

# Teachers' Professional Identity in the Digital World: A digital ethnography of Religious Education teachers' engagement in online social space.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an ethnographic investigation of teachers' peer-to-peer engagement in online social spaces, using the concept of teachers' professional identity as a framework to shape and focus the study. Using Religious Education (RE) as a strong example of the wider phenomenon of teachers' online engagement, three online social spaces (the Times Educational Supplement's RE Forum, the National Association of Teachers of RE Facebook Page, and the Save RE Facebook Group) were investigated as case studies. A year was spent in these spaces with digital ethnographic research taking place simultaneously in each one. Data gathering primarily took the form of participant observations, in depth analysis of time-based sampled text (three 8-week samples from each space), online and offline narrative based interviews and, to a lesser extent, questionnaires, elite interviews and analysis of grey literature.

The study finds that engagement in the online social spaces offered teachers opportunities to perform and construct their professional identities across a variety of topics ranging from local practical concerns to national political issues. In more practical topics the spaces could often be observed as acting as communities of practice in which professional learning took place and identities were constructed, with such online professional development influencing offline classroom practice. However, engaging across this spectrum of topics afforded users a broad conception of what it means to be a teacher, where professional identity was understood as going beyond classroom practice and integrating engagement with subject-wide, political and policy related issues at a national level. Such engagement provided many users with a feeling of belonging to a national community of peers, which, alongside political activism initiated in online interaction and meaning making debates concerning the future and identity of the subject, provided teachers with feelings of empowerment and a sense of ownership of their subject.

However, the study found that teachers' online engagement took place within structures embedded in the online social spaces that influenced and shaped engagement and the ways in which users' professional identities were performed and constructed. These structures were linked with the design and technical affordances of the spaces, the agendas of the parent organisations that provided the spaces, and the discourses that dominated the spaces. These aspects of the spaces provided a structure that limited engagement, content and available online identity positions while additionally projecting ideal identity positions, distinctive in each space. These ideal identity positions had a constructive influence over many users who aspired to these ideals, often gaining confidence through expressing such socially validated ideals or feeling inadequate when failing to perform such ideal identity positions. Thus, this study finds a complex relationship between agency linked with active online identity performance and the constructive influence of embedded structures that contributed to the shaping of users' engagement and their understandings of themselves as professionals and their subject.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

I reached out and shook the hand of a smiling woman, thanking her for meeting me and the time we had already spent online discussing her engagement in RE related online social spaces. We had been interacting on the Internet for two months already, writing to each other on a nearly daily basis in the Times Educational Supplement's RE Forum and in a Google Document as part of an online interview. In that time Dara had shared a lot about herself and her professional life as an RE teacher in a very open and, at times, intense way. We both felt that we knew each other quite well by this stage, so the move from online communication to an offline meeting felt natural and rooted in friendship and trust. However, I was still slightly taken aback that this friendly, practical teacher, who had been so generous in helping me with my studies, was at the heart of a great deal of often very intense conflict that took place on the forum. Nearly all my participants had specifically mentioned her, some even warning me about her and her online hostility, but here she was, sitting in front of me smiling, about to start explaining why she felt conflict and arguing with her online peers was such an important part of who she was as an RE teacher.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dara was one of a number of participants I interviewed as part of this study of Religious Education (RE) teachers' engagement in online social spaces. Here 'online social space' is being used as a term that denotes a website or section of a website that houses social content. Although the word 'space' can have some sociological and technological interpretations attached to it, it is used here

simply as a practical way of describing the areas of the Internet in which user engagement took place. The study focused on three open subject-specific online social spaces used by RE teachers – the Time Educational Supplement (TES) RE Forum, the National Association of Teachers of RE's (NATRE) Facebook Page, and the Save RE Facebook Group. Rather than being linked with any specific courses, CPD activities or locations, these spaces were open to anyone wanting to engage within them and populated by RE teachers at a variety of stages in their careers, in a variety of different types of school across the country. Each space was conceptualised as a separate case study and I spent a year simultaneously in each one undertaking a digital ethnography. Throughout my time in the field I acted as a participant observer and gathered data by participating in these online social spaces and observing users' interactions, analysing text, and conducting narrative based online and offline interviews.

As will be described below, RE has been used as an extreme example in order to shed light on the wider phenomenon of teachers' engagement in online social spaces. Although such engagement and teachers' subject-specific interactions with their peers are investigated in broad terms, it is argued that many aspects of teachers' engagement in online social spaces can be conceptualized as a form of identity work. A conceptual framework of teachers' professional identity has therefore been adopted as a tool to discuss these aspects of teachers' online engagement and interactions and provide an analytical springboard to investigate wider issues related to such use. The study consequently seeks to investigate the ways in which teachers' engagement in online social spaces contributes to or influences teachers' professional lives, their understandings of

themselves as teachers and the performance and construction of their professional identities. In doing so this thesis discusses the power structures embedded in online social spaces, the influence of interest groups and parent organisations on the spaces and teachers' identity work within them, the importance of social and political contexts for teachers' online engagement, the complex relationship between agency and structure, and the ways in which online and offline contexts relate to each other. The study particularly draws on the work of Goffman (1959), Hogan (2010), and Lave and Wenger (1991) to discuss these issues and offer a theorised account of teachers' engagement in online social spaces.

## **Rationale**

Although still a relatively new area, academic interest in teachers' online engagement and peer-to-peer interactions has grown significantly in the last fifteen years and even noticeably during the time I have spent undertaking this research. For example, in 1997, as part of the National Grid for Learning initiative, the Department for Education (DfE) sought to create a number of virtual teacher communities to facilitate online interaction. In a cyclical fashion, the DfE highlighted teachers' informal online CPD as an area they were interested in (DfE, 2013) and a representative requested a summary of this project's findings at the end of 2013.

Research at the beginning of the 21st century focused on the *potential* that online social spaces had as contexts that could provide opportunities for teachers to

interact with each other (e.g. Selwyn, 2000; DeWert *et al.*, 2003), overcoming practical difficulties frequently found to hinder teachers' offline peer-to-peer networking and interaction (Hargreaves, 1993). However, more recent interest in teachers' online engagement perhaps reflects the growing use of online social spaces by teachers (Duncan-Howell, 2010). As a potential becomes an actuality, research has consequently increasingly focused on actual online engagement reflecting this growth in use. As argued by Duncan-Howell, the impact of the Internet on people's lives has become pervasive in recent years and more and more often teachers are turning to online contexts - forums, social media etc. - for professional support and profession-related social interaction (2010: 324; McConnell *et al.*, 2012).

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been an increased emphasis in educational research on biography and on understanding the motivations and life histories of teachers. This, combined with increased academic interest in socio-cultural understandings of learning, has led to groups and communities being highlighted as important places for professional development, learning opportunities and identity work. (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Borko, 2004; Stoll *et al.*, 2006). Consequently a large number of studies have focused on professional groups and communities of teachers and argued that collaborative interaction within them is beneficial to teachers' development and their understandings of themselves as professionals, their subject and their practice (Kemmis, 1989; Hargreaves, 1993; Huberman, 2001). Particular emphasis has been placed on the importance of participation in subject-specific groups for self-understanding, meaning-making and networking and the ways in which such

participation can help overcome feelings of isolation, build confidence and encourage teachers' professional learning and development (Kemmis, 1989; Goldenberg and Gallimore, 1991; Hargreaves, 1993; Huberman, 2001; Stehle *et al.*, 2001; Borko, 2004; Boyle *et al.*, 2004; McConnell *et al.*, 2012).

However, it has been highlighted that offline peer-to-peer interaction and the support offered by professional groups, communities and networks are not always readily available to teachers given the messy realities and inconsistent CPD structures of schools and local authorities (Hargreaves, 1993; McConnell *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, online contexts have been highlighted as spaces that teachers have increasingly turned to for professional support and peer-to-peer subject-specific interaction (Hur and Brush, 2009). A number of studies have therefore investigated online groups and communities for teachers as important places for sharing emotions, overcoming isolation, exploring ideas and resources, experiencing camaraderie, and improving ICT skills (Hur and Brush, 2009) by focusing on professional learning (Leask and Younie, 2001), the establishment of relevance and meaning (Moore and Barab, 2002), the informal exchange of good practice and learning (Avalos, 2011) and peer support and guidance (Bond, 2004; Cornu, 2004; Matei, 2005).

Thus, teachers' engagement in online social spaces can be seen as providing a potentially rich site for professional development, learning, and meaning-making, while providing key support for teachers in their professional lives. However, as mentioned above, many early studies of teachers' online engagement tended to focus on this potential of online contexts for fostering

supportive communities rather than actually studying teachers' online interactions, groups and communities in open and organic contexts. This led Kirschner and Lai to argue, in 2007, that much of the literature on teachers' online interactions is still at a largely theoretical stage and there is an increasing need for more empirical studies (2007: 127). The number of empirical studies focusing on teachers' use of online social spaces has increased since Kirschner and Lai's analysis of the state of the field, but much of this work has focused on initial teacher training (ITT) and trainee teachers interacting in closed virtual learning environments (VLEs) linked with their courses (Moore and Chae, 2007; Lamote and Engels, 2010; Timostsuk and Ugaste, 2010; Trent and Lim, 2010) and has not explored the wider issue of online engagement beyond ITT and in more open contexts. Where studies have investigated teachers' engagement in online social spaces beyond ITT, they have tended to focus on VLEs linked with university led Masters courses (Wheeler *et al.*, 2005), specific CPD courses (Chen *et al.*, 2009), or official state or school projects designed to build communities of teachers online (Karagiorgi and Lymbouridou, 2009). The focus of such studies has consequently been on the setting up and maintenance of such spaces and communities, rather than the spaces themselves or the teachers that use them.

Therefore, Duncan-Howell (2010) and Hur and Bush (2009) have emphasised the need for studies that focus on what they term 'self-generated online communities of teachers' (Hur and Bush 2009: 280), highlighting the increasing participation of teachers at a variety of stages in their careers within them. This term, 'self-generated online communities', refers to groups of teachers that have naturally or organically come together in online spaces that are not specifically

linked with local contexts or courses, but are rather open, national and are, in most cases, subject-specific (Duncan-Howell, 2010). Thus, given the growing number of teachers engaging in this kind of online social space (Hur and Bush, 2009; Duncan-Howell, 2010; McConnel *et al.*, 2012) and the growing view that such spaces may have an extremely important role to play in teachers' lives (Chen *et al.*, 2009) there is a clear need for research that focuses in this area. Therefore, this study focuses on teachers' engagement in these kinds of open online spaces that are not tied to any course, specific CPD activity or locality, and are used by teachers at a variety of stages in their careers.

However, I have deliberately avoided Duncan-Howell's and Hur and Bush's term 'self-generated communities' since it perhaps over emphasises the agency of the users in generating their own community. This potentially risks overlooking the important roles played by interest groups involved in the spaces, the parent organisations that provide the online spaces, and the embedded social and technological structures in which groups of professionals interact. As will be discussed in the following chapters, these groups and structures can have an important influence on shaping the ways in which users engage online. An emphasis on the grassroots, self-generation of groups by their members risks overlooking the potential for the top-down shaping of engagement.

Similarly, I have also avoided the use of the word 'community', despite its proliferation in the literature (see Grossman, 2000; McConnell, 2006 for a critique of the use of the concept of community in educational literature) in order to avoid making assumptions about the kinds of groupings of users that

take place in the online spaces studied in this thesis (Selwyn, 2000). Instead, I have adopted the term online social space (Bourdieu, 1989; Coldron and Smith, 1999; boyd and Ellison, 2010; Boellstorff, 2012), as a way of talking about the locations in which teachers interact without needing to resort to assuming groups of teachers form an online 'community'. Where the term community is used in the findings chapters and discussion, particularly in relation to the concept of Community of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) it is in relation to specific instances where communities had been observed using the definitions of Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998, 2007), Wubbels, (2007: 228) and Barab *et al.* (2004: 55).

Thus, in this thesis I have focused on open online social spaces used by teachers in a variety of locations and at a variety of stages in their careers. Engagement within the spaces is not necessitated by participation in a course, activity or from a local authority dictate. Rather teachers have decided to engage in them by choice and so groups within the spaces have grown organically. The study reflects the growing use of these spaces, the potential importance they may have in teachers' professional lives and a growing need for subject-specific empirical studies of teachers' actual engagement in these kinds of online social spaces.

However, as a researcher, I came to this area for a number of additional reasons related to my own personal and professional background and experiences.

These are rooted in an early interest in religion and philosophy, which led me to study theology as an undergraduate. I continued this interest by taking a part-time distance-learning masters in Buddhist studies, which also introduced me to

the field of educational technology. During this time I worked at a number of jobs including spending two years running a recording studio. A major source of income at the studio was working for publishing companies producing the audio for educational resources, which further developed my interest in educational technology. This then came together with my Religious Studies background when, in 2006, I started working for Culham St Gabriel's, a charitable trust involved in funding and producing digital resources for religious education and religious education teachers.

A major part of my role at Culham St Gabriel's has been managing a website providing resources for RE teachers. In 2009 I was involved in attempting to set up a social network for RE teachers as part of that site. This was initially successful with RE PGCE students, but failed when we tried to involve the wider teaching community. Through that process I became interested in the issues around teacher related online social spaces, about success and failure, and about reasons for use. However, perhaps most importantly, I was fascinated by the basic assumption that appeared to be held by everyone involved in both the funding and technical development of the site: that online social spaces were vitally important for teachers. Therefore, when the opportunity came to undertake doctoral research funded by Culham St Gabriel's, I was drawn to this issue. As such, part of the rationale for this thesis is rooted in this personal story and a desire to problematize this area and unpack assumptions related to the importance and value of professional related online social spaces.

## Why focus on Religious Education?

Although this study aims to contribute to the wider phenomenon of teachers' engagement in online social spaces, the immediate focus is on Religious Education (RE) teachers. Part of the reason to focus on RE teachers relates to the aforementioned need, highlighted in the literature, for subject specific studies, reflecting the subject specific online networking and interactions that take place (McConnell *et al.*, 2009). However, additionally, in the context of teachers' peer-to-peer online engagement, it is arguable that RE provides a very interesting extreme case. As will be expanded in the following chapter, RE, as a subject, occupies a fairly unique position in the wider UK educational framework: it is a statutory subject but not part of the national curriculum, instead being locally determined; it is frequently taught by sole subject-specialists in schools, meaning that school-based interaction with subject-specialist peers is often rare (REC, 2013a) and as such RE teachers' experiences are often characterised by feelings of isolation (NATRE, 2012b); finally the possibility of peer-to-peer interaction has been further eroded by the dismantling of local support structures and CPD provided by local authorities as part of the coalition government's policy developments (Keast, 2012). It has been suggested that these factors have left RE teachers in particular need of interaction with fellow subject specialists and, although no specific cross-subject research has been undertaken, online social spaces dedicated to RE are especially busy and vibrant (Chater, 2011; NATRE, 2012a; 2012b; REC, 2013a).

Thus, RE may provide an extreme case study since it is a subject in which a need for online subject-specific professional interaction is acutely felt. As such RE

teachers' engagement in online social spaces has the potential to provide an example of deeper and more meaningful interaction than may occur in other subjects, since it may represent the only peer-to-peer networking many of the users have available to them. A study of RE teachers' online engagement may, therefore, provide an important starting place for making generalisations about the wider phenomenon of teachers' engagement in online social spaces.

## **Aims of the Study**

Thus, focusing on RE as an extreme case, the primary aim of this study is to investigate the ways in which teachers engage in online social spaces and the ways in which that engagement contributes to teachers' professional lives, their understandings of themselves as professionals and their understandings of their subjects. The study focuses on open spaces used by a variety of different kinds of teachers, from different kinds of schools and in different locations in the country. In order to provide conceptual clarity a conceptual framework of teachers' professional identity has been adopted to discuss some aspects of teachers' online engagement and, as such, the study seeks to investigate the ways in which online engagement can contribute to teachers' professional understandings of themselves and their subject embodied in the performance and construction of their professional identities (the framework, research question and focus are outlined in the following chapter). Given the social and situated understanding of engagement, the study additionally seeks to explore the relationship between teachers' social and political contexts and their engagement in online social spaces using the concept of identity which locates individuals in their social and

political contexts as well as providing an analytical lens in order to discuss the potential activities involved in online engagement in a holistic way.

Although the aim of using RE as an extreme case study is to shed light on the wider issue of teachers' engagement in online social spaces, it is hoped that the study will also contribute to the specific literature on RE and RE teachers. The attention that RE teachers have attracted from researchers over the years, as compared with teachers of other subjects, is relatively small, making them, as argued by Sikes and Everington, 'a neglected and marginalized group' (2004: 21). Therefore, this study aims to provide a contribution to wider literature on teachers' use of online social spaces as well as providing additional research on the under-studied area of RE teachers' professional interactions and understandings of themselves as professionals.

## **Overview of the Chapters**

This thesis has been organised into eight chapters.

