aligns with Foot (Lipscomb, 2021). This sits well within an Aristotelian approach, which supports belief in the existence of real, knowable virtues, even if our understanding and application of these is shaped by our culture. This is useful, as my research is predicated on me providing a just representation of the thinking of my participants. By reflecting on how my own worldview shapes my observations I not only embrace the “messiness” of research (Pillow, 2003), but also acknowledge the impact this has on my ability to tell this story.

There are criticisms of this approach. Like many ontological claims, critical realism is unfalsifiable and unverifiable; however, Wright (2016) does not consider this to be an issue, arguing that the logical positivism espoused by Ayer, for example, betrays a refusal to think richly by focusing only what can be proven analytically or synthetically. I argue that critical realism offers a useful medium between naïve realism and the extreme meaninglessness of anti-realism and gives the chance to think critically about power. It recognises the interplay between nature, sentient minds and culture, without taking away from certain specific truths (Wright, 2016); this is helpful when considered in light of critical theories in sociology, especially those related to extractivist epistemologies and feminism.

Emancipatory and non-extractive research

I draw on the use of “critical” in relation to power structures, like those described in Collins’ (2009) matrix of domination or in Patel’s (2015) critique of coloniality in educational research. In her study of extractivist epistemologies, Alcoff (2022) criticises colonial mentalities that take without respect for the labour or even humanity of the participant or culture being researched. This sits well with the virtue ethics of Fricker (2003) and Carpenter (2018), as well as an approach to research that focuses on what it means to be an ethical researcher, rather than teleological framings where the ends justify the means. Edwards & Brannelly (2017), writing on democratisation of research, and Tuck & Yang (2014), on marginalisation, make similar calls for research that avoids exploitation. Alcoff (2022) acknowledges that this may be unrealistic, but that, even if this is the case, it does not preclude research attempting to challenge extractivism.

My research seeks to be emancipatory and non-extractivist by promoting a form of virtuous digital citizenship that benefits both young people in English RE classrooms and those more broadly harmed by digitalisation and datafication, e.g. in the Global South. In addition to this, I have sought to make research reciprocal (Trainor & Bouchard, 2013) by making participation rewarding and useful. This also includes the desire to represent participants justly (Fricker, 2003), as well as being open to sharing my own views and experiences (Oakley, 1990).

Feminist research

My research has been shaped axiologically and practically by feminist ethics of care (Edwards & Brannelly, 2017). I have particularly drawn on Oakley's *Interviewing Women* (1990) and Ahmed's *Complaint!* (2021). Feminist research includes both a rejection of masculinist paradigms – both in quantitative (Clarke et al, 2021) and qualitative research (Oakley, 1990) – and an explicit focus on a way of collaborating with participants that challenges power dynamics (Ahmed, 2021). Oakley (1990) argues that this approach means treating participants with greater respect (a laudable end in itself) and allows for richer data, as participants are more likely to share their thoughts when an honest rapport is built. Ahmed (2021) utilises the “feminist ear” (first developed in Ahmed, 2012). This “hear[s] what is not being heard” (Ahmed, 2017, p203), a view that corresponds with Khalid's (2022) emphasis on silence as more than the absence of speech.

There are some criticisms in using feminist methodologies, especially concerns raised around reliability of a view that is so political (White, 2013). However, this perhaps demonstrates the issues with terms like reliability, given the way that data is always manufactured or made (Alcoff, 2022). Scholars have also shown that reliability and politicality are just as much an issue outside of critical qualitative methods like feminist interviews (Clarke et al, 2021; Zweiner-Collins et al, 2023). I argue that these potential issues are overshadowed by the benefits of a reflexive, feminist and emancipatory methodology, as described above, especially given sensible criticisms of any claim to researcher neutrality.

Part 3: Methods

I conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, over a period of four weeks. Twelve of these were one-to-one with heads of RE (though other names for the subject were sometimes used) in state-funded secondary schools; one was with a SACRE advisor; the fourteenth was with a pair of colleagues from an English exam board. Nine interviews were conducted online via Teams, with automatic transcriptions, and the rest were held in school and recorded using my phone, with transcriptions made by MS Word. I corrected these transcriptions while listening to audio recordings then uploaded to Nvivo 14 for coding.

Ethics

In line with BERA guidance (2018), I gained university approval for my research. As my sample were all adults and I was open about my research in all communications, likelihood of harm or risk to participants was low (Robson & McCortan, 2016). Throughout my research I remained committed to my participants as people, following the feminist and emancipatory frameworks described above. The snowball and convenience methods of recruitment meant approaching people as a stranger, but also using existing social and professional networks already in place. Robson & McCortan (2016) list coercion as one of ten questionable research practices; by drawing on my own personal networks I am aware that this may mean participants feeling obligated to participate. I countered this through correspondence requesting participation, where I stressed that they did not need to participate, and in the interviews themselves when gaining informed consent.

Participant Selection

I recruited participants with experience of curriculum design in secondary school English RE to maintain a clear focus on the research questions. Lincoln et al (2018) note the importance of validity in qualitative research, but that other concepts associated with more quantitative paradigms (like generalisability) are more difficult, if not impossible to meet in qualitative studies like mine, where a small sample of participants are interviewed. This means that I did not seek to develop a group of participants that would accurately represent the

experiences and views of all curriculum designers in English RE but aimed to gather a sample that represented a range of views and offered insight that would help answer my research questions. This does not preclude transferability, but recognises that the “process of discovery” will have been shaped by me as researcher – it cannot be fully objective (Lincoln et al, 2018, p143). This method allowed me to carry out more developed and thoughtful interviews, generating a richness of data that may have been lacking from alternatives and reflects my critical realist ontology (Terry et al, 2017).

I recruited participants through convenience or purposive sampling. While this was partially a pragmatic choice, given the scale of the study (Elliott, 2023), this also allowed me to deliberately seek out participants from a range of different institutions. Elliott describes convenience sampling as “I got access where I could” (2023, p44). This approach may skew the sample towards those who share political or other views, given that they may exist within a similar milieu as the researcher (Cohen et al, 2001), and its emphasis on efficiency can sometimes come “at the expense of information and credibility” (Punch & Oancea, 2014, p212). Elliott (2023) critiques examples of purposive sampling, arguing these were understandable but inevitably led to a narrowing towards a specific demographic. Despite these concerns, I chose this approach as a way to ensure a diverse sample, recognising that this would provide an insight rather than a full or complete story, as well as an axiological commitment to Ahmed (2021) and Oakley (1990), both of whom used forms of convenience sampling.

The process of recruitment can be divided into two main types: those that were based on personal and professional links and those that were not. In the first type, I drew on professional and social connections (e.g. friends or family members with connections to heads of RE in England) to either interview participants directly or to be introduced to other potential participants. The second type allowed fewer ethical concerns related to coercion, but also for more careful stratification. This included a cold-call recruitment email; while the response rate for these emails was generally low, this did produce a range of participants. I also requested participants through social media, using #TeamRE on X and the connections of my teaching union; this involved some further scrutiny of participants to ensure that they

be associated with state funded RE in England or with exam boards. A key concern with the use of #TeamRE is that this speaks only to members of the RE community who are on X; this group is not necessarily representative of RE teachers across England, as was shown in the interviews themselves. To this end, my use of a range of purposive sampling routes shows my commitment to a diverse sample.

Interview Methods

There is one undeniably practical reason for using interviews, informed by my own experience as a teacher: it is easier to organise 1:1s than focus groups with multiple participants, especially ones who are very busy. However, it is crucial that methodological decisions are driven by research questions (White, 2013) and it is important to note that my decision to use interviews went beyond practicality. Quantitative data collection methods would not allow me to gain as rich an insight into participants feelings about RE, especially as I would not be able to ask follow-up questions in response to their thoughts; this critique of quantitative methods is acknowledged by Clarke et al (2021) who situates it within feminist ethics. This is also crucial to my choice of method, given the influence of both Oakley (1990) and Ahmed (2021), as well as avoiding distance between the researcher and the participant; by working directly with participants I was reminded of their humanness and value.