In chapter two, I situate the study in its educational, social, political and academic contexts. In the first instance, the historical background of Religious Education is described. This is followed by a review of the current context and a discussion of the ways in which recent policy changes prior to and during the fieldwork period influenced and were perceived to influence the subject and RE teachers' professional experiences. The wider literature on teachers' engagement in online social spaces is discussed, focusing on the movement from the body of literature in the 1990s which tended to concentrate on the potential

benefits of such engagement, to a focus on actual practice and a need for more empirical studies on open online social spaces used by teachers. The literature on teachers' professional development is then discussed, a broad conceptual framework is outlined, and the research question and focus are presented.

Chapter three provides a description of the adopted methodological approach – digital ethnography – discussing the methodological issues and epistemological assumptions surrounding it. This includes a description of how the field was conceptualized, how online participation was understood, and the importance placed on reflexivity. A detailed research design is outlined and the specific data collection methods and participant sampling techniques are described, giving particular attention to an interview method designed to bring online and offline contexts together. The methods of data analysis and the ways of presenting ethnographic findings are then discussed.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical issues involved in the study. Here the decision to name the online social spaces that have been studied is presented with a particular focus on the difficulties involved in ensuring users' and participants' anonymity when their posts and interactions are preserved in the public domain and the consequential decision to minimize direct quotations that came from participant observation. The wider ethical issues involved in ethnography and social science research are also be presented and an operational ethical framework, based on the BERA and AoIR frameworks, that has informed this thesis is outlined.

The fourth chapter, the first of three findings chapters, is focused on presenting data related to the TES RE Forum. The chapter begins with a detailed description of the online social space, providing user statistics, describing the ethos, activity and management structures. The variety of different ways in which RE teachers engaged in the space is described, with particular attention being given to teachers overcoming feelings isolation, seeking professional support and reassurance, engaging in political issues and debates, engaging in general debate, arguing and conflict, and participating in practical collaborations and resource sharing. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of the power structures at work on the TES RE Forum and the ways in which the TES's agendas influenced online engagement and the performance and construction of RE teachers' professional identities.

Chapter five, presenting findings and analysis of the NATRE Facebook Page, begins with a detailed description of the space, providing user statistics, describing the ethos, activity and management structures, and detailing examples of posts, links, likes and observed behaviour. The discussion focuses on the ways in which the dominant political discourses on the NATRE Facebook Page influenced the ways in which users engaged within it and the identity positions that they performed and resisted within the discourses, through both textual interaction and 'likes'. Particular attention is given to the political nature of the space, the way it was perceived by users as a PR tool, the ways in which interaction within the page overlapped with users' wider group of Facebook friends and their wider offline lives, and the feeling of unity engagement within such a space provided many users. The chapter concludes with a discussion of

the ways in which NATRE's political and commercial agendas may have influenced the promotion of the political discourse that permeated its Facebook page and the influence this had on the ethos of the space and the performance and construction of its users' professional identities within it.

Chapter six, the final findings chapter, presenting data and analysis on the Save RE Facebook Group, begins, as the chapter on the NATRE Facebook Page, with a detailed description of the space, providing user statistics, describing the ethos, activity and management structures, and detailing examples of posts, links, likes and observed behaviour. The discussion focuses on the grass roots nature of the Save RE Facebook Page as a space started by an RE teacher for the political purpose of 'Saving RE' in the face of Governmental policy change (particularly the introduction of the English Baccalaureate), but which has been appropriated by its users for a number of different purposes, with most interaction being rooted in practical issues. This practical focus of the space is described in relation to the way political activity was discussed in practical local terms, the way the space provided opportunities for providing and receiving advice, sharing resources, networking for employment opportunities, ranting and meaning-making arguments related to subject ownership and subject identity. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ways in which different interest groups attempted to appropriate the space, presenting competing and conflicting discourses, which provided a constructive structure influencing the ways in which users performed and constructed their professional identities.

Chapter seven provides a discussion and synthesis of the findings. Starting with

a comparison of the three online social spaces, key macro themes are outlined and it is argued that RE teachers' engagement in online social spaces can be conceptualised as taking place across a spectrum of topical engagement, between extremes of local classroom-based practical topics and national political topics. Engagement across this spectrum took the form of a variety of modes of interaction, with conflict playing a dominant role in the way users communicated with each other. It is further argued that embedded power structures, linked with dominant discourses, both online and in wider society, and parent organisations' agendas and interests, influenced the ways in which users engaged within the spaces.

The way in which users' professional identities were performed and constructed through their engagement in the online social spaces is then discussed. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory it is argued that the spaces provided users simultaneously with a front region, in which identity was strategically performed, an exhibition space (Hogan, 2010), in which identity was exhibited, and a back region, in which identity was rehearsed and constructed. The construction of identity is further theorised by drawing on Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice theory and it is argued that the spaces can provide a constructive environment in which social learning can take place. It is finally argued that the spaces are best conceptualised as hybrid spaces in which performance, exhibition and construction of identity can take place through both active and more passive forms of engagement.

The eighth chapter concludes this thesis. Building on the framework developed in the previous chapter it is argued that engagement in online social spaces provided RE teachers with a unique opportunity to perform and construct identities across a range of practical and political topics. In doing so they were able to engage in their subject at both a local and a national level, providing them with a sense of subject ownership and subject control as they negotiated a national subject identity. Finally the chapter concludes with a brief summary of the aims of the study and discussion of the extent to which these have been met, followed by a discussion of the limitations and the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond the RE world to other subject areas, the teaching professional as a whole and the wider phenomenon of teachers engagement in online social spaces.

## **CHAPTER 2: SITUATING THE STUDY IN ITS SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND RESEARCH CONTEXTS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will initially situate the study in the educational and political contexts relating to Religious Education. The description of the study's subject specific background will be followed by a wider discussion of research into teachers' engagement in online social spaces and the interrelated concepts of professional learning and professional identity are highlighted as key areas that have shaped the analytical process of this thesis. Finally, the chapter concludes with an outline of a working conceptual framework, the research question and focus that have directed the study.

### **Religious Education: Background**

This study aims to contribute to the wider issue of teachers' engagement in online social spaces using RE teachers' online engagement as a case study of this wider phenomenon. Therefore in order to explore this very specific case it is important to provide some background information on RE as a subject. This is particularly important since online engagement is conceptualised as being located in social and political contexts and, as will be discussed in the findings chapters, a significant part of RE teachers' engagement in online social spaces revolved around the current political context surrounding RE. Therefore, in the following section, RE will be briefly located in its historical context, then a description of the context at the time of the fieldwork will be given and the ways

in which policy changes implemented prior to and during the fieldwork period (September 2011 to September 2012) have influenced and have been perceived to influence the subject.

### **The Historical Context**

Under the landmark 1988 Education Reform Act, the provision of religious education underwent significant changes. The subject, previously known as religious instruction (RI), was given the designation Religious Education – although debates raged over whether religious studies would have more appropriately severed the subject's ties with confessionalism<sup>1</sup>. RE was now required to teach the 'principle religions represented in the UK', but reflect 'the fact that religious traditions in the UK are in the main Christian' (Copley, 1997: 146). This was a hotly contested clause at the time and something that is still being debated – the recent Ofsted reports (Ofsted 2007 and 2010), for example, criticize the current teaching of Christianity in both primary and secondary schools.

However, arguably the most important legacy of the 1988 Education Reform Act as far as RE was concerned was the fact that the subject was left out of the newly created national curriculum. Instead it was placed in something vaguely defined as the 'basic curriculum' (Gearon, 2010). This enshrined RE in primary legislation as a statutory subject, but left the determination of syllabuses in the hands of local authorities, through syllabus writing conferences and the work of

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<sup>1</sup> A much criticized approach that aimed to encourage religious belief in students, akin to indoctrination.

local SACREs (Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education). Although the introduction of the Non-Statutory National Framework for RE in 2004 by the then DfES and now defunct QCA provided national guidance for syllabus writing conferences and was highly influential, it has still not been adopted by a number of local authorities (Birmingham 2007, for example). Recent work by the RE Council for England and Wales has attempted to supersede this and bring together some of the disparate elements in the RE world, but the influence of the recently published *Review of Religious Education in England* (REC, 2013b) remains to be seen.

Despite its statutory requirements, RE is frequently viewed by both RE teachers and commentators within the RE world as a 'Cinderella subject' (see Copley, 1997). Outside the RE world, it is frequently viewed as existing at the bottom of the subject hierarchy and perceived as a soft subject often with little need for significant allocated classroom time (NATRE, 2012a). Additionally, as suggested by Sikes and Everington, RE teachers face prejudicial judgments from their peers and society at large and frequently have to reconcile these prejudices against RE with their own professional identities and subject understandings (2004).

However, despite this, Religious Education seems to have grown in popularity significantly in the last decade. Record numbers of students took GCSE and A Level examinations in the subject in 2011 and 2012 (JCQ, 2011, 2012). The number of students, and, importantly, the percentage of the total, taking these examinations have increased annually since 2000 (JCQ, 2000-12). The GCSE short course in RE saw a similar increase in the number of students taking it in

the last decade, with nearly 60% of all students sitting the exam in 2011 (JCQ, 2011). However, with the recent policy changes and the emphasis on English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects, as will be discussed below, the numbers of students taking the short course dropped significantly in following years and the course has been dropped by the majority of schools (NATRE, 2012b; REC, 2013a).

Thus, historically RE has occupied a peculiar place in the UK education system as a statutory but locally determined subject, which often has been perceived negatively within schools and by the general public. Despite a relatively recent renewed interest in the subject, particularly following 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre (Moulin, 2011), RE teachers have had to reconcile competing negative discourses about the value of their subject, its place within schools and their own professional identities and understandings of the subject (Sikes and Everington, 2001; Sikes and Everington, 2004; Baumfield, 2007).

### **RE in the current context**

Despite a period of sustained growth in numbers taking RS at GCSE and A Level and the apparent growing interest in the subject, it has been argued that RE is facing a number of rapidly emerging challenges and changes as a direct result of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government's educational reforms (Chater, 2011; Keast, 2011; Keast, 2012; NATRE, 2012a; 2012b; REC, 2013a; 2013b). While, to a certain extent, some of the issues outlined below were already in existence under the Labour Government and the subject faces wider

challenges relating to secularism and an increasingly negative perception of religion in the world (Copley, 1997), the Academies Act (Great Britain, 2010), the Free Schools work (Great Britain, 2010), the Curriculum Review (DfE, 2011) and the English Baccalaureate measures (2012) have all served to accelerate change, bringing existing issues into sharper focus and raising a number of new ones.

Broadly speaking the changes and challenges that RE as a subject faced during the field work period and continues to face in the current political and social context can be brought together into three main groups: the changing nature of RE in schools; a reduction in CPD opportunities leading to the increasing isolation of specialist RE teachers; and the evolving changes in teacher training.

Immediately prior to and during the fieldwork period the biggest perceived threat to RE in schools was the omission of the subject from the then newly proposed English Baccalaureate (EBacc). The EBacc is defined by the DfE as ‘a performance measure, not a qualification’ (<https://www.gov.uk/english-baccalaureate-information-for-schools>). The measure shows where pupils have secured a C grade or above across a core of academic subjects at Key Stage 4, with an aim to provide parents with information on school performance. It is not compulsory, although it is now taken into account by Ofsted. The EBacc is made up of the following subjects: English, Mathematics, History or Geography, the sciences, and a language.

A number of organisations involved in the RE world (the REC<sup>2</sup>, NATRE, the ACCT<sup>3</sup> etc.) argued that an emphasis on these subjects as a performance measure would detract from other subjects, particularly humanities, not included in the approved list, as they would receive reduced teaching time and would be under-prioritised in schools. However, despite national agitation by RE teachers, faith groups and academics, an Early Day Motion tabled by Stephen Lloyd MP, two parliamentary debates, and the presentation of evidence illustrating the adverse affects of the EBacc on RE (NATRE, 2012a and 2012b), the Department for Education announced in July 2011, prior to the publication of the select committee review, that RE would not feature in the EBacc:

Last year's publication of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) prompted much interest and debate about the range of subjects which it should encompass. After consideration of representations, and to provide schools with certainty, the Secretary of State is minded to **leave the subjects unchanged** [emphasis in the original] i.e. English, maths, two sciences, history or geography, and an ancient or modern foreign language (DfE, 2011b: 5).

The aforementioned surveys conducted by the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) suggested that timetabling and teacher provision in schools was already being affected by the EBacc proposals before the measure had been formally launched (NATRE, 2012a and 2012b). For example, in the first survey, NATRE questioned 4,200 secondary schools, getting 800 responses, and found that one in three secondary schools planned to reduce the time allocated to teaching RE from September 2011 (NATRE, 2012a). The surveys also recorded the shrinking of RE departments with some RE teachers already having been made redundant and many RE teacher posts, when they had been vacated in

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<sup>2</sup> The Religious Education Council of England and Wales

<sup>3</sup> Association of Church College Trusts

relation to the normal movement of staff, being replaced with history or geography teachers (the humanities subjects in the EBacc) (NATRE, 2012b).

These findings have been confirmed by research undertaken by the RE Council on behalf of the All Party-Parliamentary Group (APPG) for RE, which found that RE teachers in schools are frequently sole subject specialists, with teaching support coming from teachers with other specialisms, and that teaching time for the subject had been significantly reduced following the introduction of the EBacc (REC, 2013).

The official DfE response to criticisms highlighting the potential challenges facing RE as a result of policy changes was to emphasise the statutory nature of the subject (DfE, 2011a: 2; NATRE, 2012a; REC, 2013)<sup>4</sup>. However, despite this, with the DfE's emphasis on relaxing statutory curriculum requirements, Ofsted inspection frameworks no longer focus on monitoring the delivery of the statutory curriculum (Keast, 2011: 1) – a trend already highlighted by the Ofsted long reports on RE (2007 and 2010). This has consequently left RE in the odd situation of being an unenforced statutory subject.

The statutory nature of the subject was further eroded during the fieldwork period by the continued drive towards the academization of schools and the creation of free schools embodied in the Academies Act (Great Britain, 2010).

Under current legislation RE's statutory status in community schools is rooted in primary legislation. However, the statutory provision of RE in Academies' and

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<sup>4</sup> Although in July 2013 Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove admitted that RE 'had suffered' as a result of policy changes and the DfE's assumption that the statutory nature of the subject would protect it was incorrect (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-23191048>)

Free Schools' is only contained in their funding documents, having originally been omitted from Academies Bill and the Academies Act (DfE, 2010; Great Britain, 2010). The implication of this subtle distinction is that where the statutory provision of RE had been enshrined in primary legislation, an act of parliament would be required to change this; for Academies and Free Schools, the statutory nature of RE is only upheld by secondary legislation, which can be changed by a secretary of state without recourse to parliament.

This legal modification to the status of RE, although not having any immediate affects, contributed to a politically heightened context in which discourses emphasising the challenges facing RE dominated and organisations involved in RE argued that the subject was under attack from Governmental policies (Keast, 2011; NATRE, 2012a; 2012b). Thus, during the fieldwork period, RE in schools tended to be managed by sole subject specialists and was characterised by feelings of instability as teaching time for the subject was reduced in accordance with EBacc priorities and the statutory nature of the subject was perceived to be in doubt.

This all contributed to the perspective that RE teachers were becoming increasingly isolated, as highlighted by the NATRE surveys (2011a; 2011b) and the REC (2013a). It has been argued that isolation is a problem facing many teachers of all subjects (Hargreaves, 1993) and isolation has been highlighted as an issue for RE teachers by a number of academics (see, for example, Copley, 1997; Sikes and Everington, 2004; Baumfield, 2007; Conroy *et al.*, 2013). As seen above, recent reductions in the size of RE departments left many RE teachers

feeling particularly isolated as the sole subject specialist in their schools (NATRE, 2012a and 2012b). In addition to this, the local authority support structures for RE teachers were significantly eroded prior to and during the fieldwork period. Traditionally RE teachers would have had access to CPD, advice and professional networks through Local Authority RE advisors and SACREs. However, as highlighted recently by Ofsted (2010), this sort of provision is patchy across the country, with many Local Authorities no longer providing a dedicated RE advisor. The REC has argued that the funding cuts to Local Authorities and SACREs has increased this problem, with the ability of SACREs to provide support for teachers of RE having been dramatically reduced (2013a). The report, *RE: The Truth Unmasked*, argues that RE teachers in nearly 40% of schools have inadequate access to CPD and peer networks and existing provision is a 'postcode lottery' (REC, 2013a).

This increasing sense of isolation was further enhanced by the changes to Initial Teacher Training (ITT) structures and a reduction in the number of training places allocated to RE in 2010, 2011 and 2012. TDA figures for ITT allocations for the academic year 2011/12 show that RE PGCE places had been reduced nationally by approximately 50% (TDA, 2011). This is illustrative of the Coalition Government's plans, as signalled in the Schools White Paper (2010), to increasingly adopt GTTP and Teach First models and place teacher training in 'Training Schools'. The 2011-12 drop in PGCE allocations led to the closure of a number of RE PGCE courses (Hull, and Warwick for example) and a reduction of staff and funding in others. This led to the dissolution of many of the teacher mentor networks associated with university courses, removing another

opportunity for peer-to-peer professional networking and interaction, further contributing to feelings of isolation in RE teachers (REC, 2013).