This also shaped my decision to use the form of semi-structured interviews favoured by Ahmed (2021). Ahmed (2021) describes her process as gathering testimony, focusing on understanding the experience of the participant rather than gathering objective facts. Ahmed uses the term “double testimony” to describe how she also builds her own response to the participant (2021, p13). She asks one question, offered as an invitation for the participant to share their experience, which leads to an open and fluid conversation, where Ahmed shares her own experiences where necessary, but also allows the participant the capacity to direct the conversation as well (2021). I emulated this, offering two invitation-style questions: the first was a general request to tell me about the nature of the participant’s role and organisation; the second was an open-ended request to tell me about

their curriculum design process. Though I had supplementary questions and topics that I could draw on, I was guided by the participant. This meant that I was prepared both for participants to not mention digital at all and to answer their questions about it.

Phyak's (2021) use of "dialoguing" was also influential. This involves informal interactions in community settings which emphasise being "critical, reflective, inclusive and transformative" (Phyak, 2021, p4). Like Ahmed (2021), he uses carefully framed questions and gives participants space to collect their thoughts. This also allowed for me to use in-interview member checking. While this usually takes place following an interview (Harvey, 2015), dialoguing allowed for the chance to check with participants about their meaning, as well as helping them frame their thoughts with greater clarity. This was an attempt to ensure that the participant's testimony (Ahmed, 2021) did them a full epistemic justice (Fricker, 2003). Some use of the golden mean was required, especially as there was a chance that my joining the conversation as an equal partner might mean that the interviews either failed to focus on the relevant topic, or that participants might simply affirm what they believe to be my views; this is a risk in semi-structured interviews, but it is one that Oakley (1990) and Ahmed (2021) both see as worth the rich data that might otherwise be difficult to gather. In carrying out my interviews dialogically, I also aimed to acknowledge that I cannot set myself apart from my research (Roulston, 2010).

Analytical methods

To analyse my interviews, transcripts were made (first automatically through MS Teams or Word, then manually checked by me), and then coded through NVivo 14 using thematic analysis. This drew on the work of Terry et al (2017) and Saldaña (2021); while neither of these texts provide a single method for thematic analysis – Terry et al (2021) explicitly note that thematic analysis is not homogenous – they provide a useful framework for conducting analysis. Terry et al's (2017) distinction between deductive and inductive codes is useful, though I would argue that this distinction is too binary. In my analysis I take a primarily deductive approach, in that the analysis begins with the research questions and is informed by the literature review; this suggests specific codes to look out for (e.g. Prensky's "Digital

Native”, 2001). However, this also still included elements of inductive coding, where I added to the coding frame and themes as they emerged. Saldaña makes a similar binary between decoding (where the researcher discovers the meaning) and encoding (where the researcher labels meaning). In my analysis emphasis was placed on encoding, recognising that it not possible to objectively find a meaning in any text. This was “made” into a code (Alcoff, 2022).

I followed Terry et al’s “six phases” (2021, pp14-15), moving from initial familiarisation (which began with reading the transcriptions) to the final selection of themes for use in this dissertation. In doing this, I have also reflected on Saldaña’s claim that “a code is a researcher-generated interpretation” (2021, p6). This shows that thematic analysis is subjective and aligns with critical realism and virtue ethics, recognising that there may be objective truths to be understood, but that these are mediated through subjective perception. There is also a requirement that the role of my memory in making meaning is considered, especially given the role this may play in interpretations of the text, given that as interviewer and coder, I drew on more than simply the words in the transcript. This adds to the richness described by Oakley (1990), but was also a caution to remember the role of location and my own positionality in the creation of codes themselves. Swaminathan & Mulvihill (2019) discuss the impact of location, critiquing a “relative silence on the ‘where’ in qualitative research” that fails to acknowledge the need to “site-see” (2019, p1); Ahmed (2021) also reflects on this, discussing how the presence of a ladybird helped participants manage a difficult conversation. I considered the impact of interruptions from colleagues or noise from classrooms as I analysed the interviews, as well as considering the body language of the participant themselves, following Oakley (1990). While it is impossible to know exactly how participants’ positionality, location or even mood shaped their answers, that these will have an impact reflects not only validates my use of critical realism but also Saldaña’s point that coding is useful but messy (2021).

This process initially led to the creation of seventy-five codes across the interviews. These were then recoded, with some codes blended (given their similarity, especially multiple codes focused on ideas of community cohesion), to produce twenty-nine codes set within

four distinct categories: *Challenges to RE*; *Curriculum Influences*; *Digital*; and *Purposes of RE*.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by developing the concept of virtuous digital citizenship, followed by an explanation of the various choices that shape how this research was designed, performed and analysed. This is all framed by virtue ethics, drawing not only the application of this, but also in the underlying commitment to objective virtues known through subjective experience as outlined by the Oxford Four (Lipscomb, 2021). In the next chapter, I examine the themes developed from my codes, as well as the implications of this for my research questions.

Chapter 3: Findings and Discussion

In this chapter, I draw on findings from my interviews and the literature to discuss the role RE could play in promoting virtuous digital citizenship and the associated concept of practical digital wisdom. From the codes and categories described at the end of the last chapter, I created four key themes: every job is RE's job; regulation, regulation, regulation; all roads lead to...; learning about digital, learning from digital. Each of these are explained below and then used to answer my research questions.

Every job is RE's job

“RE is always more than a curriculum subject, but it should never be less than one.” *Matt*⁸

Concerns about the remit of RE came up in several interviews and are reflected in the literature (e.g. Lundie, 2018). If reimagining RE to promote virtuous digital citizenship is perceived simply as another unfair burden for overworked and under-resourced teachers, then this is unlikely to be embraced wholeheartedly, let alone done in a way that meaningfully develops digital *phronesis* (Vallor, 2016). If this is seen to reduce the academic status of RE or conflate it with PSHE this is also problematic. The subheadings below are drawn from codes found in my analysis, which are linked to the overall theme.

Meeting duties for the whole school

Many participants discussed how RE is perceived by the school stakeholders, including senior leaders, government, students and families. Participants were sometimes rueful about or resentful of this treatment of RE, many arguing that other subjects need not regularly defend their own existence. This is shown in this quote, delivered with a frustrated smile and a roll of the eyes:

“And I think the problem also is there's no accountability to schools anyway, so you can get away with it because nobody ever looks at RE.” *Cathy*

⁸ All names are pseudonyms.

Cathy notes here the freedom that comes with this and a resentment that I link to Fricker's concept of the credibility deficit (2003). In some cases, this shifting of the purpose of RE was shown in the naming of the subject: in two schools, this made no reference to religion; in one of these, it had been fully integrated with citizenship. It is not the purpose of this dissertation to criticise these decisions, but to try and situate them, especially the arguably instrumentalist view being taken, where religion is studied (if at all) in service of wider social goals (which might include developing technomoral virtues) or potentially to avoid Ofsted's criticism. The literature reflects this, especially when RE is often reconsidered as an aid to "social, civic and performative agendas" (Lundie, 2018, p2).

Aidan, a head of department at a comprehensive, clearly expresses a concern found throughout the interviews when he notes that "RE sort of carries the weight of SMSC and British values." Here, RE is seen to have full responsibility for whole-school statutory duties like SMSC (spiritual, moral, social and cultural) and this, in some ways, is used to justify its continued existence. For several participants this dual role of RE as a both an academic subject *and* as a means of personal development and community cohesion was a strength of the subject, but this did not preclude multiple concerns about fitting these conflicting demands into an already tight curriculum. Most of the schools were delivering RE in less time than other humanities and participants frequently discussed the tough decisions about what to exclude from the curriculum (ref. Holt, 2019, on minority religious views).

Teacher expertise and enthusiasm

Nic explained that she was "really aware of it's being delivered by non-specialists who are busy and have something else to do." Here she questions whether there is capacity to add more specialist knowledge to lessons already been delivered by over-worked and often under-enthusiastic teachers or if heads of department have time to make these changes.

"There's a greater need... for real intentionality in curriculum design ... because if you come from a specialist background, you might understand why you're teaching something in that way." *Annie*

This also shows the superficiality that might come with simply delivering lessons you do not understand or see the value of, all of which can make it difficult to add more to RE.

Selling RE

The code “Student buy-in” appeared thirty-six times over eleven interviews. There was a clear emphasis on the need to sell RE to students and their families, especially in schools with low religiosity. Aidan stated “apathy is their worldviews” before explaining how much work had to be done to get students to see the value of RE. Many participants were rightly proud of their achievements here: Erica spoke excitedly of how she collaborated with young people to make RE more interesting and engaging; Charlotte was pleased to explain how numbers at GCSE had steadily increased over the last few years. “Buy-in” relates to the theme of “Every job is RE’s job” because giving RE more to do is one way in which it can be shown to be relevant or important to students, senior leaders and the wider establishment:

“I don't think that... [relevance is] ... the sole driver because I think sometimes ... if you focus on relevance, sometimes things are interesting ... [but]... they're not *relevant* ... they're academically interesting ... for me, it's quite an academic subject.” *Cathy*

Here Cathy makes a case for relevance, but also against it; while relevance can help build buy-in, it is important that it not detract from the academic nature of the subject or that theology can be interesting for its own sake. In this sense, incorporating virtuous digital citizenship into RE could help improve buy-in and raise the perceived value of the subject. However, doing so might also mean focusing on staying relevant over academic value; this is a fine line to walk.

Theme One: Summary

In this theme, I have considered how RE can be expected to meet the duties of the whole school on behalf of the whole school, and the impact of this, teacher expertise and enthusiasm (or a lack thereof) and the need to “sell” RE on the subject as a whole. By asking RE to bear the load for jobs like SMSC, digital citizenship and personal development, there is a risk that the subject itself becomes undermined, as argued here:

“Yeah, I think it's like many of these sorts of themes that we have to address, like careers, really, digital citizenship, where it has to be there, but it's how much it can take away from the main job.” *Aidan*

There is a concern that by asking RE to potentially lead the way on digital citizenship I am promoting a more instrumentalist and less academic view of the subject that is itself not necessarily virtuous. This is not the same, perhaps, as the view criticised by several participants where RE is merely a place to talk about feelings (Matt referred to this as “bean-bag chair RE”); virtuous digital citizenship is building on academic research and would involve students being taught, but it does potentially mean a loss of time that can be given over to the study of religions – a concern already being raised by those critical of the “Religion and Worldviews” paradigm (e.g. Barnes, 2023).

However, there is also a positive to this positioning of RE as integral to wider purposes beyond the academic realm. Rather than seeing this as detrimental to the subject, it instead puts it at the centre of a reimagining of education altogether, where academic credibility and preparation for existing in the world can go hand in hand, particularly if the way digital citizenship is delivered complements the study of religions and worldviews. This links clearly to virtue ethics’ focus on a “golden mean” where these competing needs are balanced – itself representative of what it means to be a virtuous digital citizen who uses potentially problematic digital tools in a way that is mindful and minimises harm.

Regulation, regulation, regulation

Regulation came up frequently. There was a lack of consistency amongst heads of department on the role of locally agreed syllabuses. This is pertinent to my research, not simply because it reflects my first question on how participants make decisions about the curriculum, but because the opacity of regulation in RE offers both an affordance and a challenge when it comes to delivering digital citizenship. It potentially gives individual schools and teachers the flexibility to promote virtuous digital citizenship, if they had the time and inclination to do so, but the confusion over purpose, and a lack of direction from government, may make schools less willing to do this, or at least less able. This theme shows the importance of finding a golden mean that allows for students to develop the necessary virtues for a digital life, while preserving the academic nature and value of RE.

RE ignored

A key concern for many was that RE was ignored or undervalued by government and school leaders. While there was disagreement about what legislation entailed, participants generally felt this was not being properly enforced. Beth told me “Not one school primary or secondary was deep dived for RE in our area last year” and Eve said “The reality is no-one checks... Ofsted couldn’t give a damn.” These claims reflect data from Ofsted itself (Walker, 2023), where RE has rarely been the focus of inspections in schools in the UK, as well as some of the concerns reflected in the first theme where RE is seen to be of less value as a curriculum subject. However, several respondents did speak positively of Ofsted’s *Research Review* (2021), in particular seeming to value that it had been written at all, though this was again also rueful, noting how grateful many people were to have the subject seen and considered. This was the subject of some joking from Beth. For several participants the review was influential. It helped Charlotte think about “disciplinarian knowledge”, which was especially useful for her as a non-specialist by training. Annie noted that “As much as sometimes these things feel almost like checklists that schools would follow, it was the one document ... that actually matched what I felt was where we were going.” For Annie, it was fundamentally reassuring, even if she still raised general concerns with how RE is perceived.

There was significant variation in the application of statutory guidance across my sample. For example, of the twelve schools studied, only eight had some form of universal provision of RE in Key Stage 4, despite this being a statutory requirement, and three of these did this through tutor time or citizenship, both routes criticised by NATRE (2017). Only Matt’s Catholic school made the GCSE compulsory for all students, meeting the requirements of the Bishops, while four had both “Core RE” (non-examined RE lessons built into the Key Stage 4 timetable) alongside GCSE Religious Studies as an option. It is worth noting that this sample represents a deviation from the norm in the UK. NATRE (2017) found that around 84% of schools offer no taught RE at all in KS4. That 60% of my participants reported some form of this suggests buy-in from school leaders, but also could be reflective of my sampling methods and the need for more research. There may be some selection bias among the people who agreed to interviews, both in terms of their confidence in RE and their willingness

to discuss their schools and departments. Some were at pains to note that their strong RE provision in Key Stage 4 was not the norm, with many schools referenced that are not meeting their duty. As Beth stated, “It's like the statutory requirement is not really a thing.”

An RE cacophony

Many conversations were permeated with the sense that there are a lot of voices to listen to when designing RE curriculums. This was especially the case for Harry, a SACRE advisor who works with faith leaders and other stakeholders to produce locally agreed syllabuses, and with Edward and Alistair, who work for an English exam board. Some heads of department saw this as a unique issue for RE, distinct from other subject areas, a view reflected in the literature (e.g. Smith et al, 2018). In some cases, like Cathy's CofE school and Matt's Catholic school, the role of religious groups was particularly explicit, though not resented; here, it was seen as helpful to have rigorous guidance and, perhaps, one voice that could be listened to and trusted.

I use the term cacophony judiciously, not because this is unpleasant or painful, but more that the number of voices can be chaotic. Knowledge and confidence around locally agreed syllabuses varied across the sample, as did awareness of (and subsequent engagement with) the CORE Report that promoted the Religion and Worldviews paradigm; three of the participants had not heard of the CORE Report or the new paradigm, while two more were aware of it but had not engaged with it directly. Some were enthusiastic adopters, but most of these were participants I had connected with through social media, particularly through #TeamRE. Beth said “If you're not on social media if, ugh, you don't hear a thing, absolutely nothing” and Eve noted that she needed to remind herself that “the online community is actually a really small percentage of the actual wider community.” Beth and Eve were making similar points here, though Eve explicitly notes the consensus about RE that was built through #TeamRE and that that this is often then assumed as representing everyone. Ellie, who is a prominent voice in this online community, also noted just how “horrible people are to each other” on social media, and the impact this can have on how these frameworks are perceived. This is relevant to my questions in that choices about design may

be influenced by fashions and feuds on X, but also that reimagining RE will require engaging with more than just those on social media. The need for virtuous digital citizenship in teachers as well as students and critical engagement with social media is also shown here.