Thus, prior to and during the fieldwork period, opportunities for RE teachers to meet and interact with their subject-specialist peers had been increasingly eroded: many teachers were left as sole subject specialists in their schools, local authority and SACRE networks were removed and University based networking structures were demolished. In many instances, as highlighted by the REC report, online social spaces were the only means of subject specific peer-to-peer interaction available to many RE teachers (REC, 2013a). As such, during the fieldwork period, RE teachers' engagement in online social spaces took place within a changing landscape, where the subject appeared to be threatened by recent policy changes, particularly a focus on the EBacc subjects in schools. The context was characterised by increasing isolation and the erosion of offline opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction and was dominated by political rhetoric and campaigning coming from official RE related bodies such as NATRE and the REC. This was all reflected in the ways in which RE teachers engaged online and the kinds of topics that were discussed. As such, this analysis of the context in which RE teachers interacted is key to understanding the ways in which RE teachers engaged in online social spaces and the ways in which they thought about themselves and their subject.

## **Teachers and Online Social Spaces**

Having situated the study in its social context, the following section situates the study in its academic context by discussing the wider research on teachers' online interactions and engagement in online social spaces, networks, groups and communities. This review of relevant literature highlights the need to study the actual engagement of teachers from a variety of stages in their careers in open online social spaces. This is distinct from much of the existing literature which tends to discuss the potential of teachers' peer-to-peer online interactions or focus on closed spaces linked with teacher training, masters' courses or specific CPD activities. The review highlights teachers' professional development as the focus of most of the literature in this area and discusses the importance of social learning and particularly identity construction and performance as ways in which engagement has been conceptualized. A wider review of literature on teachers' professional identity is then presented and a broad conceptual framework for this study based on this is outlined.

### **Potential Benefits vs Actual Use**

In the late 1990s the UK Labour government pledged over £700 million to the formation of a National Grid for Learning (NGfL) – an extensive investment in educational information communications technology. A significant part of this programme of work was aimed at giving teachers access to shared resources and information as well the means to communicate with each other on a local, national, and international basis (DfEE, 1997: 5). To meet these aims a range of official and commercial 'Virtual Teacher Centres' were established aiming to

‘provide invaluable professional support’ and allowing ‘teachers to share issues and expertise from around the country’ (BECTa, 1999: 5 cited in Selwyn, 2000: 751). Online tools, communities and spaces were viewed as exciting opportunities for ‘teachers to share ideas and good practice, to learn quickly from each other, and find out which schools...[were] doing well and why’ (Blunkett, 1998).

As described in the previous chapter, this interest in the potential benefits of online teacher-to-teacher networking and support has re-emerged under the Coalition Government, although perhaps for slightly different reasons<sup>5</sup>. This emphasis on and enthusiasm for teachers’ peer-to-peer online interaction as a key part of professional support, development, and learning emerged from two growing trends in both academic and wider societal thought: firstly, the perceived importance of ‘community’ and professional social interaction for teachers’ development, support and learning; secondly, the growing emphasis, particularly in the 1990s, on online communication, communities, and social spaces as supporting new ways of interacting, learning and participating in identity work. Building on growing interest in social constructivist theories of learning and professional development (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991), education theorists have emphasised the importance of peer-to-peer interaction in teacher development (Kemmis, 1989; Hargreaves, 1993; Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996) and a large number of research projects have focused on the idea of community based learning or professional learning communities as environments in which

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<sup>5</sup> It is arguable that the current interest is more related to ideological reasons, the shrinking of the state, and financial reasons, the reduction in formal CPD delivered in school time.

teachers could come together, develop, and ‘make meaning’ related to their work (Corwin, 1993; Lieberman, 2000).

Teachers’ professional interactions and collaboration have therefore been viewed as key parts of their developing understandings about themselves as professionals and their subjects (Hargreaves, 1993). Thus, emphasis has been placed on teachers’ participation in groups and communities of professionals, particularly subject specific groups, as supporting meaning-making, networking, overcoming isolation, enhancing confidence, and developing practice (Kemmis, 1989; Goldenberg and Gallimore, 1991; Hargreaves, 1993; Huberman, 2001; Stehle *et al.*, 2001; Borko, 2004; Boyle *et al.*, 2004; McConnell *et al.*, 2012).

However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, a number of studies have highlighted the practical difficulties teachers face in participating in peer-to-peer interaction and professional groups and communities given the messy realities of schools and personal lives (Hargreaves, 1993; McConnell *et al.*, 2012). As argued by Sachs and Smith (1988), teachers’ experiences can be characterised by a sense of isolation, working away from peers and building up professional competency on their own, hampered by heavy workloads, limited opportunities for dialogue and busy personal lives. Therefore, as illustrated by the emphasis on virtual teacher communities in the NGfL scheme, online social spaces have been highlighted as potential contexts in which offline limitations could be overcome and peer-to-peer professional interaction could take place (Bakkenes *et al.*, 1999).

This emphasis on the Internet as a context in which teachers could come together in professional groups built on more general ideas and discourses related to the value of Internet technologies in facilitating the construction of communities and new modes of interacting, belonging, learning and being (Wooley, 1992) – applying them to professional and, specifically, teacher-related contexts. For many academics and technological enthusiasts in the 1990s (and beyond), online communication has been seen as a powerful medium for specialist disparate groups of like-minded individuals to form open communities, providing mutual support, advice and identity (Rheingold, 1993; Gates *et al.*, 1995). As Loader argues: ‘communication networks offer the prospect of greater opportunities for seeking advice, challenging orthodoxy, meeting new minds and constructing one’s own sense of self’ (1998: 10). Therefore, the turn of the millennium saw a growing interest in the potential of online social spaces for fostering online professional communities of teachers that could support professional learning, development and identity work while providing key support structures – as illustrated by the positive discourses embedded in literature linked with the NGfL and associated funding for virtual teacher communities.

However, despite this, Selwyn argued that there was a gulf between many of these positive discourses and the ways in which teachers were actually interacting with each other on the Internet (2000). He highlighted the fact that, in the late 1990s, very few teachers were actually engaging in online social spaces or interacting with their colleagues through computer mediated communication. As such, discourses embedded in the NGfL related to online

teacher development should be seen as aspirational rather than evidence based. Similarly, as briefly discussed in the previous chapter, associated academic literature focusing on teachers' online engagement and interactions from the 1990s and early 2000s tends to highlight potential value rather than investigate and analyse actual practice.

As such, a great deal of literature – particularly relatively early literature on online teacher communities, groups, networks – is focused on the creation and sustenance of such groups (De Souza and Preece, 2004). Consequently many academics have focused on issues related to the 'usability' of technology that underlies online spaces (Schlager *et al.*, 1998), social factors related to the creation and establishment of online communities (Karagiorgi and Lymbouridou, 2009), participation levels (De Souza and Preece, 2004), and barriers to participation (Carr and Chambers, 2006). A number of detailed studies have therefore been produced analysing issues related to trust (Hough *et al.*, 2004), knowledge (Sztajn *et al.*, 2007) and the role of the facilitator or moderator (Slavit, 2002; Gray, 2004; Li, 2005; Dalgarno and Colgan, 2007). The majority of these tend to focus on closed online environments linked with teacher training courses, Masters courses or specific CPD projects (Hur and Brush, 2009). This arguably reflects the limited number of teachers using open spaces, highlighted by Selwyn (2000), in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As such many empirical studies of teachers' online engagement have focused on spaces where teachers' online participation was an integral part of a course or formal programme of professional development.

Despite the fact that many of these studies focus on spaces linked with specific educational and training courses or events, a number have highlighted the potential benefits online social spaces, groups, networks and communities may have for teachers on an ongoing basis as part of their longer term career development. It has been argued such spaces can reproduce offline peer-to-peer networking bringing teachers together, overcoming isolation and offline practical difficulties (Duncan-Howell, 2010). They can provide a context in which teachers develop as professionals (Hur and Brush, 2009), through participating in professional learning (Leask and Younie, 2001), negotiating relevance and meaning (Moore and Barab, 2002), exchanging good practice (Avalos, 2011), gaining peer support and guidance (Bond, 2004; Cornu, 2004; Matei, 2005) and engaging in identity work (Selwyn, 2000; Delahunty, 2012).

Thus, while the literature on teachers' engagement in online groups, networks, communities and social spaces is dominated either by theoretical studies emphasising potential rather than actual use or by studies investigating engagement in closed spaces related to education or training, this literature offers an important starting place for any study of open spaces used by teachers at a variety of stages in their careers.

### **Teacher Development**

As illustrated above, the literature on teachers' interactions and engagements in online social spaces, groups, communities and networks offers a variety of nuanced approaches and specific interests. However, across all of these studies

there is one common concern: teacher development (Pratt and Back, 2013). The potential for professional communities, groups and networks of teachers interacting in online social spaces for teacher development was highlighted in relatively early literature in the late 1990s and early 2000s (e.g. Schlager *et al.*, 1998), embedded in the concept of virtual teacher communities in the NGfL (DfEE, 1997: 5), and continued throughout the more recent literature referenced above (Duncan-Howell, 2010). However, in many ways the concept of teacher development is problematic due to the breadth of areas it covers (Boyle *et al.*, 2004). Any activity involving teachers' interacting is frequently viewed as having the potential for professional improvement and so is seen as professional development (Hargreaves, 1993). The term is, therefore, frequently generalized as activity that brings about change in teachers' practices, their attitudes, beliefs and self-concepts (Guskey, 2002) and is rooted in social constructivist ontologies which locates development in the social realm, specifically in interaction.

Using such a definition, many studies view professional development as being synonymous with professional learning (Clary and Wandersee, 2009), which is part of the wider body of literature emphasizing the value of online interaction in terms of learning (Borko, 2004) and highlighting online spaces as holding professional value (Wenger *et al.*, 2009). As such Boyle *et al.* (2004) argue that online collaborative networks are particularly effective in promoting social learning for teachers. Thus, a number of studies have investigated the wider issue of teachers' online interactions focused on teacher development as professional learning (Stoll *et al.*, 2006; Lock, 2006; Kirschner and Lai, 2007; Hur and Brush, 2009; Clary and Wandersee, 2009; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Georgiou *et*

*al.*, 2012; Cho *et al.*, 2013). Kirschner and Lai (2007) for example argue that there is a growing recognition of the importance of online communities and groups as offering support for teachers to reflect on their practice in a collaborative supportive setting and as such engage in collaborative learning. Hur and Brush (2009) expand this to argue that online 'self-generated' communities can support participants' professional development and learning in five main ways: helping users share emotions; helping users to utilize the advantages of technology; helping users to overcome isolation; helping users to explore ideas; helping users to experience a sense of camaraderie.

Thus, it is clear that definitions of development and professional learning are necessarily broad, including a range of activities and factors that support it (Duncan-Howell, 2010). They are rooted in social constructivist theories of learning which emphasise a wide range of interactive activities, social factors and social contexts as being part of the learning process (Palincsar, 1998). Fundamental to such a social constructivist view of teacher development and teacher learning is the concept of teachers' professional identity, where the construction of an identity is viewed as the key part of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Day and Gu, 2007, Hodgen and Askew, 2007): as teachers develop through interactive learning they construct and perform new professional identities becoming new professionals in and through interaction (Soreide, 2006). Thus, where learning and development are conceptualized as taking place through interaction, identity is also seen as being embedded in that interaction, with professional identity being conceptualized in social and discursive terms (Foucault, 1975; Beijaard *et al.*, 2004; Benwell and Stockoe,

2006). Teachers' professional development is consequently frequently expressed in terms of the development of teachers' professional identity and linked with the concept of professional learning (Renee and Wandersee, 2009).

### **Teachers' Professional Identity in Online Social Spaces**

Selwyn, building on wider literature emphasising the potential online contexts have for the construction and performance of identity, highlights a similar potential in relation to teachers' online interactions (2000). Given the social nature of online groups, networks and communities, it has been argued that there is a clear potential for the performance and construction of discursive professional identities (Irwin and Hramiak, 2010; Pratt and Back, 2013).

Coldron and Smith argue that being a teacher is a matter of being seen as a teacher by both oneself and by others: 'it is a matter of acquiring and then redefining an identity that is socially legitimated' (1999: 712). In other words, teachers' professional identities can be viewed as socially constructed and rooted in social interaction. Therefore, the form that social interaction takes is important. Such interaction is often conceptualized as taking place within the classroom. Teachers' professional identities are socially legitimated through interaction with their students (Sfard and Prusak, 2005; Assaf, 2008; Akkerman and Meijjer, 2011). However, a large number of studies locate professional identity in teachers' peer-to-peer interactions (Hargreaves, 1993; Huberman, 2001; Boyle *et al.*, 2004; Taylor and Otinnsky, 2008; Kwan and Lopez-Real, 2010;). Here teachers' professional identities are studied in the context of membership of professional communities (Clarke, 2008).

In such work the relationships between teachers are studied as these teachers relate to each other in cohesive groups and communities. Professional identity is conceptualized as being constructed and performed in communities of peers and located in professional-to-professional interactions (Lamote and Engels, 2010). Much of the literature on teachers' professional identity is focused on identity construction during initial teacher training, reflecting the importance of this time for teachers' sense of themselves as professionals (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2010). As such, it is unsurprising that a significant number of studies looking at identity and communities or networks of teachers focuses on teacher training and trainee teachers interacting within their peer groups (Lamote and Engels, 2010; Timostsuk and Ugaste, 2010; Trent and Lim, 2010). However, a number of studies have focused on teacher communities populated by teachers who have completed their training and have become established in their careers (Borko, 2004) focusing on teacher development (Erickson *et al.*, 2005; Stoll *et al.*, 2006) and discussing identity in terms of professional learning (Strehle *et al.*, 2001; Riveros, *et al.*, 2012).

Given that professional identity is frequently located in peer-to-peer professional interactions and discourse, a number of studies have increasingly highlighted the importance of online contexts for bringing teachers together and the ways in which identity can be constructed and performed within them (Selwyn, 2000; MacKey and Evans, 2011; Matzat, 2013). Online contexts have been seen as offering the potential for groups of professionals to come together to form meaningful professional communities in which identity work can be undertaken

(Duncan-Howell, 2010). Adams (2007), for example, analyses student teachers' online interactions on a forum in a virtual learning environment (VLE) of a teacher training course. He uses students' posts as narrative indicators of professional identity construction. However, here, the online context is viewed as a place in which the researcher could observe or detect students' developing professional identities that had been constructed through university classes and teaching experience. Adams does not appear to locate the active performance and construction of identity within the VLE.

However, others have conceptualized online contexts differently and located identity construction, performance and negotiation within online spaces themselves and embedded in online interaction (Lock, 2006; Duncan-Howell, 2010). Online contexts provide an active social environment in which users meaningfully interact and engage in identity work (Comas-Quin, 2011) as opposed to passive windows into internal identity narratives. Delahunty (2012), for example, in her study of a TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) course VLE, argues that professional identity emerged through students' online dialogical choices, which projected an impression of themselves as professionals, and formed part of positional negotiations within the group, establishing contextual values and developing professional identity performance.

Like the wider literature on teachers' professional identity, with many studies that discuss teachers' identities in online contexts focused on ITT, there is a tendency to investigate identity with a practical purpose of improving course delivery and student learning (e.g. Kelly *et al.*, 2007). Although a practical goal of

developing online communities to support identity work and social learning is shared across studies, different academics have focused on different issues – for example, student teachers’ identity construction and learning (Delahunty, 2012), identity through knowledge transmission (Comas-Quinn, 2011), identity transition between student and teacher (Irwin and Hramiak, 2010), the role of the tutor in online spaces (Henderson and Bradley, 2008) etc. However, all of these studies focus on virtual learning environments associated with the teacher training courses being undertaken. These represent important spaces related to the development of students’ understandings of themselves as professionals, but are also closed spaces, often comprising only a single year group and potentially reproducing top-heavy power relations since student engagement may be linked with evaluation and course leaders often also participate within the space.

Several studies have looked at professional identity in online contexts beyond teacher training, but many of the online spaces investigated were also closed environments linked, for example, with Masters’ courses in education (Wheeler, *et al.*, 2005) or with specific community building initiatives (Karagiorgi and Lymbouridou, 2009). As such the focus has either been on practical opportunities for course leaders to improve masters’ level teacher learning or on the practical issues of community creation and sustainment as described above. Carr and Charters (2006), for example, describe qualified teachers’ professional learning and identity construction in an online community set up as a pilot project as part of the National Quality Schooling Framework in Australia. However, they focus on the technical aspects of creating the online social space, promoting it to its intended users, attempting to generate a community and then

sustain it through incentives (2006), as opposed to teachers' experiences and interactions within the online space.

Thus, as described above, the literature highlights identity as an important aspect of teachers' engagement in online social spaces and a concept which is frequently used to hold together professional development and social learning in interactive contexts. While these studies have focused their investigations of teachers' engagement in online social spaces on teachers' professional identities and highlight the value of studying the phenomenon through such a conceptual lens of identity, it is not always clear what ontological and epistemological frameworks underlie it and how identity is conceptualized. Therefore, it is important to review the wider literature on teachers' identity and general identity in online contexts to gain conceptual clarity.

### **Conceptualizing Teachers' Professional Identity**

Research focusing on teachers' professional identities has, over the last three decades, established itself in the mainstream of academic activity, and the literature is extensive. At the heart of research into teachers' professional identities lies the idea, clearly articulated by Goodson, that 'in understanding something so intensely personal as teaching, it is critical we know about the person the teacher is' (1981: 61). This is extended in a significant part of the literature on teachers' identities, as will be discussed below, to encompass teacher training. Given the importance attributed to the 'kind of person a teacher is' as a professional, the ways in which teachers become professionals

and so first construct their professional identities, usually at the initial teacher training stage, is a major part of literature on the wider issue of teachers' professional identities.

To a certain extent the historic divide between psychological conceptualizations and sociological understandings of identity (Benwell and Stockoe, 2006) is reflected in the body of research into teachers' professional identities. Studies rooted in a psychological understanding discuss teachers' professional identity through the lens of the 'self' with embedded essentialist understandings (Akkerman and Meijer, 2011) while sociologically oriented studies focus on social and interactional models of identity (Richards, 2006). However, despite this division of understanding, both Beijaard *et al.* (2004) and Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), in their systematic reviews of teachers' professional identity, argue that, in the majority of studies, teachers' professional identity is conceptualized as a dynamic social phenomenon: it is located in the context of situated interpersonal negotiations. Being a teacher is a matter of being seen as a teacher by both oneself and by others: 'it is a matter of acquiring and then redefining an identity that is socially legitimated' (Coldron and Smith, 1999: 712). In other words, the majority of the literature on teachers' professional identities is rooted in wider sociological literature and adopts postmodern social understandings of the term.

However, within this broad social understanding, literature on teachers' professional identity deals with the concept in a huge variety of ways and with a diverse range of agendas. Identity can be used as a theoretical framework and

broad analytical lens (Gee, 2001), a focus of analysis in order to examine aspects of teaching (Olsen, 2008), an organizing element in teachers' professional lives (Day *et al.*, 2006), or a means of justifying and making sense of teachers' selves in relation to others and the world (MacLure, 1993) etc. Within these wide ranging agendas, it is possible to further delineate the way the concept of identity has been used and identify six main ways in which it is understood in teacher-focused literature and the specific aspects of identity that academics have focused on (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009: 181-182):

1. In terms of identity shift at initial teacher training (Sikes and Everington, 2004; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2006; Baumfield, 2007)
2. In terms of constant teacher reinvention (Mitchell and Weber, 1999)
3. In terms of narratives that teachers create to explain themselves and their teaching lives (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999; Sfard and Prusak, 2005)
4. In terms of the variety of discourses teachers participate in and produce (Alsup, 2006)
5. In terms of metaphors that may guide or result from teachers' understandings of the role (Hunt, 2006; Leavy, McSorley, and Bote, 2006)
6. In terms of the influence of a wide range of contextual factors on teachers and their practice (Flores and Day, 2006; Chevrier *et al.*, 2007)

Just as in wider social science literature on identity, this internal diversity is reflected in the range of adjectives, adverbs and participles associated with teachers' professional identity. These terms are dominated by the construction of identity (see Lave and Wenger, 1991; Coldron and Smith, 1999; Søreide, 2006) and the performance of identity (Orland-Barak and Tillema, 2006; Luehmann,

2008), but others include: the development of identity (see Watson, 2006; Olsen, 2008); identity formation (see Rodgers and Scott, 2008); identity making (see Sfard and Prusak, 2005); creating identity (see Parkison, 2008); shaping identity (see Flores and Day, 2006); building identity (see Sfard and Prusak, 2005), and even the architecture of teacher's professional identities (Day *et al.*, 2006: 612). Such diversity appears to suggest a variety of ontological and epistemological approaches as well as the range of embedded aims and agendas in the research. However, within this diversity, Beijaard *et al.* (2004), in their systematic review of teacher professional identity literature, argue that four common features of teacher professional identity are apparent in the body of literature they focused on: dynamism; the combination of person and context; fragmentation; and agency. Although their review only goes up until 2000, the general themes that the authors highlight still appear to be applicable to more recent studies and papers (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Desimone, 2009; Thomas and Beauchamp, 2011; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013).

As perhaps might be expected in postmodern social perspectives on identity, Beijaard *et al.* highlight the first common feature in most literature on teachers' professional identity as dynamism: identity is a dynamic ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences – a constantly evolving phenomenon (Beijaard *et al.*, 2004: 122). In this respect professional identity should be viewed as a process of lifelong learning (see Day, 1999). It is not a static phenomenon that is created during teacher training, but one that is constantly changing in relation to developing contexts, experiences and interactions. This dynamic feature of identity can be understood within a

sociocultural perspective, where professional teacher identity is seen as both a product (of influences on the teacher) and a process (a form of continued interaction within teacher development (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009: 177).

Despite the importance of this dynamic development of professional identity for teachers' continued sense of themselves throughout their whole teaching careers (Day, 1999), as mentioned above, a huge proportion of literature on teacher identity is focused on initial teacher training (ITT; e.g. Irwin and Hramiak, 2010; Sutherland *et al.*, 2010; Timostsuk and Ugaste, 2010; Trent and Lim, 2010). To a certain extent this reflects the importance of ITT in relation to teachers' professional identity. This is the time when individuals begin to think about themselves as teachers, enter the profession and take on professional identity. However, it may also reflect the ready availability of teacher trainee participants, with researchers often sampling from ITT courses that they are involved in themselves (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009).

As highlighted above in relation to studies of online engagement, the dominance of research on professional identity at ITT highlights the relative scarcity of empirical research on identity development across teachers' whole careers. Despite the fact that most theoretical and empirical papers highlight the dynamic nature of identity and the importance of understanding professional identity as an continuous and evolving phenomenon, particularly when thinking about CPD and wider teaching issues, only a small number of studies have been undertaken on teachers' professional identity beyond ITT (for example Soreide, 2006; Orland-Barak and Tillem, 2007; Assaf, 2008; Shapiro, 2010;). As suggested by

Day *et al.* (2006) there is consequently a need to expand the number of studies related to teachers' professional identity as an dynamic concept across a wider span of teachers' careers.

The second aspect Beijaard *et al.* highlight as a common feature of teacher professional identity in educational literature is that 'professional identity implies both 'person and context'' (2004: 122). Here the authors are referring to the complex relationship between individuals and the contexts that they work in: 'within a context teachers learn professional characteristics that are adopted by individuals in unique ways' (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2000: 177). As Olsen argues, identity is a label:

for the collection of influences and effects from immediate contexts, prior constructs of self, social positioning, and meaning systems... that become intertwined inside the flow of activity as a teacher simultaneously reacts to and negotiates given contexts and human relationships at given moments (Olsen, 2008: 139).

As with all social theories of the concept, identity work – its expression, construction, performance (or whatever term is used) – is not seen as taking place in a vacuum. Rather professional identity is seen by most authors as operating within a complex social context, influencing and being influenced by that context.

Coldron and Smith (1999) focus on the importance of context in relation to the construction of teachers' identities, relating their article to the work of Bourdieu (1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), and particularly highlighting the importance of 'active location in social space'. They argue that the construction of teachers' professional identities is influenced by a variety of contextual

factors, ranging from the quality and availability of craft, scientific, moral and artistic traditions, to the 'technology of teaching' and the influence of educational policy. This highlights the importance of context for understanding teachers' professional identities and the wide range of areas that the concept of context can entail. As suggested by Clarke (2009), building on the work of Maclure (1993; where teachers' identities are understood in terms of 'arguing for yourself', perhaps echoing some of Bernstein's (2005) socio-political concerns about identity), contexts relevant to teachers' professional identity can include wider issues beyond school and classroom performance, particularly wider political and policy contexts in which teachers work (see also Sachs, 2001).

Beijaard *et al.* identify another key postmodern idea, fragmentation, as the third feature of professional identity common to much of the literature they surveyed: teachers' professional identities are often portrayed in fragmentary terms, consisting of a multitude of sub-identities. However, academics understand the fragmentary nature of identity in a variety of ways. Some adopt extreme post-modern and post-structural concepts emphasizing a coreless multiplicity (Coldron and Smith, 1999), with even the concept of professional identity itself being seen as multiple and fragmentary, teachers' professional identity merely being a shorthand way of bringing together a series of broadly related identity positions (Alsup, 2006). Others, however, root fragmentation in some kind of core identity (Gee, 2001; Beijaard *et al.*, 2004) where professional identity is seen as one part of a fragmented whole (Cohen, 2010) – a concept which has similarities with essentialist interpretations.

Whether identity is seen in coreless relativist terms or understood in essentialist language, a framework of fragmentation highlights the potential issue of conflict between different identity positions (Volkman and Anderson, 1998). Several writers have used this as a research focus, exploring the ways in which different identity positions are in tension with each other and the influence this has on teachers' sense of themselves as professionals (Akerman and Meijer, 2011). The majority of such studies have tended to focus on ways in which particular kinds of identity may come into conflict with emerging professional identity in ITT (Sikes and Everington, 2004; Day *et al.*, 2006; Baumfield, 2007). However, where studies focus on teachers' identities beyond ITT, the above issue of context has been linked with potential tensions between fragmented identities (Flores and Day, 2006): the variety of contexts teachers work in may lead to the performance and construction of context-specific identities which may result in conflict between them. For example some identities rooted in the classroom may be in tension with identities rooted in political contexts (Clarke 2009). 'Identity work' can therefore involve teachers negotiating these different identity positions related to contexts, and a variety of other cultural and biographical background factors, in order to understand themselves as professionals (Flores and Day, 2006).

This fragmented understanding of identity is related to Beijgaard *et al.*'s fourth common feature of teachers' professional identity – agency. They argue that in the majority of the literature teachers are conceptualized as having 'to be active in the process of professional development' (2004: 122). This is a position particularly advocated by Coldron and Smith (1999) who view professional

identity formation in terms of a constructivist view of learning, where learning (either individually or collaboratively) requires an active agent. This perspective particularly emphasizes professional identity as not simply something that is possessed, but as something that teachers use in order to make sense of themselves as teachers: 'the way they explain and justify things in relation to other people and contexts expresses... professional identity' (Beijaard *et al.*, 2004: 123).

However, despite Beijaard *et al.*'s emphasis on the sovereignty of agency and their analysis that this view is common across literature on teachers' professional identity, not all authors adopt quite such a strongly agentic view. Clarke (2009), for example, builds on the work of Foucault (1972; 1975; 2000) to highlight the complex relationship between agency and structure described in the wider social sciences literature on identity (Butler, 1990; Benwell and Stockoe, 2006; 2010; etc.). For him, teacher identity cannot be seen in merely agentic terms where teachers must be fully active in the process of professional development. Rather, drawing on the paradoxes of identity highlighted by Butler (2005), Derrida (1982), and Laclau and Moufe (1985), he argues for the importance of structure and context on teachers' professional identities. Similarly, in one of the few papers on RE teachers' professional identity and development (see also Sikes and Everington, 2001; Mead, 2006; Baumfield, 2007; Everington *et al.*, 2011), Sikes and Everington (2004) illustrate this complex relationship between structure and agency, although they do not explicitly use these terms. They show how wider negative societal discourses about the value and aims of RE can influence the ways in which trainee RE

teachers express themselves as professionals. Dominant society-wide discursive structures influence the construction of teachers' professional identities by forcing them to adopt identity positions in relation to them.

Kelly *et al.* (2007), therefore, argue for recognition of the link between agency and structure in relation to teachers' professional identity using the language of social position or stance. Identity is constructed in relation to how we position ourselves, how we are positioned by others, and by social circumstances (2007: 154). Identity is influenced by structure just as it may be conceptualized as being agentically performed within it (Lasky, 2005).

Thus, Beijaard *et al.* (2004) offer a useful summary and analysis of the ways in which teachers' professional identity has been conceptualized. This provides insight into the ways in which teachers' engagement in online social spaces can also be conceptualized and ways in which online interaction can be thought of as identity work. Rooting professional identity in postmodern and post structural understandings, the authors highlight dynamism, the importance of context, fragmentation, and agency as key aspects of understanding the concept of teachers' professional identity. Although a more nuanced understanding of agency and structure than the one presented by Beijaard *et al.* is necessary, these four aspects provide a practical framework for studying teachers' professional identity. The review also illustrates the broad range of activities linked with interaction the concept of identity covers, providing a valuable lens for thinking about teachers, their interactions and the contexts in which they operate.

However, a great deal of research outside of the field of education has been

undertaken on identity in online contexts. Therefore, this broad framework should be interpreted in relation to wider identity research in the social sciences related to identity in online contexts.

## **Identity in Online Contexts**

Early accounts of identity and the Internet tend to emphasise the potential for presenting and performing identities online that differ from those found offline (Kendall, 1998). This was sometimes described negatively as ‘deception’ (Rheingold, 1993), or more positively as offering opportunities to disrupt existing hierarchies, such as those based on gender, (Bruckman, 1992; Dickel, 1995; Turkle, 1995) or engage in identity play (Kendall, 2002). However, academics have increasingly criticized the separation of online and offline contexts, the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’, arguing that it represents a false dichotomy (Orgad, 2005; Wynn and Katz, 2006; Davies and Eynon, 2013). Instead offline contexts and online contexts have increasingly been viewed as linked. Although, some accounts portray a movement towards the shattering of online and offline barriers and the homogenization of space, the majority of moderate understandings of the two contexts argue that they still remain distinct, though closely related (Boellstorff, 2012). As such online identity and offline identity are viewed as being interrelated with online performances being rooted in offline concerns (Orgad, 2005; Wynn and Katz, 2006; Davies and Eynon, 2013).

Given the emphasis on the performative affordances of online contexts, a number of studies have adopted Goffman’s dramaturgical theory (1959) or

Butler's performativity theory (1997; 2005) as frameworks for analysing online engagement. In such works, identity performance is frequently located in profile development and maintenance (boyd, 2007; Greenhow and Robelia, 2009; Driscoll and Gregg, 2010) in which users are able to utilize the affordances of online technologies to manage the impressions of others through the careful projection of the self within their online profiles. However, as will be expanded in chapter 7, this element of self-presentation online contexts has been developed by Hogan (2010) who has argued that such engagement is best conceptualised as a form of curatorship and exhibition.

Therefore, a number of studies have located identity in online interaction, where users express and perform identity through engagement in online discourse (Baym, 1995; Phillips, 2002; Benwell and Stockoe, 2006) and engage in impression management through interactional self-presentation (boyd, 2007; Bar-Lev and Tillinger, 2008; Chou, 2010; Planchenault, 2010; Parks, 2011). Thus with such a discursive understanding of the phenomenon – identity is located in online posts, comments, discussions etc. However, technology and online spaces can also have a determining influence on users (Davies and Eynon, 2013: 70-73) as they adopt identity positions within online discourses (Kennedy, 2006) or interact with existing materials through active engagement or information seeking activities (Wood and Smith, 2005). Users can interact with already existing online material reading it, internalizing it, and constructing their identity in relation to it (Rodogno, 2012). This consequently has potential implications for agency and the relationship between structures related to online

social spaces and the associated performance of construction of users' identities (Foucault, 1972; Foucault, 1975; Butler, 1992; Benwell and Stockoe, 2006).

Thus online contexts and online social spaces are frequently viewed as key environments for the construction and performance of identity, particularly where it is conceptualized in discursive terms and located in interaction (Kendall, 1998; Wood and Smith, 2005; Zhao *et al.*, 2008). However, with online contexts and technologies being viewed as having a determining influence on individual's identities (Orgad, 2006; Soreide, 2006; Parsell, 2008; Irwin and Hramiak, 2010), identity can be seen as crossing online and offline contexts (Munro, 2010) rather than simply being rooted in online presentation. Where online discourse, interaction and information influences the way in which individuals think about themselves, identities constructed online can be taken out of the online context and expressed in offline contexts and offline social interactions (Munro, 2010). Orgad's (2006) study of breast cancer patients' uses of online social spaces, for example, highlights the ways in which information gathering (as well as active interaction) influences individuals' understandings of themselves and their expressions of identity beyond the context of the online activity, linking the online and the offline worlds (Hine, 2005; Orgad, 2006).