Even for those who were aware of the Review or the Report, there were definite concerns with how seriously to take them, in particular how much time to allow for their adoption or implementation. This was especially the case for the CORE Report, given that participants were aware that Ofsted would likely draw on their Review when making school judgements. Aidan said that he didn't "have time to necessarily meet every non-statutory piece of advice out there" and Cathy was reluctant to "throw myself into something that's going to change next year." They both demonstrate the challenges with even accessing some of these reports and guidance, alongside the accompanying overwhelm. This is important for digital citizenship, especially when taken with comments in the previous theme around the dearth of time, resources and specialists in RE; non-statutory regulation (especially that which is not fully disseminated or accessible) can often make the task of curriculum design much more complex. Cathy's implicit point about fads in education was alluded to by other participants; Harry, for example, argued that much of the Religion and Worldviews paradigm is not new, and several heads of department saw Ofsted's Review and the CORE Report as confirmations of work they were already doing. This is crucial not just for RE, but also for digital citizenship; curriculum designers were wary of doing enormous amounts of work that may need to be completely redone in a year's time if and when the hype cycle moves on.

No regulation without resourcing

Many expressed concerns about their own digital knowledge and the need to keep up with academic knowledge of religions already. The current knowledge, interests and confidence of the designers and their colleagues were often central to decisions about the curriculum. Several participants referred to being old or out of touch, implicitly drawing on the Digital Natives trope critiqued in the literature review by Selwyn (2009) and Bayne & Ross (2011), while also recognising the workload that might come from incorporating new content into a stretched curriculum. Participants were pragmatic about these decisions. This was crucial

for the exam boards, which are fundamentally still a customer-focused business. They sought to also repurpose useable resources that were already in place and might require the least amount of new learning for the teachers themselves.⁹ This was also reflected in how heads of department chose the second religion for GCSE. For example, Annie referred to her own confidence, as well as the desire to present an interesting balance to Christianity by choosing Buddhism.

This relates to *regulation, regulation, regulation* in that many frameworks are unhelpful about content. Criticisms of textbooks (e.g. Fujihara, 2019) and other resources link to the time required to do this work meaningfully. In reality, most participants were eager for greater regulation in RE spaces, including guidance about current regulation. Not everyone was clear on their duty to their locally agreed syllabus, for example, let alone how they might implement a Religion and Worldviews approach or incorporate digital citizenship. Participants wanted statutory guidance as well as real resources to help build knowledge and lighten workload, but there was a common caveat shown in this quote from Ellie: “I would like to see a national curriculum, however, I'm aware that, as I say that, I'd like to see my curriculum as a national curriculum [laughs].”

Ellie was not alone in this view, though it was often presented as a joke. This presents another challenge to regulation or guidance, in that designers seemed used to paying lip service to guidance they did not value. Regulation is evidently not enough by itself – any reimagination of RE for virtuous digital citizenship needs to be bring as many people as possible along if it is going to have impact. This speaks to the need for participatory design, perhaps, or at least regulation that includes RE teachers who are on the ground, as well as drawing on the academic literature discussed in Chapter 1.

Theme Two: Summary

This theme has shown how RE suffers simultaneously from a deficiency of listening and resources and an excess of voices – good regulation is required to manage both ends of this

⁹ Edward and Alistair, who work for an English exam board, asked not to be quoted directly.

spectrum. This regulation needs to give curriculum designers the authority to make RE heard in schools and guidance in ensuring that is it of good quality and meets the needs of young people, which should, as I have argued, include preparing them to be virtuous digital citizens.

Some argued that the plurality in RE means that it will never be possible to gain a national consensus and therefore some of the amorphousness of RE guidance could act as a blessing as well as a curse, given that it gave confident and purposeful designers the chance to reimagine RE in their own schools, if not nationally. The freedom that could come from less clarity in regulation was also noted, especially by Adam and Aidan. However, this was juxtaposed with the wider risk of being vague and a worry about the subject disappearing altogether when Adam said, “My big concern for RE... is, will it still be here in 5-10 years?” Most participants welcomed the idea of greater regulation, especially one that could be employed nationally. For Ellie, who works across an Academy Trust as an RE lead, this means a structure that allows for creativity:

“Ideally it's sort of the launchpad and I use this phrase that an aligned or centralised curriculum supports you where you need it, but then it's a platform for you to do your thing.” *Ellie*

This shows the importance of clear regulation for RE generally and the teaching of virtuous digital citizenship specifically. Without a stronger sense of the backing of statutory policies – within RE and across schools generally – it seems unlikely that this kind of education will be embedded consistently or widely, but this itself will also not be enough if this reimagination is not shared across the community.

All roads lead to...

This theme is inspired by a phrase used, almost in passing, by Adam, who noted “all roads lead to GCSE” early in his interview. This struck me, not only because Adam went on to paint a purpose for RE that went far beyond exams, but because of the emphasis on a curriculum leading *somewhere*; a common code found was the “golden thread” that runs through a curriculum. As noted in the literature review, there is not a consensus in the RE community or government about the *telos* of RE. This was demonstrated conclusively in the interviews I conducted, where participants often articulated several different purposes. Over the course

of my coding, multiple golden threads coalesced, and I ultimately narrowed these down to four: development of religious literacy and academic knowledge; personal development and self-reflection; community cohesion; and being able to engage well with others. These related in various ways to virtuous digital citizenship, with some clear links to Vallor (2016), Emejulu & McGregor (2016) and Román (2010), the latter especially in the final section below of “mutiny”, though this emphasis is more on changing society rather than simply being an active and engaged citizen.

... knowledge and skills?

A central concern for several participants was the academic rigour of RE and its role in developing crucial skills, especially critical thinking, oracy and argumentation (ref. Chan et al, 2021). In the schools that particularly prioritised this, there was a firm rejection of RE being something anyone could teach, though there was some variation in whether to prioritise deep theological knowledge (as in Beth’s work on Genesis 3) or a broader religious literacy (as shown by Eve’s commitment to students’ knowing “the six main world religions”). This suggests that if RE is to be reimagined to lead on digital citizenship, it may be necessary to think about how it might develop theological thinking or religious literacy.

However, in all cases knowledge went together with the development of subject-specific skills. Eve explicitly emphasised the interpretation of symbolism, without which students would “fundamentally not understand most of the religions that we teach.” This reflects points made in the literature (e.g. Barnes, 2023), as well as the desire for RE to be specific and not superficial (e.g. Rissanen et al, 2024). It could also relate to the development of technomoral virtues like “perspective” and “humility” (Vallor, 2016, p120), where students accept that religious claims are more than surface-level.

“Critical thinking” was referenced in every interview, to varying degrees. In some cases, this was directly related to the digital world, in particular misinformation and disinformation (ref. Carmi et al, 2020), though it was more often related to the theology, philosophy and ethics as academic fields. Critical thinking was not seen as exclusive to RE, but it was definitely seen as central to it, and could be closely linked to virtuous digital citizenship, especially in

relation to Vallor's technomoral wisdom (2016). To be wise, our second sailor would need to be able to thoughtfully parse what she sees and hears – and to do so with humility. This links to the next golden thread – personal growth.

... *personal growth?*

Harry emphasised the need for personal development, stating that “There's gotta be that personal development side because you're dealing with issues that people are gonna respond on a personal, subjective as well as an objective.” Here Harry is drawing on the *learning about religion, learning from religion* objectives discussed in the literature review (O'Grady, 2023). There was some disagreement among participants about the importance of this as a purpose, but this did not mean that they were not in favour of RE that allowed students space to reflect on their own views and have these challenged where necessary:

“I think it's a space for them to develop their own views and be challenged to think things through.” *Nic*

“I think it [social justice] is a whole school thing, but also in a maths lesson you're not necessarily gonna be having a conversation about trans rights, so it happens more for us...” *Adam*

Adam and Nic reflected on the unique role of RE in making this space, but also that this did not mean blindly or uncritically expressing views. This allows RE to be a place for discussing social justice and potentially lead the way on those issues in relation to virtuous digital citizenship, as described by Emejulu & McGregor (2016). This offers another useful application of Vallor, particularly her technomoral virtues (2016), which should be developed across society. This can happen through explicit teaching – RE, with its focus already on personal development, could be an excellent place for this to happen.

Participants noted that while students rarely had chance to reflect on their own beliefs in school, this hardly happened at home either. Aidan felt that students mimicked their parents, but did so without “deep reflection, and so I'm trying to get them to reflect.” For Charlotte, a goal of RE was for students to “become more curious... more understanding and accepting... [to] become less judgemental.”

Aidan and Charlotte position RE lessons as places to be challenged, especially when parents or families may have very fixed worldviews or spend little time discussing religion or ethics, for example. Their points show that RE can also be inward-focusing. That is, not about driving social change *per se*, but rather helping people better understand themselves. In this there was also a strong link to critical thinking and argumentation skills, particularly the idea that to make an argument you first need to know what you think.

...mutiny?

The last two purposes – community cohesion and being able to engage well with others – were subcodes of the much broader goal of preparing to be a good human. Few participants made any reference to the workplace or careers education; where they did, this was generally seen as a positive side effect of the becoming human process. This focus sits well with digital citizenship, particularly the kind embodied by the second sailor. There was also a sense that this was about making people more engaging and how this might mean they could be happy in the future; Adam, with a smile, said that his aim was to make students “more interesting at dinner parties” but situated this within the desire to make human connections. This resonated with what Bayne (2018) refers to as a humanist view of education, one that focuses on teaching us to become fully ourselves, to be human and to engage well with others. Aidan noted that students wanted to be taught “how to be a human being”, for example, and saw RE as central to this process, especially given the ways it helps build connections and reflection, as noted above. This cohesive sense was found in multiple interviews, where participants like Charlotte expressed hopes that young people would be “empathetic and understanding”. The quote from Annie below encapsulates this:

“I would really hope that they would... be self-aware and that they would be able to recognise that different views they have come from a variety of sources and places, and that they I would hope that they would be able to present ... reasoned views... for the viewpoints that they have, and at the same time hold competing truths in their mind and... that as individuals, they would be curious ... and that they would have a strategy in which they could engage with that that doesn't.”

Annie

Here she is presenting multiple purposes, from critical thinking to self-reflection, within a wider focus on understanding and living alongside people with other views. This speaks well to the Aristotelian emphasis on *phronesis*, where the *phronimos* learns to be wise in relation to other people (Vallor, 2016).

“I want students to be happy and successful and I sort of say you know success is... not just measured in outcomes, it's measured in... the way they engage with the curriculum, it's measured in them becoming good upstanding citizens and hopefully people of Christ as well.” *Matt*

Matt, who works at a Catholic school, also referred to the idea of “making saints”, a view that can chime with the more secular focus outlined by Annie and others and resonates with another Aristotelian emphasis on flourishing (Plaisance, 2013). Throughout the interviews it was this concept of the purpose of RE to which participants frequently returned, though with some important provisos. These are important for considering RE as a place for promoting virtuous digital citizenship. There was a general critique of teaching young people to be activists. This was particularly made by Aidan:

“Yeah, I'm weary of inculcating some sort of desire to... [be a] ... social just type fighter, because I think that's going beyond the role of the state. And it certainly goes beyond the remit of RE... I don't think the legislation supports sort of me training a generation of campaigners.” *Aidan*

This links to earlier points about regulation, including the difficulty of understanding it, but reflects a wider belief among participants that it is not the job of teachers or the curriculum to tell students what to believe about social justice, but to give them the critical skills to act in line with their own, interrogated views. Adam described social justice activism as a potential “byproduct” of RE, while for Annie the emphasis was on RE providing “nuance”. However, most curriculum designers recognised the challenges here, especially with other areas of social justice like prejudice and discrimination or the climate crisis. Emphasis was often placed on school cultures or modelling, rather than perhaps teaching young people how to go out and be anti-racist, for example. This shows the challenge inherent to teaching social justice issues like digital citizenship in RE. To what extent should we focus on teaching young people about the digital world and its impacts and helping them develop useful skills versus deliberately encouraging them to go and make waves? To return to my sailing

metaphor again – should we be teaching students to be informed and thoughtful sailors who might choose to mutiny one day or should we teach mutiny from the beginning?

Theme Three: Summary

The literature clearly demonstrates that there are many competing visions of RE's purpose (O'Grady, 2023). There was perhaps a greater coherence in my sample than in the Academy, especially the idea that RE can have several concurrent themes, though designers often prioritised some over others and there were clearly different visions of how such purposes might be delivered. The significance of this for reimagining RE cannot be overstated, given that virtuous digital citizenship is itself rooted not just in knowledge of the digital world but in developing personal technomoral virtues like those described by Vallor (2021) and using this knowledge to improve the world (Emejulu & McGregor, 2016).

Learning about digital, learning from digital

The title of this theme is drawn from Grimmitt's two learning objectives: learning about religion and learning from religion (O'Grady, 2023). Here I seek to make the case for digital citizenship aligning with RE's core aims, noting how it is and is not reflected in current curriculum design.

Digital discussions

The digital was mentioned in many ways during the interviews, appearing one-hundred-and-sixteen times across the sample. Where it was discussed, it held different roles. Interestingly, "social media" made one-hundred-and-sixty-eight appearances, though again this ranged from sources of curriculum influence (especially #TeamRE) to teaching children to critically reflect on its influence. This theme developed when I coded references to teaching about the digital (e.g. lessons related to AI), teaching using the digital (e.g. using YouTube or social media as a medium for learning) and teaching for a digital life (e.g. skills like critical thinking).

Curriculum designers made many references to their use of digital technologies in teaching and planning and how these were also used by young people. This included the ways in

which teachers communicated with exam boards and the role of websites and other online resources, as well as the use of social media, especially for Eve, Ellie and Beth. Beth also explained how she had also used AI to generate images to go with booklets she was making on Hinduism, while Aidan described how he used AI to create resources on the war in Syria. Erica shared the different ways in which she used digital resources to engage her students and as a medium for them to present assessed work. Participants wove digital into the classroom, a view found in the literature as well (e.g. Aagard, 2022). With this came strong concerns about the impact of this on young people, noting that while there were affordances there were also challenges to including digital learning in the classroom. This included a lack of actual devices to use, but also worries about how social media and mobile phone use affected how young people engaged with each other:

“The students don't want to discuss as much as they used to. It's just quieter and they don't want to reveal. And they don't want to, because of the judgment that we see in on digital. So kids are naturally becoming more closed about expressing their views, so don't wanna offend anyone.” *Beth*

Here Beth shares a concern that students are being negatively affected by their use of digital technology and reflects some of the ways this can harm individuals (ref. Dixon-Román et al, 2020). Annie also worried about the impact of social media, but saw some positives in this, in particular the role TikTok could play in raising awareness. Annie pointed out that many students asked thoughtful questions about conversion therapy because of what they had seen online. Both these cases show a deepening involvement of the digital in the classroom and the ways in which this can affect or alter teaching. The nature of RE is particularly important here, given the discussions being held in lessons that might set it apart from other subjects. However, this still does not directly connect to teaching for virtuous digital citizenship in the classroom, though there are links to Emejulu & McGregor's radical digital citizenship (2016).

The digital was not something that was yet present in RS exam specifications; my interviewees from an exam board noted that this was likely because it was not part of the content guidance from the DfE and had not been requested by customers (i.e. the schools). However, several heads of department referred to examples of education about the digital

being woven into the curriculum. In philosophy and ethics, designers reported discussing AI in relation to debates around the soul and what it means to be human. Adam described using ChatGPT in lessons to carry out a “mini Turing test” and Aidan told me about how his classes discussed “neurolink and having a chip in your brain.” Good links could be made by designers to a range of philosophers here, for example Margaret Boden’s (2016) work on the nature and future of AI.

Participants also explained their teaching on misinformation and prejudice.