## **Research Framework and Research Question**

Thus the concept of identity and more specifically teachers' professional identities has the potential to offer an important starting place for investigating teachers' engagement in online social spaces given the intimate relationship between it and the socially interactive nature of online social spaces. A focus on

identity emphasises teachers as social beings, bringing together individuals with their social and political contexts, and providing a framework for talking about activities such as collaborative support, learning, development, meaning-making, self understanding, subject understanding etc. A social and discursive understanding of professional identity emphasises the view that teachers' engagement in social spaces does not take place within a vacuum (Coldron and Smith, 1990). Rather it is located within specific social and political contexts relevant to the spaces and the teachers that engage within them. As such the concept locates teachers using online social spaces in their social and political contexts and highlights the need to include these wider contexts in analysis (Clarke, 2009), while also highlighting the importance of thinking about online engagement in relation to offline contexts.

Thus, the concept of identity provides an important way of discussing individuals' relationships with each other and their places within the social and political, online and offline contexts in which they work. A broadly discursive understanding of identity can provide a way into investigating aspects of teachers' engagement highlighted in the literature above in a holistic way, focusing the study on how teachers' think about themselves as professionals and their subjects, how online engagement contributes to these understandings and professional lives and the ways in which context influences these aspects of engagement. However, this starting point allows the study to investigate wider issues related to engagement that go beyond explicit identity work, for example overcoming isolation (Hargreaves, 1993), belonging (Selwyn, 2000) etc., with identity providing analytical language and an analytical starting point for a wider

study of teachers' engagement in online social spaces. As such, identity has been used as an initial starting framework for investigating online engagement in this study, but with the aim of going beyond this framework in order to deepen understanding of engagement in a wider and holistic way.

For the purposes of this thesis, then, RE teachers' professional identity is defined in simple terms, drawing on Davies and Eynon's working definition<sup>6</sup> (2013), as how RE teachers define themselves as professionals based on characteristics and attributes and social contexts. However, identity is further theorized as being located in public realms of discourse, interaction, and other semiotic systems of meaning-making and as actively and dynamically constructed and performed – building on the literature outline above (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; etc.). Further, identity is seen as inscribed in dominant discourses, tied to social or institutional practices, such that selfhood can take on a subjected, structured quality, perpetuating existing power relations in society (Foucault, 1975; Benwell and Stokoe, 2010: 83). Identity is conceptualized as embodying a complex relationship between structure and agency (Butler, 1990; 1997) and rooted in a variety of online and offline social, political and educational contexts. In the case of online social spaces, embedded structures and contexts may relate to political situations, policy developments, social and cultural structures, organizations and institutions etc.

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<sup>6</sup> Although they discuss identity in relation to teenagers and technology, their definition can be generalized and applied to other contexts.

The conceptual framework therefore consists of three core aspects. Firstly, identity is understood as *linking both online and offline contexts*, with online identity being in a relationship with offline contexts<sup>7</sup> (Miller and Slater, 2000; Rybas and Gajjala, 2007). Secondly, *identity can be performed and constructed online* (Butler, 1990; Bar-Lev and Tillinger, 2008; Chou, 2010; Planchenault, 2010; Parks, 2011; see also Goffman's 1959 'impression management' discussed in online terms by, for example, boyd, 2007), which can encourage greater self-reflection and a projection of how people want to be viewed by others (Benwell and Stockoe, 2006; Davies and Eynon, 2013). Finally, *identity is rooted in a tension between agency and structure*: power structures linked to online contexts and spaces can influence dominant discourses and the ways in which identity is performed and constructed (Foucault, 1975; Butler, 1990; Wittel, 2000; Benwell and Stockoe, 2006).

As described above, the concept of professional identity is closely linked with the idea of professional development and professional learning. Therefore, these concepts have also been included in this conceptual framework, with professional development being understood as activity that brings about change in teachers' practices, their attitudes, beliefs and self-concepts (Guskey, 2002) and learning being understood in social constructivist terms.

Thus I have used this framework as an analytical starting point for this thesis, seeking to investigate the claims embedded within it – that engagement can facilitate and be conceptualized as identity performance and construction linked

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<sup>7</sup> This will be further described in the following chapter in relation to defining the field

with the associated concepts of professional development and professional learning. Consequently, based on this conceptual framework this study seeks to analyse the ways in which RE teachers engage in online social spaces by investigating the following research question:

- *How can RE teachers' professional identities be constructed and performed through their engagement in online social spaces?*

Although this question appears fairly simple, it emerged from the messy realities of fieldwork, analysis, and writing, and had a number of different iterations, only taking this final form towards the very end of the whole research process. The early fieldwork was based on a broad question focusing simply on exploring teachers' online engagement. However, as the fieldwork progressed I began to see engagement in terms of identity and worked with a series of more specific research questions. These focused on both identity and, as the importance of parent organisations in the spaces emerged, internal organisational power relations. By the end of the analytical process I had settled on using the words 'performance' and 'construction' within the questions, but continued to hold this in tension with an overarching question looking at engagement in broad terms. It wasn't until re-writing a finished draft that I settled on the final question and conceptual framework as I felt it was broad enough to allow elements of exploration but specific enough to reflect the identity-related data that emerged from the fieldwork.

Therefore, this question and initial conceptual framework is used to investigate the issue of teachers' engagement in online social spaces in specific terms, but, as will be discussed in the final two chapters, is expanded upon in order to theorise a way in which such engagement can be understood in a holistic cross-contextual way. As will be described below, a digital ethnography of three online social spaces used by RE teachers was undertaken in order to engage with this question.

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents a detailed description of digital ethnography, the methodology used for this thesis. The different ways in which ethnography of online social spaces can be conceptualized is discussed, a detailed research design outlined and the different methods employed to collect data presented. Finally the ways in which the data has been analysed and presented is described and the ethical framework used to shape this project outlined.

### **Research Design**

This study is focused on RE teachers' actual and continued engagement in online social spaces during the course of their professional lives. Therefore, a methodological approach that explored this phenomenon in its natural setting was deemed most appropriate. I decided that an inductive methodology was best suited to a study of Internet use, since, as argued by Coleman:

Whenever and wherever individuals and groups deploy and communicate with digital media, there will be circulations, reimaginings, magnifications, deletions, translations, revisionings, and remakings of a range of cultural representations, experiences, and identities, but the precise ways that these dynamics unfold can never be fully anticipated in advance (Coleman 2010: 488)

Thus, within this broad approach, I decided that undertaking an ethnography of the online social spaces frequented by RE teachers allowed for the examination of RE teachers' engagement in these spaces in a way that valued their own perspectives and the meanings they derived from such engagement, while

enabling me to place that everyday detail within the context of wider social and professional structures and academic theory (Walford, 2008: 7).

Ethnography has now become embedded in academic culture as an appropriate method for exploring the ways in which people use, interact, engage and construct meanings on the Internet (Hine, 2008: 260), as illustrated by, for example, Nardi's thick descriptions in her ethnography of the *World of Warcraft* (2010) or Orgad's ethnography of breast cancer patients' Internet use. However, Internet related ethnography can still be thought of as an emergent field and as such is peppered with ontological and practical polemics. An issue lying at the heart of much of the debate is whether ethnography of the digital should be considered a novel methodology in its own right or simply an extension of the traditional anthropological approach (Hine 2000; Sveningsson, 2003; Markham, 2004; Markham and Baym, 2008; Kozinets, 2010).

A number of scholars have argued for the former and produced methodological frameworks designed specifically for online contexts (netnography and virtual ethnography, for example). However, there is an increasing emphasis, particularly from academics in the field of anthropology, on conceptualizing ethnography of digital realms as a continuation of the anthropological tradition (Hine, 2005; Miller and Horst, 2012). Here the phrase 'digital anthropology' or 'digital ethnography' tends to be used as a term, free from the baggage of phrases like 'virtual ethnography', to describe ethnography in relation to digital contexts. In fact, as argued by Boellstorff 'technology is now ubiquitous worldwide, and few, if any, future fieldwork projects could ever constitute 'ethnography

unplugged' ... all anthropology is now digital anthropology in some shape or form' (Boellstorff, 2012: 39).

Fundamental to this debate is the issue of how digital ethnographic fields should be bounded. When undertaking any ethnographic research, the first task is to define the field. This can be problematic in the context of Internet use as the researcher must first determine the extent to which the offline, in addition to the online, world should be included. Initial Internet related ethnographies tended to focus on single online communities, remaining only in the online realm (Markham, 1998; Baym, 2000) and consequently developed methodological frameworks suited to a solely online field. However, a number of scholars have increasingly argued that the Internet is rarely, if ever, experienced as a separate domain of virtual experience (Miller and Slater, 2000, for example) and as such should be studied as it is made meaningful in a variety of online and offline contexts. Internet researchers are now increasingly rejecting a sharp dichotomous distinction between the online and offline realms (Horst, 2012; Miller and Horst, 2012), preferring to discuss these worlds in terms of mutually related, intersecting social contexts.

Thus, Bruckman, for example, argues that 'that all "Internet research" takes place in an embedded social context. To understand Internet based phenomena, you need to understand the broader context. Consequently, most "online research" really also should have an offline component' (2002b: 3). In the context of ethnographic research, therefore, the field is often conceptualized as crossing the online and offline contexts (Miller and Horst, 2012; Boellstorff, 2012) and the

desire to add credibility to research findings and improve understandings of phenomena within their ethnographic context frequently leads to the combination of online textual representations and physical personae (Markham, 2004) through both online and offline interactions and communications (James and Busher, 2009: 36).

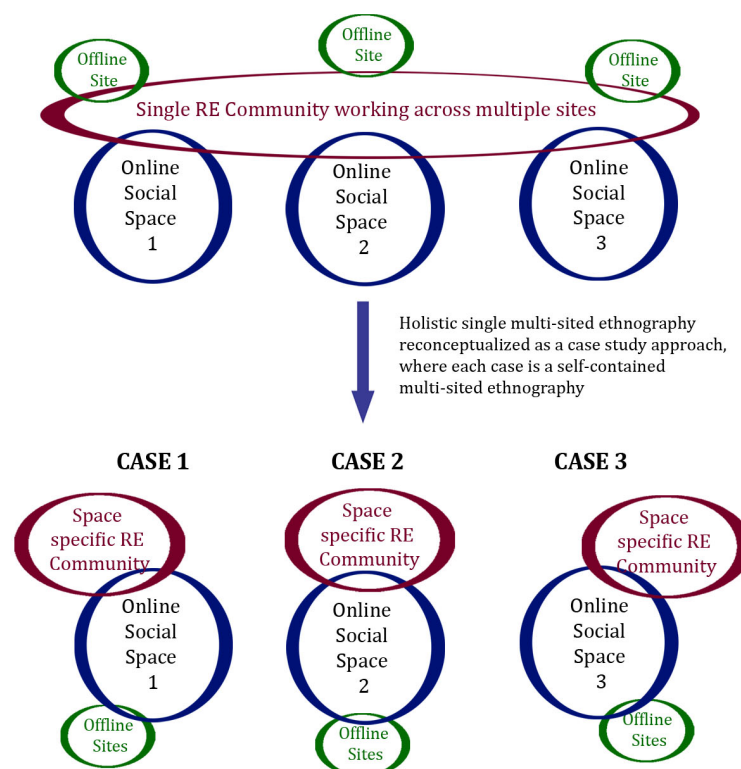
Such a field can be described as 'multi-sited', building on Marcus's understanding of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995; 1998; Hine 2008), and is conceptualized as a network of intersecting online and offline sites (Wittel, 2000; Bakardjieva and Smith, 2001). The primary site can be an online social space that is related to a number of other sites both online (other social spaces and websites) and offline (the home, work, conferences etc.) (Orgad, 2006). Even if all related sites cannot be studied in detail, they are still considered in an ethnography focused on the primary site (Bakardjieva and Smith's (2001) study of how non-professional users of the Internet adapt and interpret it in their every day lives, for example). Thus, a field that is conceptualized as a series of multiple sites, as opposed to a single self-contained online community, is better suited to a methodological approach that continues anthropological ethnography, particularly traditions that build on Marcus' multi-sited understanding of a field of study, rather than a framework designed specifically for solely online contexts (Hine 2008). A digital ethnography, therefore, is an ethnography that simply happens to be online (Boellstorff, 2012), with any context specific modifications being an inherent part of a flexible and emergent design (Beaulieu, 2004; Nardi 2010).

Thus, digital ethnography is the approach taken in this study, where I have conceived of the field as a flexible space spanning both the online social spaces I was studying as well as the wider online and offline lives of the users. I have, therefore, taken a broadly multi-sited approach where online social spaces used by RE teachers are taken as the primary field sites and studied in detail, but their relationships to a wider multi-sited online and offline field (e.g. other online spaces as well as offline sites - teachers' schools, their homes, conferences, CPD related spaces etc.) are also discussed and analysed. I have avoided tying myself to an online specific ethnographic framework and have adopted digital ethnography as a flexible methodological approach, where context specific methods can be adopted and adapted as appropriate.

I began by undertaking a preliminary investigation to set the boundaries for the field. This exploratory work consisted of extensive searching of the Internet, informal discussions with RE teachers and key individuals in the RE world, and network analysis particularly using NodeXL's Twitter and Facebook APIs (see Howard's argument for network analysis as a means of determining the field, 2002). This work revealed only three online social spaces regularly frequented by RE teachers in any number: the Time Educational Supplement's RE Forum (TES RE Forum); the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education Facebook Group (NATRE Facebook Group); and the Save RE Facebook Page. Other spaces were used by RE teachers (a YouTube group and Twitter, particularly the hashtag #reteacher). However, at the time of this study, use of these spaces was infrequent and involved less than 10 people in each space.

I had originally anticipated conducting a single multi-sited ethnography focusing particularly on a number of networked online social spaces frequented by RE teachers. However, when conducting the preliminary investigation, it became clear that the real world is not as holistically networked as might be imagined (Wittel, 2000) with few RE teachers engaging across the different available online social spaces. Instead, professional related online social spaces tended to have communities built up around them, loyal to their 'brand', as opposed to one community working across them. Each online social space still could be conceptualized as being part of a multi-sited field, where it interacted with other, primarily offline, sites. However, the originally anticipated network of online spaces did not exist as a cohesive whole. Therefore, I focused the design on a case study approach, where each online social space constituted a case (see

*Figure 1- Reconceptualising the Field*)



*Figure 1- Reconceptualising the Field*

With only three main online social spaces used by RE teachers, the choice of cases to study was limited. I therefore decided that each space should be an individual case in order to gain a relatively complete picture of the different ways RE teachers engaged online. One of the benefits of studying online spaces is that it is possible to occupy more than one at the same time. I therefore decided to conduct each case study simultaneously and consequently spent just under a year in all three field sites between mid-September 2011 and early September 2012.

In order to undertake any ethnographic work one first has to enter the field of study. This often involves negotiating access with gatekeepers (Emerson *et al.*, 2001, Hammersley 2006). With three separate case studies, I needed to negotiate access with three separate gatekeepers: the TES RE Forum Convener, the NATRE Facebook Page Administrator, and the Save RE Group Founder. In all cases the identities of these individuals were not immediately obvious or recorded in public areas of the sites. It was only through some initial investigation and observation of the workings of the online social spaces that I was able to find relevant names and contact details.

I contacted all administrators electronically and in all cases I got a near immediate response and an invitation to discuss the project further. These initial conversations were conducted on the phone (although I met the gatekeepers in person several times during the course of the fieldwork), where I discussed the project, its aims and methodology in more detail.

Fortunately, these negotiations were relatively easy. All three people were positive about Religious Education and about social media and, given that all were intimately involved in supporting RE teachers through online social spaces, they saw my research as important and were glad to support me in any way they could. In the case of the TES, I believe there was a hope that my study would help administrators improve forum management and align itself with their commercial aim of increasing the numbers of users. The TES Forum Convenor was consequently particularly supportive and enthusiastic and the managers of all the spaces were happy to discuss the ethos, the technical administrative issues, the input from their parent organisations etc., while also approving my presence publically (through Facebook 'likes' and supportive comments) and recommending people participate when I posted recruitment messages.

Although initial negotiations are vital in ethnography, access can also be thought of as a continuous and dynamic process that requires constant attention during the entire fieldwork period (Feldman, Bell and Berger, 2003). This involves negotiating, not just with gatekeepers, but with community members as well. I was consequently conscious of the need to justify and remind people of my presence on a continued basis. Therefore, in addition to general introductory posts, where I explained the project and who I was, and reminder posts (see the section on questionnaires below), I followed the advice of a number of Internet researchers (Kivits, 2005; Orgad, 2005; James, 2007; Hine, 2008 etc.) and set up a website for the project.

On this site I gave a detailed personal profile (my academic background, my employment background, some personal details and hobbies, and my 'RE Story' – a detailed explanation of why I was involved in working in Religious Education), and explained in more detail exactly what I was studying, what I was hoping to achieve and a summary of what digital ethnography entails. I frequently pointed people towards this site by including it in the signature of all my posts and in emails to participants. I attempted to keep it dynamic by regularly loading new content through a blog. However, despite the consistently positive portrayal of this method of communicating with one's participants in the literature, it quickly became obvious from the statistics that no one was using the site. It appeared that most people in the online social spaces were perfectly happy to welcome me into their communities based on the information that I included in my posts. Those that wanted more details about me or the study preferred to ask questions within the medium of the online space itself – i.e. via a post or private message on the TES RE Forum or a Facebook post or message – rather than going outside it.