“And actually when we do the unit which we're doing in year nine on prejudice and so we're looking at the media's role in Islamophobia... we look at the meaning of... jihad and when you type jihad into a server... and I showed the kids. I said look at these images. We've just looked at how this is a spiritual struggle, a really faithful, important thing. And I said, do any of these pictures represent that?” *Charlotte*

Eve described doing something similar in relation to abortion using Google. Both teachers are making connections similar to those made by Noble (2018) and are demonstrating not just digital skills but the kind of critical computational literacy being described by Garcia & Lee (2020) that is, I argue, central to my conception of practical digital wisdom. However, these kinds of lesson were not the norm and this still did not explicitly focus on teaching to become a virtuous digital citizen or a digital *phronimos*. The emphasis remained on teaching skills or using this to develop theological or philosophical knowledge. Importantly, none of the above examples engages with datafication.

Another focus was on RE teaching useful and relevant skills:

“Most of the purpose of my curriculum is critical thinking. So I like to think I'm enabling the skills to do that even if I'm not focusing on the topic.” *Aidan*

“Umm, you know, at the end of the day, if any kind of information they come across, whether it be digitally or not or you know... they have those tools to critically question and critically analyse I think that is the beauty of RE.” *Beth*

Both Aidan and Beth suggested that good RE would prepare students for a critical engagement with the digital even if this has not been taught explicitly. However, the literature suggests this is unlikely to go far enough, especially given the concerns raised by Selwyn (2009) around the lack of technological skill shown by many young people. More

research would be needed to consider the extent to which young people can apply skills like critical thinking in RE to fields like media criticism, without additional support or guidance and how this might look in a virtuous digital citizen.

Digital silences

Khalid (2022), in studying Pakistani mothers' silence, encourages researchers to listen not just to what is being said in interviews, but what is not (a view that corresponds with Ahmed's feminist ear, 2021). I made the decision not to foreground digital in my dialoguing, engaging with this when participants brought it up or if it felt natural to do so. Some participants asked outright about this, knowing that it was part of my research; others did not. This meant that it was sometimes not discussed. It is important not to make unreasonable inferences here – the interviews took between 45-60 minutes, and it would be hubristic to assume this allows me a full insight into the curriculum design process. As shown by virtue ethics, it is important not to give a credibility deficit to these participants (Fricker, 2003). However, that there were silences is important.

In some cases, the silence around digital technology or citizenship was acknowledged by participants, as when Beth made comments on being too old to understand technology and whether RE teachers can really engage with this content:

“We're all non-specialists in this situation and does that then beg... are we in the best place to be teaching them? We are the best place to teach them how media influences and power... But are we in the best place to be teaching them about, you know, digital stuff when we ourselves are not probably as clever as they are?” *Beth*

I have referred to this above in the ways that some participants positioned themselves as lacking knowledge, a view linking to Prensky's Digital Native/Immigrant (2001). In some cases, this led to them asking me questions about the digital and about digital citizenship. Following Oakley's (1990) commitment to answering questions, I then gave examples from the literature (e.g. Noble, 2018; Emejulu & McGregor, 2016), which often sparked a lively discussion. Indeed, Beth asked for me to send her some suggested readings, and Eve was enthusiastic about learning something new.

As might be expected, one area of silence was related to theorising about digital education. This chimes with my own experience of schools, where there may be little if any awareness of sociotechnical models, for example, or of posthumanist theories like Actor Network Theory (Aagard, 2022). Where theorising took place, it was perhaps more closely related to critical theories and ideas about equity and levelling the playing field; participants often noted that not all students had equal access to digital resources and that ability to use this varied enormously. This speaks to the need for the ideas of the Academy to be better communicated to curriculum designers, not just on virtuous digital citizenship.

Crucial to my research, there was (understandably) very little conception of ideas like digital citizenship, never mind academic writing about this. Participants were often confident in their use of literacy as a term in relation to religion and there was often some sense of digital literacy being linked to essential skills and even to misinformation. However, the interviews implied that this silence came from a lack of opportunity to engage with digital citizenship or with the wider risks of living a digital life. This may reflect the ways in which technology has been positioned as neutral (ref. Reich, 2020), as well as participants own lack of confidence in areas related to data.

Theme Four: Summary

That the digital is part of many curriculums is evident, but so is the lack of consistency – an issue common within RE (Lundie & O’Siochru 2021). Here, there are clear connections to earlier themes related to whether this is RE’s job, the role of regulation (especially in how this shapes exam board specifications) and beliefs about the purpose of RE. While there are some interesting examples of the inclusion of digital discussions in curriculums, especially in relation to philosophy and ethics, there is still a great deal of silence around digital citizenship, especially in relation to what digitalisation might mean for issues of inequality or the climate crisis for example (Emejulu & McGregor, 2016). Nor is there engagement with concepts like datafication and how this might affect the way we see or understand people or the risks that this might pose to young people themselves (Zuboff, 2019; Eubanks, 2019). No reference was made to any specific edtech during the interviews, beyond social media

or platforms like Google. This, another silence, may also speak to a lack of training for curriculum designers on the role of edtech and other digital platforms in shaping behaviour – an area that would be ripe for discussions around human nature, free will and moral responsibility, for example. Crucial to my Aristotelian focus, there was some reference to developing specific virtues like critical thinking, but not the more directly digital technomoral virtues advanced by Vallor (2016) and therefore no specific emphasis on developing the practical digital wisdom associated with the second sailor.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed four key themes developed from my codes: every job is RE's job; regulation, regulation, regulation; all roads lead to...; and learning from digital, learning about digital. In this, I have sought to demonstrate the challenges to promoting digital citizenship in RE, including the way this might be received by overworked and underappreciated teachers, the need for better regulation and resources to facilitate this, and how this must be situated within the wider purpose of the subject. I have also shown that there is an appetite for this in RE, even if its inclusion in curriculum design is inconsistent and not yet fully reflective of the kind of virtuous citizenship I have constructed.

These findings can be used to answer my research questions, though there are evidently limitations to the study. As noted, the size of my sample and the nature of the research itself means that it cannot be seen as fully representative of the entire RE community, not in the least because of how nebulous this grouping is, given that it feasibly includes many non-teachers, as well as faith groups and government agencies. However, to speak on behalf of all RE curriculum designers has not been the intention of this study and by situating this within critical realism I have made clear my belief that it is not possible to objectively know this view either. Instead, the focus has been on gaining insights that help think imaginatively about RE in response to my research questions.

How do leaders in English RE imagine/design their curriculum?

It is clear from my findings that RE curriculum designers do this imaginative work by drawing on a range of sources – including both statutory and non-statutory guidance, as well as a

range of paradigms – and by thinking pragmatically about what can be achieved in their community and among those using this curriculum. For heads of department in particular this was a common theme, given the challenges placed around the subject. Relevance and student buy-in were crucial for all designers, including exam boards, but this complemented a desire to protect the integrity of the subject and the joy found in theology, for example, as shown in Beth’s enthusiasm for Genesis. The process of designing or imagining a curriculum is a complex one, and is not always focused completely around purpose. As shown by many participants, the choice of topic was often shaped by personal interest, the availability of resources or the needs of those delivering it. However, there were still strong senses of *telos*, which reflected the multiplicity evident in the literature (Lundie, 2018) and this was evidently an important part of how curriculums were constructed, especially with reference to Ofsted expectations like intent (O’Grady, 2023)

Can RE be reimagined to lead the way on education for virtuous digital citizenship?

I believe that, given the findings above and the literature, it is possible for RE to be reimagined in a way that honours the academic value of the subject and its historical positioning through *learning about* and *learning from religion* (O’Grady, 2023). My sample, limited though it may be, exhibited enthusiasm for thinking about the digital and were committed to RE’s future in a complex world. This links closely to digital citizenship, which is more than simply an instrumentalist focus on how to use technology as typified by the first sailor. In my conclusion, I will consider how RE might be reimagined to promote the virtuous digital citizenship I have described, drawing on both the literature and my own research.