In the end the website became something of an embarrassment to me, particularly given the, in retrospect, poor choice of URL ([www.jamesrobsonresearch.com](http://www.jamesrobsonresearch.com)), which I quickly began to fear sounded arrogant. I had hoped the site would become an outlet to share emergent findings with participants and as such become an additional method of collecting data. However, after a series of redesigns and reformats I was pleased to take the site down as soon as the fieldwork period had ended.

However, despite the failure of the project website, I was fortunate to be welcomed into all three online social spaces by both the gate keepers and the community members and was never challenged or experienced any hostility. I was therefore able to observe users' interactions overtly as an active participant of each online social space.

## **Data Collection Methods**

Ethnography typically involves a range of data collection methods with any method that furthers the investigation being used (Sveningsson, 2003). As Hammersley and Atkinson put it, ethnography describes:

[a] set of methods. In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (2007: 1)

In fact some argue that multiple methods of data collection are essential if a study is to be considered ethnography at all (Walford 2008). In the context of ethnography in the digital domain data tends to be collected via participant observation (online) and in depth qualitative interviews (online, offline or both) (Hine, 2008).

These were also my primary methods of data collection, with participant observation of online activity recorded in detailed field notes, online engagement in the form of posts collected for analysis, and in depth narrative based online and offline interviews undertaken. However, this mode of data collection has been criticized when the interviews and observations are disconnected

(Boellstorff, 2012). Therefore, I attempted to link my participant observations with my interviews by recruiting interviewees from within the online communities, via the online social spaces, undertaking interviews over a period of several months in order to discuss the changing interactions taking place, and using participants' (and others') posts as interview stimuli. This helped to couple these data collection methods and root the interviews in the observed behaviour of the participants.

In accordance with a traditional model of ethnography, data were also collected from a variety of other sources as appropriate and available. Therefore, in addition to participant observations and interviews, data were also collected through questionnaires, conference attendance (interviews and observation of delegates), analysis of grey literature (articles in the media, Twitter, blogs etc.) and interviewing key people in the RE world. A more detailed description of all data collection methods now follows.

### **Participant Observations**

Participant observation in all three cases formed the core part of this study. The aim of this was to gain intimate familiarity with a group of individuals in the field through interaction and observation over an extended period of time (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002; Walford, 2008). However, the degree to which researchers participate in the field is often a controversial issue in Internet related ethnographies since it is often possible to conduct covert research without revealing one's presence to the community (Hine, 2008). Conversely over

participation risks influencing the nature, ethos or culture of the field site (Gatson and Zweerink, 2004) and can lead to the loss of analytical clarity through over involvement in the community – ‘going native’. In this study participation within the online social spaces was an important part of the research design enabling me to deepen my experience of the sites (Mason 1996), test concepts through direct experience and exposure to critique from community members (Hine 2010), and in ethical terms, remain an overt researcher ensuring users were aware of my presence (Eynon *et al.* 2008). Therefore, I selected the role of peripheral-member researcher (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002), which enabled me to interact and maintain an overt presence without blocking my ‘observational interpretive capacities’ (Ybema *et al.*, 2009) by losing the sense of being an outsider (Marcus, 1998) or distorting the ethos of the field sites (Hine, 2010).

I actively observed RE teacher online engagement for the whole of my time in the field in all three cases simultaneously. This involved logging into all three online social spaces on a daily basis, reading all posts, responding to posts or starting threads where appropriate, privately messaging users to forge contacts, ask questions and develop relationships. I tended to check the sites three times a day: at approximately 9:30 in the morning; at around 1pm; and at around 8pm. When away from my desktop computer or laptop, my engagement with the field was facilitated by a smartphone and an iPad.

This kind of participant observation enabled me to gather information about the structural and functional dimensions of the three online social spaces I was

studying, produce a time based narrative of interactions, issues, and discourses, and gain insights into the roles and relationships within the social spaces. The data I collected took three forms: field notes, extensive analyzable text, and statistical information.

### *Field Notes*

As Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) argue, the continued evaluations collected in field notes engender an continuous reflective dialogue, which helps the researcher understand when saturation and completeness have been reached as well as providing a rich description of the field and deepening the narrative of the community being studied (Hammersley, 2006, Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Field notes are a systematic record and accumulated account of the ethnographer's observations and experiences in the field (Wolcott, 1975; Hine, 2000; Hammersley, 2006).

In the case of this project I used field notes to record information and observations I made while participating in the online social spaces and while conducting interviews. I also made notes prior to and following all other relevant online and offline activity such as conducting searches on Twitter, going to RE Teacher Conferences in 2011 and 2012, meeting key people in the RE world etc. The field notes were an important place to record the narrative developments and minutiae of interactions of the three observed spaces and groups of users as well as my thoughts and impressions of what was going on and how I personally was engaging with the field.

The field notes also provided a useful place to record my thoughts and feelings about the general research process and were part of a reflexive self-analysis, which helped highlight my own biases and assumptions, allowing me to scrutinize them and see where they might be influencing the study. Given that in ethnography the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection (Wolcott, 1975; Dewalt and Dewalt, 2002), a key principle in conducting this study was this kind of reflexivity.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) describe reflexivity as an awareness of the socio-historical location of the research, its assumptions, the background of the researcher and the context and political circumstances in which the research takes place. It refers to the researcher's awareness and analytical focus on his or her relationship to the field and study. Such awareness and analysis is particularly important in representing the field and those within it since it helps the researcher to avoid the objectification of people and cultures solely as objects of study, instead promoting more collaborative approaches to ethnography (Marcus 1995). In this study, reflexive internal dialogue could become expressed and analysed through the field notes.

Thus, field notes formed a vital part of the collected data for this thesis as they not only recorded the story of the online social spaces, and the observed engagement within the spaces, they also provided an opportunity to analyse reflexively my position within the field.

### *Collection of Text*

Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) observe that good ethnographers must learn to remember dialogue like an actor. However one of the significant advantages of conducting a digital ethnography is that almost all the observable online interactions take the form of written text that can be easily collected from web servers or from front-end sites for in depth analysis. Therefore, in addition to recording the dynamics of ongoing online interaction in the field notes, I selected threads and posts to analyse in more detail.

While all interaction was observed and discussed in the field notes, a year's worth of TES posts and Facebook activity and liking patterns was simply too much data to undertake the kind of in depth qualitative analysis that I hoped would enable appropriate discussion of professional identity construction and performance. Therefore, I decided that a way of taking a sample of threads and posts was necessary. While I considered purposive sampling (Robson, 2002), I was concerned that this might lead to a misplaced focus on posts that I personally found interesting, while under-emphasizing the 'blander' communications. Consequently, I determined that time-based sampling was the most appropriate option since everything that occurred during the sample period would be captured and analysed.

Having observed the natural ebb and flow of conversation in the online social spaces, the duration of 8 week sample periods was deemed appropriate to capture a run of complete conversations, provide a variety of topics, and give

depth and richness to the data, while being broad enough to allow events in the news to develop and be discussed. I took three time-based samples in each case across the fieldwork period, each lasting for 8 weeks and featuring both term time activity and some holiday activity. The periods were: 26th September 2011 to 14<sup>th</sup> November 2011; 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2012 to 12<sup>th</sup> March 2012; and 15<sup>th</sup> May 2012 to 25 July 2012. During each of these I gathered all posts and activity in all three online field sites for later in depth analysis.

In the case of the TES I scraped all available information during this sample period. This included: the date; the name of each poster; the number of posts that each poster had made; when each poster had joined the forum; the title of the thread; the time of the post; and the post itself. For both Facebook sites I recorded: the date and time of the post; the name of the poster; the number of likes the post received; the names of the 'likers'; and the post itself. I inputted this into Microsoft Excel for some descriptive quantitative analysis and then outputted the data in readable format in basic Word documents for qualitative analysis.

### *Gathering of statistics, network diagrams and analyses*

Through the detailed sampling of text along with daily participant observation I was able to gather some useful descriptive statistics relating to use of all three online social spaces, a form of data comparable to the 'counting' advocated by Dewalt and Dewalt (2002:72). These statistics were used to work out the following: total number of posts across the fieldwork period; the average daily/

weekly/ monthly number of posts; the total number of active individuals; the average daily/ weekly/ monthly number of active individuals; the total number of active threads; the average daily/ weekly/ monthly number of active threads. This was a useful form of information that helped to paint a more detailed picture of online engagement and supplemented the qualitative work well.

The collection of statistics relating to the use of all of the online social spaces additionally enabled me to undertake some basic network analysis and produce some simple network diagrams (see Dewalt and Dewalt, 2002, on the value of mapping space and relationships) highlighting internal and cross site networks, along with specific individuals who could be considered as 'information silos' (Hogan, 2008; Howard, 2002). In the case of the TES RE Forum I inputted the statistics by hand. However, in the cases of the two Facebook spaces, I was able to use NodeXL's then recently developed Facebook Fan Page API. Although not completely bug free, this extracted data from Facebook and automatically generated network diagrams based on postings and likes. I supplemented these analyses with information I learned about participants' relationships from further observation, online interaction and interviewing.

This kind of analysis, analogous to anthropological familial diagrams (Geertz, 1973), provided another useful way of observing and describing RE teachers' engagement in the online social spaces. In terms of identity work, it was particularly useful to relate active networks to particular types of content. For example, political content might bring out a different kind of network when compared with content related to RE exams. It was useful to see how these

overlapped and developed in order to understand how such interaction might influence or be influenced by the kind of people and the kind of RE teachers the users were or aspired to be.

### **Semi-Structured Online and Offline Narrative Interviews**

Through participant observation I aimed to examine events and online engagement within the social spaces. In depth interviews were used to bring in a different and more holistic perspective by eliciting participants' own interpretations of how their online engagement related to their professional lives. As Kvale and Brinkmann state, interviews help the researcher 'to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold meaning of their experiences' (2009:1).

Semi-structured interviews are an effective way of exploring themes that emerge from activities and so are particularly appropriate for ethnographic studies (Somekh and Lewin, 2011). I therefore adopted a semi-structured approach to interviewing as this enabled greater flexibility to discuss themes and issues that emerged from participants' own perspectives. I specifically took a narrative approach when interviewing, taking the perspective that meanings are socially constructed and that action, agency and identity are contingent on sociocultural, historical and political influences (Gill and Goodson, 2011). By getting a broad narrative, or life history (Goodson, 1992), of participants' professional lives and their experiences of teaching and their subject, I could more easily explore how engagement in online social spaces related to that narrative and then focus the

interview appropriately. This provided an important holistic perspective on participants' online engagement and its place in their professional lives.

As discussed, each case was conceptualized as a multi-sited field in its own right, with offline spaces also relating to the primary online social space being studied. Therefore, I felt it was important to interview participants both online and offline in order to root the interviews in both the online and the offline ethnographic contexts (Hine, 2000): communicating in the context that one is discussing can afford both the researcher and the participants greater analytical insights and clarity (James and Busher, 2009: 101). Similarly, as argued by Orgad, conducting both online and offline interviews can be viewed as a form of triangulation, which increases the validity of the analytical interpretations (Orgad 2006: 52).

I therefore developed a slightly modified method of life history interviewing which would take place in both online and offline contexts and would enhance certain aspect of each. Building on the life history approach where the interviewer is viewed as a co-constructor of the participants' narratives (Kivits, 2005; Busher and James, 2012), I set up an online collaborative document, in this case a Google Doc, for each participant. In it were some basic questions eliciting their life story in relation their use of the online social spaces I was studying, but also going further into the stories of how they became teachers, descriptions of their schools and examples of how their online interaction fits into their daily lives. Then as part of an iterative process, lasting around two months, I placed questions inside the text in response to participants' answers and highlighted

sections requesting more information or clarification as part of an ongoing online interview process. As time went on, these documents grew into lengthy co-constructed narratives that were both detailed and rich.

The technique was ideally suited to life history interviewing as some of the criticisms often levelled at online interviews (particularly asynchronous ones), that interviewees are given time and space to rehearse and craft an answer (Mann and Stewart, 2000; Kivits 2005), were actually beneficial here. For life history interviewing, the aim is to tap into the stories people tell about themselves (Goodson, 1992), which are often well rehearsed and without spontaneity, so the time and space allowed by the online context actually helped facilitate this. Then the collaborative nature of the narrative production allowed for these stories to be jointly analysed and interrogated with time and space for analytical insights to emerge.

Taking place over a period of at least two month for each participant and generally involving a two-day cycle of questions and answers, the length of time meant that we could discuss observed online behaviour and developing threads (an important way of linking the interviews with the observations (Boellstorff, 2012)). It also facilitated the development of sufficient trust, and in some cases real friendships, which was important when I then requested to move the interviews offline and meet the participants in person. When we did meet, I was able to use the lengthy narrative documents we had produced as stimuli for these offline interviews. This helped build a bridge between the offline and online contexts and provided a different mode of interviewing suited to the

context. While participants were able to craft their responses online, they were forced to give more spontaneous and in many ways more vulnerable answers offline (Bruckman, 2002b; Orgad, 2005; Hine, 2010). This allowed us to explore their narratives more deeply as well as facilitating a freer more natural movement between discussing online and offline behaviour and spaces.

This kind of online collaborative co-construction of a narrative coupled with offline meeting, where the document was used as an interview stimulus, was important in three main ways. Firstly, by starting online, the ability to link online observations with the interviews was more easily possible. Secondly, the mode of online interviewing was very effective at building trust, facilitating a smooth transition into an offline setting. Finally the combination of the online and offline interviews enabled me to enter the appropriate ethnographic context to discuss offline sites and activities related to the primary online social space. This meant that the online and the offline field sites were held together as a whole by interviews that straddled both contexts.

### *Selection of participants*

Interview participants were selected in a number of ways. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) state, the purpose of sampling is to gain a representation of the population. However, in many ethnographic studies, the nature of the researcher's relationship with the field and participants often makes it difficult or impossible to take a fully random sample in order to achieve the 'gold standard' of representation. Instead, Bryman suggests that ethnographers

should 'gain access to as wide a range of individuals as possible, so that many different perspectives and ranges of activity are the focus of attention (Bryman 2008: 304). Therefore, in selecting participants to interview I aimed to choose a spectrum of users of the online social spaces reflecting the different kinds of people that were engaging online and different levels of use.

The participants I interviewed were recruited through my own participation in the TES RE Forum, the NATRE Facebook Group and Save RE Facebook Page. This was the most likely means of successfully recruiting participants, but as mentioned was also an attempt to link participant observations with the interviews (Boellstorff, 2012). This kind of recruitment was undertaken in a variety of ways. In some cases I got to know people through interacting with them online and then requested a more in depth interview. In other cases, I targeted particular individuals as representing different kinds of users (e.g. frequent posters, infrequent posters etc.). Finally, I put out several online calls for participation, in all three online social spaces, which asked for interviewees and contained a basic introductory questionnaire. *Table 1 - List of Participants* offers a break down of how each participant was selected and recruited and the frequency with which they engaged in the field sites.

The method of recruitment through online calls was particularly important for several reasons. Firstly, it was a way of reminding the users that I was a researcher. I felt it ethically important to alert the users to my presence in a continued way and, through gently reminders and the reinforcement of my researcher identity through the use of a research tool in the questionnaire, this

was a practical way of doing so (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Secondly, it provided an opportunity to reach people I may not have been aware of because they rarely posted, although they still read posts extensively. Although I attempted to recruit this kind of user through a snowballing approach (Bryman, 2008) by asking existing participants whether any of their colleagues used the online social spaces without posting, it was only through the online call that I managed to recruit this kind of user. However, it should be noted that I was not successful in recruiting anyone who never actively posted in the online social spaces. All participants made some posts at some stage during their online engagement.

This method of selecting and recruiting participants proved relatively effective at generating a group which covered the main kinds of RE teachers using each online social space. This gave a balanced view of the kinds of people who engaged in online social spaces, but should not be thought of as a 'representative sample'. Rather the interviewed group offers an appropriate range of views and perspectives based on my own participant observations of the community and analysis of the interview data as it was collected.

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Online Social Space</b> | <b>Type of User</b>                 | <b>Biographical Information</b>                                                                                                                                                                                      | <b>How recruited</b>        |
|------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Abney            | TES                        | Regular Reader<br>Occasional Poster | A head of department with over 10 years of teaching experience. Experienced difficulties at his school about the EBacc and became interested in online engagement, particularly in relation to educational politics, | Known through participation |

|           |       |                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                  |
|-----------|-------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|           |       |                                        | as a direct result of this.                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                  |
| Benjamin  | TES   | Regular Reader<br>Frequent Poster      | A head of department with over 5 years of teaching experience. Came onto the forum for resources, but began to get more interested in debates and political issues.                                                                       | Targeted following participation |
| Camilla   | TES   | Regular Reader<br>Infrequent Poster    | A very experienced head of department with over 15 years of teaching experience. Felt isolated in her role at school and particularly viewed the forum as a way of overcoming that isolation and networking with her peers.               | Known through participation      |
| Charlotte | TES   | Occasional Reader<br>Occasional Poster | Newly qualified teacher in her first year of teaching. Joined the forum in her PGCE year for teaching advice and moral support.                                                                                                           | Questionnaire                    |
| Dara      | TES   | Regular Reader<br>Frequent Poster      | A part time mid career teacher with 5 years of experience. Her head of department left and was not replaced just prior to the fieldwork and she viewed the forum as a place to gain support and connection that she lacked in her school. | Targeted following participation |
| Grace     | TES   | Regular Reader<br>Frequent Poster      | Early career teacher with 4 years experience. Came to the forum for advice and reassurance.                                                                                                                                               | Questionnaire                    |
| Haley     | TES   | Regular Reader<br>Occasional Poster    | Mid career teacher with 5 years experience. Thinking about the next stage in her career and interested in the ways the forum could support job hunting through networking.                                                                | Questionnaire and Known          |
| Jeanette  | TES   | Regular Reader<br>Occasional Poster    | An experienced head of department with over 10 years experience. A mentor to PGCE students and interested in supporting developing teachers.                                                                                              | Questionnaire                    |
| Lilah     | NATRE | Regular Reader                         | A mid career teacher                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Targeted                         |

|        |         |                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                  |
|--------|---------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
|        |         | Frequent Poster                        | with 5 years experience. Came to NATRE to stay up to date with RE news and for a sense of unity with her peers.                                                                                                                  | following participation          |
| Thelma | NATRE   | Occasional Reader<br>Occasional Poster | An experienced head of department with over 10 years teaching experience. Interested in the support the NATRE Page offered political campaigns.                                                                                  | Questionnaire                    |
| Trina  | NATRE   | Regular Reader<br>Infrequent Poster    | An early career teacher with 3 years experience. Came to the Page through linking on Facebook with people she did her PGCE with.                                                                                                 | Questionnaire                    |
| Tamara | NATRE   | Regular reader<br>Frequent Poster      | An experienced head of department with 10 years teaching experience. Experiencing difficulties regarding timetabling in her school and so particularly described the page as being valuable in PR, political and activist terms. | Targeted following participation |
| Simone | NATRE   | Regular Reader<br>Frequent Poster      | Early career teacher with 2 years teaching experience. During the fieldwork period she questioned her decision to teach RE and was wondering how long she would last in the profession.                                          | Targeted following participation |
| John   | NATRE   | Regular Reader<br>Frequent Poster      | Mid career teacher with over 5 years experience. Interested and involved in political campaigns. Actively looking for a head of department role.                                                                                 | Questionnaire and Known          |
| Helen  | NATRE   | Occasional Reader<br>Occasional Poster | Mid career teacher with 5 years experience. Interested in refreshing RE in her school and making it more philosophically oriented.                                                                                               | Questionnaire                    |
| Aisla  | Save RE | Occasional Reader<br>Occasional Poster | Early career teacher with 4 years experience. Particularly interested in self-reflection and                                                                                                                                     | Questionnaire                    |

|          |         |                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                             |
|----------|---------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
|          |         |                                        | CPD to improve her teaching practice and the support the group could provide.                                                                                                                                               |                             |
| Megan    | Save RE | Regular Reader<br>Infrequent<br>Poster | Mid career teacher with over 5 years experience. Came to the Group to share teaching practice and gain advice. Focused on online practical support.                                                                         | Questionnaire               |
| Lorraine | Save RE | Regular Reader<br>Frequent Poster      | Very experienced head of department with over 15 years of experience. Very interested in supporting her peers and making use of her experience.                                                                             | Questionnaire               |
| Holden   | Save RE | Regular Reader<br>Frequent Poster      | Mid career teacher with over 5 years experience. Actively enjoying teaching but expressed frustration at being stuck at his current level and the lack of head of department jobs available in his area.                    | Known through participation |
| Jude     | Save RE | Regular Reader<br>Occasional<br>Poster | Head of department with over 5 years experience. Although felt secure in his role, he expressed anger and frustration at the current political situation and was very interested in the political discussions in the group. | Known through participation |

*Table 1 - List of Participants*

## Other Sources of Data

Although participant observation and semi-structured narrative interviews formed the most significant part of data collection during the fieldwork period, in accordance with the ideals of ethnography, I additionally collected data from a

number of different sources in a number of different ways as opportunities and needs presented themselves.

As already mentioned, I viewed questionnaires as an important part of the recruitment process and an opportunity to emphasise my role as a researcher and my continued participation in the field. However, the questionnaires themselves were also useful ways of collecting data. I produced three different online questionnaires at different points during the fieldwork period. Although the primary aim was recruitment, I also wanted the opportunity to get wider feedback on themes that were emerging from interviews I had already undertaken, and get a sense of how generalizable these emerging themes might be (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

These questionnaires were designed to generate rich qualitative data that could supplement the interviews (similar to the qualitative surveys Baym used in her ethnography of a soap opera news groups, 2000; see also Hine 2008). This was useful for those people who completed the questionnaire and were then interviewed since the answers they had given were a useful starting point to explore further the issues they had raised. Additionally, where respondents had indicated they would not participate in interviews, there was still rich qualitative data, which could be analysed and gave an important additional picture of use.

In addition to this I was able to gather data through conference attendance; specifically I was able to join participants at two key offline events – the 2011 and 2012 RE Teacher Conference's held at Wokefield Park. A number of teachers

used the online social spaces to arrange meetings at these conferences and the online spaces were also used to discuss the proceedings. I used these events to meet again with several participants, users I had interacted with online in the sites, RE consultants, and key people in the RE world (e.g. members of the NATRE Executive, the Chair of the RE Council etc.), as well as discuss the project and undertake several formal recorded interviews. The 2012 conference was also a useful opportunity to share my ideas and emerging analysis with several participants, which led to a vibrant impromptu 'informal focus group' in the bar. This involved discussing the project, the emerging themes, and the wider issues of online interaction and developments in the RE world.

The analysis of grey literature was also an important additional source of data and a means of staying up to date with educational developments. Given that so much conversation in the online social spaces was related to developments, events and even moods within the RE and wider educational worlds, it was vital to stay well informed about these issues and record developments appropriately. In order to achieve this, firstly, I checked the media on a daily basis for relevant stories using a series of detailed online searches. These highlighted stories from the main media outlets (such as the BBC, the Guardian, the Telegraph etc.) as well as opinion pieces and political and educational blogs. Secondly, I set up a Twitter account and followed a large number of commentators on RE, education, and politics and did regular searches with the hashtag #reteacher, as well as searches related to specific key events (e.g. EBacc, free schools, academies etc.). This highlighted more news stories and opinion pieces as well as giving me a feel for what was being said in the 'Twitterverse' and 'Blogosphere'.

Finally, I sought out and discussed the educational context and my specific research focus with key members of the RE world. This included the members of the NATRE Executive Committee, the Chair of the RE Council, the Chair of the RE Council's PR Sub Committee, the Chair of NASACRE and a number of RE consultants and teacher trainers. These conversations enabled me to stay very current with political developments, particularly as some of the people I spoke with were involved in policy development and national political action.

## Data Analysis

Using the data collection methods outlined above, data mainly took the form of field notes, text documents recording online interactions, text from online interviews, and transcripts from the offline section of the interviews (as illustrated in *Table 2 – Description of Data*), all of which were analysed. The study explored the different ways in which RE Teachers interacted within online social spaces in order to investigate the influence of this use on the construction and performance of teachers' professional identities. With this in mind, an interpretative, thematic approach was adopted to analyse the data and, in keeping with the ethnographic approach, these themes were allowed to emerge from the data, rather than attempting to impose preconceived categories or themes onto them.

| Data         | Collection method                         | Timing of collection                   | Nature of data                                      |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Observations | Participating in and observing the online | Ongoing for the whole fieldwork period | TES – 21 pages of fieldnotes<br>NATRE – 16 pages of |

|                    |                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                    | social spaces, collating posts, likes etc, conducting informal network analyses of the spaces.            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | fieldnotes<br>Save RE – 24 pages of fieldnotes<br><br>Network diagrams were produced using NodeXL, supplemented with informal annotations based on observations.                                                                           |
| Sampled text       | Three 8-week long samples of all interactions and engagement in each social space                         | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 26th September 2011 to 14<sup>th</sup> November 2011;</li> <li>2. 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2012 to 12<sup>th</sup> March 2012;</li> <li>3. 15<sup>th</sup> May 2012 to 25 July 2012</li> </ol>                                                                                                                                                                                                | <p>The data was extracted and put into an Excel spreadsheet for descriptive statistical work then put in a Word Document for more detailed analysis.</p> <p>TES – 1743 pages<br/>NATRE – 217 pages<br/>Save RE – 392 pages<sup>8</sup></p> |
| Online interviews  | Collaboratively produced narrative interviews through Google Docs                                         | <p>The online section of the interviews took place over a period of 1-2 months for each participant and were carried out simultaneously across the sites.</p> <p>The majority of the interviews in all cases were conducted in the first 6 months of fieldwork depending on the time taken to recruit.</p> <p>3 TES interviews, 3 NATRE interviews and 1 Save RE interview were carried out in months 6,7,and 8 of the field work.</p> | <p>The interviews, though produced in Google Docs were copied and pasted into Word documents for storage and analysis.</p> <p>TES – 209 pages<br/>NATRE – 168 pages<br/>Save RE – 109 pages</p>                                            |
| Offline Interviews | Following online interviews, participants were met in offline contexts to develop the interviews further. | Offline interviews took place after online interviews and sometimes took several weeks or months to arrange. As such they all took place in the last 6 months of fieldwork                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <p>The interviews were recorded and then fully transcribed into word documents.</p> <p>TES – 195 pages<br/>NATRE – 132 pages<br/>Save RE 154 pages</p>                                                                                     |

<sup>8</sup> The differences here can, in part, be accounted for by different formatting systems between Facebook and TES posts: each post on the TES came with additional information (date, time, name of the poster, number of posts that poster had made, number of posts in the thread) all of which took up more space in the Word document. Other differences related to the kinds of engagement that took place in each space are discussed in the findings chapters.

|                         |                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                         | Interviews tended to last approximately 1 hour.                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Questionnaires          | 3 short (less than 10 questions) online questionnaires were posted in each space to aid recruitment and to test ideas                                               | The questionnaires were loaded in months 1, 4 and 7.                                                                                          | <p>The data was qualitative with just a few lines per question.<br/>Respondents:</p> <p>Questionnaire 1:<br/>TES – 8<br/>NATRE – 3<br/>Save RE – 6</p> <p>Questionnaire 2:<br/>TES – 9<br/>NATRE – 5<br/>Save RE – 6</p> <p>Questionnaire 3:<br/>TES – 4<br/>NATRE – 3<br/>Save RE – 7</p> |
| Conference Observations | I attended 2 conferences during the fieldwork period and used this as an opportunity to interview some participants, observe interactions and test ideas informally | The conferences took place at the very beginning and at the very end of the fieldwork period                                                  | <p>Observations were written up as field notes</p> <p>Conference 1 – 5 pages<br/>Conference 2 – 9 pages</p>                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Elite interviews        | Interviews with elites were often informal and were used as a way of shaping my understanding of the current educational context facing RE.                         | Interviews were often short and opportunistic based on availability of interviewees. As such they took place throughout the fieldwork period. | Interviews were generally informal, but were documented in short notes totalling 7 pages.                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Grey Literature         | Grey literature in the form of news reports, blogs, tweets etc. was used to provide an ethnographic background and context for the research                         | Grey literature analysis was ongoing through the whole fieldwork period and beyond.                                                           | Ongoing informal analysis formed the context of this study to ensure, I as an ethnographer was informed on debates and developments. This generally led to 1-3 documents/ posts being read each day.                                                                                       |

*Table 2 – Description of Data*

In ethnography analysis of data is not necessarily a distinct stage of the research process:

It begins in the pre-fieldwork phase, in the formulation and clarification of the research problems and continues to the process of writing reports, articles and books. Formally it starts to take shape in analytic notes and memoranda; informally, it is embodied in the ethnographer's ideas and hunches' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 158).

In the context of this research project, a form of analysis akin to the Grounded Theory approach of Straus and Corbin (1998), took place throughout my time in the field, informing recruitment of participants and the kinds of questions I asked.

The data were analysed through a cyclical and iterative process of reducing the data, synthesizing themes and concluding trends, based on Miles and Huberman's three main analytical steps – data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions (1994: 4). Themes, categories and potential conclusions were refined through repeated readings of the data, moving from the descriptive and mundane to the conceptual and analytical. With the emergence of new categories, data were systematically revisited to test the presence and robustness of the new categories. Through what Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as the 'constant comparative method', the data items against each category were compared and examined for similarities and differences, which generated new categories and subcategories.

As detailed above, consideration was given to linking participant observations with interviews during data collection. Therefore, this was extended into the

analysis and all data were analysed together to ensure a holistic approach. Although, I initially experimented with undertaking analysis through the qualitative analysis software, NVivo, I found this didn't give me the freedom, flexibility and creativity I required. I therefore set up a system linking documents containing the data in a secure Dropbox account, displayed and annotated the data in a variety of ways, mainly on an iPad through iAnnotate (where I also recorded analytical memos), then laid out reduced data, categories and themes in a master Word document set out in Outline display. Using <H1> formatting for mains themes, <H2> for sub-themes etc., I was able to quickly expand and contract the document, getting an instant overview at <H1>, while being able to drill into detailed quotes and sections with just a few clicks.

## **Presentation of Ethnographic Data**

As highlighted in the recently formed cross-disciplinary Digital Ethnography group at Oxford University, one of the best examples of digital ethnography is Bonnie Nardi's book (2010), *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of the World of Warcraft*. Nardi presents an ethnography of a virtual world, the game World of Warcraft, the title based on the in game character she selected. Through thick description of in-game interactions and experiences she weaves theoretical concepts with her ethnographic findings.

Like many digital ethnographers, Nardi's book has been an inspiration for this thesis. However, while I had initially hoped to provide a holistic account of a community of RE teachers working across a field of networked online spaces,

interweaving description and theory across the thesis, the early reconceptualization of the field as three case studies prevented this. I have therefore decided to present the findings from each case in a dedicated chapter. While these chapters provide some theoretical interpretations and have been shaped by the conceptual framework of identity performance and construction and the influence of power structures on these, I have withheld most theoretical analysis until the 'Synthesis' chapter where the findings are brought together and discussed in more explicitly theoretical terms.

## **Ethical Considerations**

As highlighted by Eynon *et al.*, ethics and research methods are closely related (2008). Therefore, it is important to conclude this methodology chapter with a discussion of the ethical issue involved in this project, the ethical framework used, and the measures taken to avoid causing harm to participants. While it has been argued that online research settings demand specific ethical frameworks, the majority of ethical approaches in online research are rooted in human subjects models (Eynon *et al.*, 2008)<sup>9</sup>. These place the avoidance of harm to participants at their heart through ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of participants and emphasizing the need for informed consent and participants' right to withdraw from the study (BERA, 2011). In this thesis I have, therefore, tried to uphold these values and protect participants from potential harm as a priority. While in most areas this has been relatively straight forward, some aspects of the online nature of the research, particularly the public nature of the

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<sup>9</sup> Although this has been questioned in some contexts (Basset and O'Riordan, 2002).

online social spaces, raised complicated ethical issues and concerns as will be discussed below. I have therefore drawn on both the ethical frameworks of the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2011; Jones, 2011) and the Association of Internet Researchers (Ess, 2002; Markham and Buchanan, 2012) in order to discuss these issues.

In all research using human subjects, the issue of harm is a complex one and a balance must be struck between the potential benefits to individuals, general society, and the academic community and the potential harm participants might experience (Bruckman, 2002a). An important part of assessing risk relates to who the participants are (Langford, 2010). Across the social sciences, all human subjects based ethical frameworks demand greater protection for high-risk groups such as children and young people. Although research in online contexts is no different in the need to differentiate between adult participants and more vulnerable groups, it has been highlighted that the possibilities of identity play online can make it harder for the researcher to assess possible harm to participants (Eynon *et al.*, 2008) – a young person could lie about their age in an online context. Fortunately this was not a significant problem in this thesis since the spaces being studied, their focus and content acted tended to attract a very specific adult audience: with the spaces being primarily attractive to RE teachers, adult RE teachers were the primary users. During my time in the field two users were accused of being students trolling the TES RE Forum. However, I felt it was likely was this was simply a way of undermining these users' arguments and there was no evidence that these people were not the teachers they claimed to be. Additionally, I was able to eliminate the possibility of identity play for

interview participants by meeting them in an offline context where I could easily verify their identities as adult RE teachers.