Conclusion

I began this dissertation with two sailors, both situated at extreme ends of a spectrum in how they engaged with their seagoing world and the cultures that touched it. This metaphor, demarking digital instrumentalism and citizenship (while recognising that most people sit somewhere between these), set the context for my investigation into how RE could be used to promote the latter. In the literature review, I considered not just the problems that make digital citizenship necessary (including unhelpful narratives about “Natives” and skills), but also the difficulties associated with this term and others like digital literacy, arguing that Emejulu & McGregor’s (2016) radical understand is particularly useful. I then analysed the current landscape for RE in England, emphasising how this subject could lead the way on digital citizenship, and the different challenges that might come with this. In Chapter 2, I drew on the literature review and on Aristotelian virtue ethics, especially the modern application of this to technology made by Vallor (2016) and Foot’s use of it to promote flourishing (Plaisance, 2013), to articulate a new way of thinking about digital citizenship. This also drew on Ancient Greek conceptions of citizenship (Román, 2010), to see the virtuous digital citizen as someone who can exist wisely in the online world, mindful of their impact on marginalised people, the Global South, the climate and even future generations (ref. MacAskill, 2022). This was followed by my methodology, which was also framed by virtue ethics and made use of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975), non-extractivism (Alcoff, 2022) and feminism (Ahmed, 2021; Oakley, 1990). In the final chapter, I analysed the themes generated through my analysis of the interviews, using virtue ethics and the concept of virtuous digital citizenship. I found that while there is a clear appetite and space for the promotion of digital citizenship in RE, there are also key challenges. However, these can be solved, as I will explain below.

Reimagining RE

The literature and my findings support the argument that RE can and should be reimagined to lead the way on virtuous digital citizenship, though there are concerns about how this might be done and what this could mean for the integrity of the subject. This is, in part,

because the philosophical underpinning of this concept naturally lends itself to RE, as do other debates around AI, human nature and medical technologies, even if direct links to the second sailor's citizenship need to be more explicit. In addition to this, the flexibility around the subject, while often a source of challenge for curriculum designers and teachers, does allow for experimentation. This is less the case for examined RS (though not impossible, for example in units on the environment or on equality), but Core RE as delivered in secondary schools has the capacity to lead on this.

Curriculum development: how RE could incorporate teaching for virtuous digital citizenship in schools

As shown in my interviews, RE curriculum designers are already incorporating the digital, especially in philosophy and ethics. However, this is not happening consistently and there is room for development, especially when it comes to making explicit use of contemporary scholars in the modern application of philosophy to technology (e.g. Vallor, 2016; Boden 2016). There is certainly scope for considering the international impact of living digitally, as described by Emejulu & McGregor (2016), or the ways in which this exacerbates marginalisation. In short, while there is some excellent work being done in RE, this could go much further in teaching about (and for) virtuous digital citizenship. The question, therefore, is how this should be done.

Andreotti et al (2015) argue that reform is not enough, advocating for a beyond-reform approach to curriculum design when discussion decolonisation. This requires starting from the beginning with a new, inclusive and radical curriculum. However, my participants' discussions of how they design their curriculum – as well as the challenges in this process – make the beyond-reform approach of replanning the curriculum from scratch deeply difficult. Instead, participants saw curriculum design as iterative and gradual. Therefore, it seems sensible to integrate digital citizenship into existing curriculums, at least to begin with; this would still require effort and time from designers, but less so than rewriting the entire syllabus. This is potentially made more plausible by recent turns to a “worldviews” approach that may lend itself to seeing RE in a new and empowered way. By focusing on the

development of “lenses”, students can reflect not just on how they see the world, but how this is shaped by the digitalisation and datafication, as well as their families and community.

Virtuous digital citizenship must be taught explicitly, however; I am sceptical of the argument that teaching critical skills prepares students to be digital citizens by default. The second sailor comes to her deep understanding through explicit learning experiences, not osmosis. This can be delivered through RE, though not only by RE.

Modelling for others: how RE could lead the way for the rest of the school

The idea that we should be careful when using Google, shown by Eve and Charlotte, as well as in the literature, is a good example of this process. Here, a question that is situated in RE could also be used to showcase the ways in which digital technologies can be approached critically. This criticality is central to the development of digital citizenship (Pangrazio & Sefton-Green, 2021), as is consideration about the impact of misinformation, for example, not just on the person Googling but on the individuals or groups being misrepresented. Charlotte’s discussion of *jihad* is pertinent here, but could be easily transferable across many subjects, not just in the humanities and English. Indeed, this kind of practical digital wisdom is crucial across the curriculum, especially with the use of the internet and AI for self-teaching. This could also contribute to building a better understanding of data itself, in particular the ways in which statistics are used to justify decisions or claims, despite the many problems with relying on statistic regression when this may not be objective (Zweiner-Collins et al, 2023).

This extends beyond how teachers or leaders might model good digital awareness or criticality, however. This would also include roadmaps for how to develop the curriculum to build practical digital wisdom, using judicious examples or, eventually, new units of study that contribute towards overall aims of the subject while meeting this need. In this, there are also additional lessons to be learned from the (often uneven) implementation of other duties like SMSC, careers education and community cohesion across the curriculum, as well as the way whole-school policies on behaviour and homework are embedded. For example, findings from Formby & Wolstenholme (2012) critique the use of one-off education events,

preferring learning over time. RE leaders could position themselves as models for how to engage with technology for education, including the ways in which the internet is utilized for homework, considering the kind of questions that teachers, parents and students should ask themselves before they use technology. This is reminiscent of the skills already found in textual or symbolic analysis, as described by Eve, as well as the evaluation and application of religions and ethical theories to moral dilemmas, while showcasing technomoral wisdom (Vallor, 2016).

Participants and the literature have raised sensible and understandable concerns about the dangers of this for RE (in particular its dilution as a subject focused on the academic study of religion), as well as the unfairness of RE having to justify its own existence and value. However, this does not, I argue, necessarily need to be a zero-sum game. By taking this position, RE raises its status within education, showing that its academic focus lends itself to deeper understanding and that this can support other subjects. In this sense, developing virtuous digital citizenship does not become RE's job alone, but everyone's, but with RE taking the lead, whether that be as captain or steersman.

What next?

If RE is reimagined to promote virtuous digital citizenship and therefore lead the way on the teaching of practical digital wisdom in schools, several things need to happen. First, more research into current provision in schools and other educational institutions is required, including primary, further and higher education, as well as on how this would be perceived among RE bodies like NATRE, Culham St Gabriel's and SACREs. This might include larger quantitative studies into what is currently on offer, through content analysis of existing curriculums and syllabi, and through surveys. This could also use qualitative focus groups and interviews to explore student, staff and community experiences. My study has offered a useful insight, but it would be beneficial to hear from more stakeholders, including those outside of RE. This may also benefit from close work with existing projects, like the ERSC-funded *Teaching Digital Citizenship* project being run by the Universities of Glasgow and Oxford, to not only better understand the current situation but engage with this reimagining

of education for a digital world. It would be useful to carry out some participatory design of new curriculums that test the ideas above, with analysis of their impact that engages with students and teachers.

Secondly, there needs to be a move towards a wider consensus in RE on the subject's purpose and role in preparing children for adulthood and how this relates to practical digital wisdom. This is more difficult to achieve, but without at least some move towards a shared vision, it would be difficult to reimagine RE as whole. Otherwise, this aspiration is likely to get lost in the cacophony.

Thirdly, there needs to be a broader acceptance that teaching for virtuous digital citizenships is the job of the whole school. This not only prevents this from overloading RE teachers, but also shows a commitment to digital justice that is needful, given the manifold ways in which digitalisation and datafication can harm people and the planet. This requires lobbying of policymakers, not just academics. Given recent changes to the UK government as I write this in the summer of 2024, this could be a ripe time for drastic reimaginings of education, or even a full mutiny against those who position education for their own needs (ref. Davies et al, 2022; Deegan & Martin, 2018). This, of course, sits within a wider call for more time and resources for teachers and curriculum designers to do this important and meaningful work.

This dissertation, I hope, can act as a call to curriculum designers, policymakers and academics. Promoting digital citizenship within RE (and the school) can be done, and it can be done well, and doing this will make a meaningful and significant difference, potentially to lives being lived on the other side of the world. However, this can only be done with proper support, thoughtful regulation and due respect for the professionals involved. Importantly, this will only work if academics are able to engage with educators at every level, including in exam boards, SACREs and other bodies.

After all, there is only so much one sailor can do on her own.

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Appendices

Interview Questions

45-60 minutes

Question 1: Can you tell me about your role, your school and your department? *Brief.*

Question 2: Can you tell me about how you design your curriculum for RE? Open question.

Potential follow-up questions:

- *If don't mention Religion & Worldviews directly:* Has the "Religion & Worldviews" approach had much of an impact on your curriculum?
- Are you quite knowledge-focused in your curriculum?
- Is there a single purpose of your curriculum? What would that be?
- Would you say that your approach is quite traditional?
- Is there space for reimagining RE, do you think?
- Does RE need to change for the 21st century, do you think?
- How does this sit within the digital world?
- *If they mention teaching about climate change:* Would you think about the impact of data servers or mining for digital materials when you teach about this?
- *If they mention social justice (or issues within social justice like anti-racism or decolonisation):* Would you talk about the misuse of data or how the digital world can lead to injustice or justice when you teach about this?
- *If they ask about digital citizenship:* What does it mean to you? (Given that there is no set definition). *Share definition if requested.*

Ethical Approval Letter

Change in title was approved.

SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Department of Education
15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY
student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk; staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk



[REDACTED]
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division
University of Oxford

22 February 2024

Dear [REDACTED]

Research ethics approval

How important is teaching for digital citizenship to curriculum designers?

Research ethics reference: EDUC_C1A_24_025

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

Personal data: It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's [guidance and legal requirements](#).

In-person activities: Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's [website](#).

Amendments: Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the [SSH IDREC webpage](#).

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk / student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk or ethics@soecsci.ox.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

DREC member

cc: [REDACTED]

Recruitment Messages

Email to Former Colleague

SUBJECT: Research participant request

Dear _____

I hope you're well!

I'm currently studying for my MSc in Education at the University of Oxford, focusing on digital and social change and I was wondering if you would be willing to participate in my research for my dissertation? My focus is on the process of curriculum design, particularly on how senior and middle leaders in schools and exam boards go about planning or adapting curriculum and whether this involves thinking about preparing students to be "digital citizens".

I'd like to interview you for 45-60 minutes. I'd be more than happy to come and visit you at work for the interview, or to carry it out over Microsoft Teams. All data will be anonymised, including information about the school and would be for use only in my dissertation.

My aim is for this to be useful for you as well, so I'd be happy to discuss what is meant by digital citizenship and how this is reflected in academic literature, but I also want to give you time to think about this and your own practice. Above all, I am really interested in hearing what you've got to say about curriculum design and how this relates to young people and the purpose of education more generally.

I'm hoping to carry out interviews in March and April this year. If you would be happy to participate, please let me know and we can organise a time to meet.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

██████

Cold-Call Email

SUBJECT: Enquiry regarding research with the University of Oxford on digital citizenship and curriculum design.

Dear _____

I hope you're well!

My apologies for emailing out of the blue; I am currently studying for my MSc in Education at the University of Oxford, and I am reaching out to see if you, or any of your colleagues, would be willing to participate in my research for my dissertation. This would require around one

hour of your time, and I hope would be useful and interesting for you and for your school. As a former teacher myself – I worked for several years as a [REDACTED] – I know how busy everyone in education is, so I would do my best to ensure a positive experience for you.

My focus is on the process of curriculum design, particularly on how senior and middle leaders in schools and exam boards go about planning or adapting curriculum and whether this involves thinking about preparing students to be “digital citizens”. This is not something that has been extensively studied, particularly in how this affects teachers and curriculum designers who are at the coalface, as it were, so it would be fantastic to have your input and to be able to share with you some of the ways researchers are thinking about how we prepare students to operate in an increasingly digital world.

I’d like to interview you for 45-60 minutes. I’d be more than happy to come and visit you at work for the interview, or to carry it out over Microsoft Teams. All data will be anonymised, including information about the school and would be for use only in my dissertation.

My aim is for this to be useful for you as well, so I’d be happy to discuss what is meant by digital citizenship and how this is reflected in academic literature, but I also want to give you time to think about this and your own practice. Above all, I am really interested in hearing what you’ve got to say about curriculum design and how this relates to young people and the purpose of education more generally.

I’m hoping to carry out interviews in March and April this year. If you would be happy to participate, please let me know and we can organise a time to meet.

With my very best wishes and thanks for your time,

[REDACTED]

The Department of Education

University of Oxford

Snowball Email

SUBJECT: Enquiry for research with the University of Oxford on digital citizenship and curriculum design.

Dear _____

I hope you're well!

I was given your email by _____, who suggested that you might be able to help with my research for my MSc in Education? Thank you very much for being open to this, it is enormously appreciated. As a former teacher myself – I worked for several years as a _____ – I know how busy everyone in education is! Please do not feel that you need to participate in this research, though I will do my best to ensure that it is a positive experience for you.

My focus is on the process of curriculum design, particularly on how senior and middle leaders in schools and exam boards go about planning or adapting curriculum and whether this involves thinking about preparing students to be “digital citizens”. This is not something that has been extensively studied, particularly in how this affects teachers and curriculum designers who are at the coalface, as it were, so it would be fantastic to have your input and to be able to share with you some of the ways researchers are thinking about how we prepare students to operate in an increasingly digital world.

I’d like to interview you for 45-60 minutes. I’d be more than happy to come and visit you at work for the interview, or to carry it out over Microsoft Teams. All data will be anonymised, including information about the school and would be for use only in my dissertation.

My aim is for this to be useful for you as well, so I’d be happy to discuss what is meant by digital citizenship and how this is reflected in academic literature, but I also want to give you time to think about this and your own practice. Above all, I am really interested in hearing what you’ve got to say about curriculum design and how this relates to young people and the purpose of education more generally.

I’m hoping to carry out interviews in March and April this year. If you would be happy to participate, please let me know and we can organise a time to meet.

With my very best wishes and thanks for your time,

The Department of Education

University of Oxford

Mobilize Advert

Calling all curriculum designers! I am looking for participants with experience of designing curriculum in English secondary comprehensive schools for my MSc in Education at the University of Oxford. I am focusing particularly on how curriculum can be designed for social change, focusing on digital citizenship. I would like to carry out interviews over Teams for 45-60 minutes in March and April; please let me know if you would like to participate, as well as

a little information about your experience of curriculum design. While I am not able to offer any financial reward, I hope that you will find participating interesting and useful! Thank you.

General Enquiry

I hope you're well!

I'm currently studying for my MSc in Education at the University of Oxford, focusing on digital and social change, and I was wondering if it would be possible to reach out to potential research participants through you? As a former teacher myself – I worked for several years as a [REDACTED] – I know how busy everyone in education is so I will do my best to ensure that it is a positive experience for anyone who agrees to participate.

My focus is on the process of curriculum design in Religious Education, particularly on how leaders in schools and exam boards go about planning or adapting curriculum and whether this involves thinking about preparing students to be “digital citizens”. This is not something that has been extensively studied, particularly in how this affects teachers and curriculum designers who are at the coalface, as it were, so it would be fantastic to have input and to be able to share some of the ways researchers are thinking about how we prepare students to operate in an increasingly digital world.

I'd like to interview participants for 45-60 minutes, either in person or on Microsoft Teams. All data will be anonymised, including information about the school and would be for use only in my dissertation.

My aim is for this to be useful, so I'd be happy to discuss what is meant by digital citizenship and how this is reflected in academic literature, but I also want to give participants time to think about this and their own practice. Above all, I am really interested in hearing what professionals have got to say about curriculum design and how this relates to young people and the purpose of education more generally.