Although participants were adults there was still the potential that the research project could cause them harm since many revealed personal information about themselves and their professional lives in interviews, often talking about their families and their colleagues and describing work based conflicts and difficulties. Potential risks related to this kind of information are usually seen as being reduced by upholding participants' rights to privacy by treating their data confidentially and providing them with anonymity, while also ensuring they understand what is meant by participation that they provide fully informed consent (Bassett and O'Riordan, 2002; Hammersley, 2006; BERA, 2011). In terms of the online and offline interviews I maintained confidentiality by anonymising the names of all participants and not including any personal information or quotes within the findings chapters that might have identified the individuals. Interview text and audio recordings were kept securely on a password-protected computer. Although the data were primarily kept in a digital format, when I printed transcripts for certain kinds of analysis, these were kept securely in a locked filing cabinet when not in use.

The use of Google docs as a site for online interviews presented a small security risk as, although I removed the documents after each interview had been completed, the documents and information contained within them remained online for the duration of the online interview. However, I attempted to alleviate the risk by only conducting interviews on Google docs using my own password-

protected computer and using a secure domain (<https://docs.google.com>, as opposed to <http://docs.google.com>). I also advised participants to use the secure URL and to remember to log out of their Google accounts following each updating session as a way of alleviating the risk of a third party accessing private interview information.

Both the BERA and the AoIR ethical frameworks, which have particularly informed this study, emphasis the need for informed consent. Individuals must choose to participate in the research project on the basis of informed consent, understanding what they are agreeing to, the potential risks and benefits, that their participation is voluntary, and that they can withdraw at any time. In relation to the interviews, since they started online, an online consent form was used to gain consent. Participants were generally approached informally through the space and I would briefly describe the study within that initial communication. However, prior to starting the formal interview process a complete information sheet and consent form were emailed to the participants and the consent forms were emailed back to me. I also included the information at the top of the Google document to ensure that the participants were reminded of the relevant information and I uploaded the information onto the project's website for visitors to download. When the interviews moved into an offline context, I provided a printed information sheet and asked the participants to sign a second consent form stating that they were happy with the change of context and the continuation of the interview.

However, confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent were more complex in relation to participant observations. Ensuring complete anonymity can be problematic when gathering data in this way (Hammersley, 2006) and this can be a particularly important issue in online contexts when observed interaction may remain accessible and searchable for many years after the fieldwork was undertaken (Elgesem, 2002; Ess, 2002). In the case of both the TES and Facebook spaces, users' interactions observed during the fieldwork period have remained online and are potentially accessible to anyone seeking them, although neither site has particularly strong search functions and finding the relevant information would generally involve going through each page by hand. Therefore, there is the potential that the privacy of all users of the online social spaces might be compromised by a study highlighting and quoting that use. However, some academics have questioned whether online interaction needs to be treated with the same degree of confidentiality as interview data and whether users engaging in online social spaces need the same kind of privacy (Bassett and O'Riordan, 2002).

Ess highlights the nature of the online space being studied, whether it is predominantly public or private, as an important aspect of determining the degree of anonymity that researchers should afford to online interactions that take place within it (2002). Of course, the relative privacy of a space is sometimes difficult to establish. Therefore, in addition to the formal presentation of the spaces in their documentation, researchers should also take into account users' own perceptions of the spaces they engage in (Ess, 2002) – whether they view their interactions as taking place in the public sphere or not.

Ess suggests that 'the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent etc.' (2002: 5).

This perspective was an important part in deciding an ethical framework for this study. In all three of the online social spaces studied the administrators and published information about them, as well as security settings in Facebook, made it clear that they were open public spaces<sup>10</sup>. It was also clear from the beginning of the fieldwork that participants were very aware of the public nature of their activity. Being teachers, they were conscious of the possibility that students might enter the spaces and attempt to access their personal information. Users were consequently very careful with the kinds of information they made publically available in the spaces and, in the case of the TES RE Forum, frequently reminded each other of the public nature of the space. Although more occasional, users did sometimes remind each other in the Facebook spaces about the public nature of their interactions and encourage each other to ensure they had robust Facebook privacy settings. Therefore, in all three spaces it was clear that users saw their interactions as taking place in the public sphere and did not expect the levels of privacy associated with closed private spaces, adjusting their behaviour accordingly.

Given the spaces all appeared to be public and perceived by their users as public, I decided it was appropriate to quote observed interactions in this thesis.

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<sup>10</sup> As of the 21<sup>st</sup> of April 2014 the Save RE Group changed its privacy settings from Open to Closed.

However, I felt that it was still important to protect users' privacy as best I could. Therefore, when quoting interaction that took place online I have anonymized original posters by providing them with pseudonyms. I have also attempted to minimize long quotes that might make it easier for someone to track down the original post and user through Google, and I have paraphrased long contextual quotes that contained personal or identifying information where appropriate. Additionally, although users' own posts were often discussed at length in interviews and these observed posts and interviews were analysed together holistically, I have separated observed posts and interview data where possible when presenting the findings as a way of further protecting the identities of the participants.

However, although it increases the potential risk of loss of privacy for participants, due to the public nature of the spaces, I have decided to name them. A major factor in making this decision was the importance for this study of the social and political context in which RE teachers' engagement took place. Without explaining that the spaces being studied were RE related, a significant part of this context would have been lost and the way in which RE teachers' online engagement related to national issues and policy developments could not have been adequately discussed. Therefore, it was important to acknowledge that a subject specific study had taken place and describe the RE context. However, given that there were only three main online social spaces for RE teachers during this study, the spaces could easily have been discovered and would have been clear to anyone in the RE world, whether they were explicitly named or not.

The second important factor in deciding to name the spaces relates to issues of power. A significant part of this study relates to the ways in which the agendas of parent organisations providing the spaces influence the engagement that took place within them. It would have made little sense to describe agendas in a general way without naming the organisations being described. Therefore, following Walford's arguments (2002), I have decided to name my research sites for conceptual clarity and explanatory power and I hope that the benefits this provides to the study outweighs the potential risk to users' privacy and that my attempts to offset this risk through pseudonyms and judicious quotation have been successful.

The issue of informed consent was also problematic when conducting participant observations. Although online research can provide the researcher with easy opportunities to conduct covert observations (Eynon *et al.*, 2008), I have described above how I felt it was important to be an overt participant in the spaces. Aside from the benefits to the research of experiencing the spaces as a participant and getting feedback and criticism on analyses from users, being explicit about my presence was a way of informing users of the spaces of project. As described above, in addition to the under-used website for the project, each post I made had a signature briefly explaining my identity as a researcher and I used devices such as the questionnaires as ways of reminding users of my presence and researcher status throughout the fieldwork period. However, aside from getting permission from the administrators and representatives to enter the spaces and making it clear in my posts that people could private message me

and request I not use their posts in the study, I did not gain explicit consent from all users. This decision was based on the public nature of the spaces and the perception by users that their posts were made in a public domain. However, as described above, efforts have been made to reduce exposure to individual users by minimizing direct quotations of online interactions and anonymizing the data. I also hope that as the fieldwork was undertaken two years before the completion of this thesis, the passage of time and the constant accumulation of additional posts will smother the interactions observed making them very hard to find.

Thus, in this study I have attempted to follow guidelines housed in both BERA's and the AoIR's ethical frameworks and uphold the core ethical value of avoiding harm to participants. While maintaining confidentiality and anonymity and ensuring informed consent was possible in relation to conducting the interviews, this was more problematic in relation to the participant observations. Although an overt participant observer, it was not practical to gain informed consent from every user of each space, but I have argued that the public nature of the spaces justified this approach. For conceptual clarity I also made the decision to name the spaces, but undertook a number of measures to reduce users' potential exposure. However, ultimately many of these measures, particularly in relation to the presentation of quotations of online interactions, come down to my knowledge of the context and the original post and my judgment in how best to present that material in a way that preserved individuals' privacy adequately. As such, I hope that wherever I have quoted an individual, I have made the right

decision and not exposed that person to any unnecessary risks to their privacy or jeopardised their anonymity unnecessarily.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF THE TES RE FORUM**

### **Introduction**

This chapter reports the findings of fieldwork undertaken in the TES RE Forum. Following a detailed description of the online social space, the different ways in which RE teachers engaged within it will be described and discussed using the concepts of identity construction and performance as tools to frame some aspects of the presented data. Finally the forum's relationship with its parent body, the TES, and the ways in which the TES's aims and agendas formed part of the wider context in which RE teacher engaged and influenced the structure of the space and teachers' engagement within it is be presented.

### **Description of the TES RE Forum**

The TES RE Forum is an open online social space that is part of a larger suite of subject specific and more general education focused forums provided by the Times Educational Supplement. The forums were created in 2005 and are linked to teacher-provided teaching resources, with many of the people engaging in the forums also sharing these. Although the TES also publishes its articles online, the interactive sections (forums and resource sharing) of the TES website now represent a significant part of the organisations' work: according to the RE TES representative, the TES invested £6 million in the social element of its website in 2011 and in 2012 undertook preliminary work to expand the forums to an international market, with a much higher budget likely.

The online spaces are intimately linked to the TES's physical publication with, during the fieldwork period, a substantial section of the supplement dedicated to information and activity on the forums (the section *From the Forums*, for example) and many printed stories developed from forum conversations (*Ofsted Has a Problem*, TES, April 6, 2012, for example) or tested on the forums prior to publication as a way of generating opinions and quotes. The TES also held regular competitions, awarding prizes (e.g. iPads, vouchers, meals etc.) to the most active community members, and hosts annual 'Teacher Award Events', which involve free meals and the presentation of awards to regular contributors, resource providers, and 'nominated experts'.

The forum was managed and moderated by a forum convener, a full time secondary RE teacher also employed part time by the TES. Although he had traditional forum moderator duties (deleting offensive posts and banning offensive users), his job was primarily aimed at keeping the forum active and bringing new users to it. Aside from managing the RE side of the TES's competitions and producing a weekly newsletter, the convener described his promotional work in terms of advertising the TES RE Forum to his network of RE contacts:

At [a] University, in their first week, I go in and talk about [a particular topic]. Well some years there's been 250 people there and I'm turning round and saying I'm associated with the TES and this is what we can do for you. It's excellent advertising. Then I won't print anything out for them. I'll load my presentation on the TES and tell them to go there for it. You know you can't just turn around and get access to that part of the teaching community. They are paying for my contacts (Forum Convenor 5).

At the beginning of the fieldwork period the forum convener had recently extended this promotional model by establishing a 'forum network' of RE teachers, paid small amounts of money or vouchers, to assist him by tapping into their own professional networks around the country. As the convener put it, 'I've got people from Derby to London to Devon all the way up to like Bolton way... They've got links elsewhere and they spread the good word according to the TES.'

By the end of 2012 the TES were advertising as part of their promotional material that they had '48,305,695 teachers and students connecting globally'<sup>11</sup>. During the fieldwork period the TES informed me that there were 'over 2 million visits'<sup>12</sup> to the RE Forum and figures that I gathered myself through participant observation showed that there were 363 active community members posting messages. There was an average of 7 posts per day during this period, but this average doesn't reflect the natural ebb and flow of online conversation, where some days a topic would take hold leading to an intense flurry of activity. These activity levels made this the most active online social space for RE teachers in the UK.

Establishing the number of users accessing the forums simply to view other users' posts, as opposed to active members of the community also engaged in posting, was problematic. The statistics given to me by the TES implied there

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<sup>11</sup> It is unclear how this figure was generated and is likely to have been produced for promotional purposes, possibly representing hit rates rather than unique users.

<sup>12</sup> The TES RE Forum Convener provided me with several sets of site statistics over the course of the year. These were often embedded in promotional discourse, so, while likely to be broadly accurate, I tended to view them as potentially inflated.

were significant numbers of more passive viewers but the figures were all generalized and difficult to break down into more detail. Figures that I could gather myself could only relate to observable activity. It was therefore impossible to gain accurate statistical information on the more passive users. Although I attempted to recruit users who hadn't registered with the site but still read posts, I was unsuccessful, succeeding only in interviewing people who at the lowest levels of use, posted infrequently, but still had TES accounts. Therefore, most of the findings are necessarily based on observations and interviews with users who were active on the forums to some degree.

During the fieldwork period these users tended to be RE subject specialists (usually secondary), although non-specialists occasionally did request information from the specialist community and a substantial number of Teacher Trainees and NQTs also participated (as of October 2012, the forum convener told me that he was planning on attempting to make the forum more open and approachable for non-specialists, reflecting the growing number of non-specialists responsible for RE in schools). Of the members actively engaged in posting online during the fieldwork period, 65 joined the site in 2005, 45 in 2006, 37 in 2007, 35 in 2008, 55 in 2009, 45 in 2010, 51 in 2011, and 30 in 2012 (up to October). This shows a community with a fairly steady growth rate and one in which new users were able to participate regularly alongside older and more experienced community members.

Users engaged with the space in a variety of different contexts: in the home, at school, and one user reported regularly accessing the forum on her phone while

stuck in traffic and behind slow moving 'flocks of sheep'. Access and posting occurred throughout the day with users often engaging with the site in their free periods, during breaks, or, in some cases, actually during classes. However, the majority of activity occurred first thing in the morning (often beginning as early as 5am or 6am) and in the evenings, with discussions occasionally running into the early morning (3am posts occurred several times during the fieldwork period).

The reasons participants gave for coming to the forum were closely linked with the ways in which they used it and what they hoped to gain from that use. Therefore the next section of this chapter will present the emerging areas of use and reasons for this use that came out of the data, focusing on the ways users described their online engagement within the forum. This engagement will be discussed in terms of five general areas that emerged from observations and interviews: feelings of isolation; a felt need for reassurance and validation; politics and engaging in the current educational context; general debating, arguing, and conflict; and practical issues – resource and ideas sharing and asking for help. Using the conceptual framework of professional identity, RE teacher engagement will be described and discussed using the concepts of identity performance and identity construction as descriptive and analytical tools.

## RE Teacher Engagement in the TES RE Forum

### Feelings of Isolation

A word that every participant I interviewed and every forum member I interacted with online used to describe their motivation to engage on the TES RE Forum was 'isolation'. Dara, for example, stated:

I think because of the isolation, you know, that's why we're quite good at using social media and the Internet and sharing practice and things like that online. It's because we have to be (Dara 2).

It is perhaps unsurprising that users mentioned the word isolation so frequently since it is a word that is often used in the wider context of the RE world to describe RE teachers' experiences in schools (as described in the introduction; NATRE 2012a; NATRE, 2012b; REC, 2013a; and REC, 2013b). When using the term, isolation usually referred to the common arrangement where RE teachers are sole subject specialists in their schools, with few opportunities to meet other RE professionals, with teaching support coming from non-specialists or teaching assistants (REC, 2013a). Participants viewed this situation as pushing them online in order to interact with subject peers they were unable to meet elsewhere: 'we're in departments on our own so we need that online community because we don't have it anywhere else' (Abney, 6).

As described in the Introduction, NATRE and REC reports have argued that this isolation has been accentuated in recent years with the erosion of local authority support, particularly through the mass redundancies and repositioning of RE Advisors, and the reduction in funding for CPD activities where RE teachers would have been able to interact with their subject specialist peers outside their

schools (NATRE, 2012a and 2012b; REC, 2013a). Some users therefore expressed the need to interact more acutely since the policy changes of Education Secretary Michael Gove, as the erosion of their support networks has been accelerated in recent years:

It's very hard now for people to draw together, I know from my own borough we lost our full-time RE advisor. We don't really know who the heads of departments are nowadays whereas we used to meet very regularly. We don't have the same points of connection we used to have and that's probably true nationally. So to go online and hear what other people are saying and doing and to know that they are thinking the same way that you are is very important. (Amy, online interaction)

In addition to criticizing the lack of wider structured support, some users particularly emphasized more school based policy changes, such as the EBacc as increasing their sense of isolation at the school level. Dara, for example, felt that her school's decision not to replace her head of department was rooted in a new culture in her school that was hostile to religious education and fostered by governmental attitudes. Therefore, an online supportive community was deemed vital to overcome these local problems:

I don't know if I could have stayed as positive and as enthusiastic over the last few years without it [TES]. I think I would have felt more depressed without it. I would definitely feel completely isolated, especially with the changes in the last couple of years with the government's ideas and the EBacc and our school's own changes with the subject. I think without that right then I would've been completely lost. I wouldn't know who to reach out to. (Camilla 11)

Thus for some teachers it could be observed that engagement in online social spaces provided them with an important way of maintaining a sense of who they were as RE professionals. Connecting with their peers online helped overcome teachers' sense of isolation, and in doing so provided them with a sense of

belonging to a community, providing them with a sense of community identity that they felt was unavailable to them in their offline professional lives.

Furthermore, for some teachers, agentially entering online social spaces in order to overcome a growing sense of isolation appeared to provide a sense of empowerment. Given the discourses dominating the wider RE world concerning the influence of policy development on RE teachers' sense of isolation, overcoming that isolation was, for some, a form of political protest: 'they've taken it away from us, but screw them! This is our way of talking to each other anyway!' (Abney 4). As such the active utilization of online social spaces to overcome a sense of isolation can be seen in performative terms: it is an expression of identity rooted in politically oriented anger. The act of engaging online in order to overcome isolation, for some teachers, can be seen as a way in which they felt they were fighting back against a policy based power that had removed formal networking opportunities from them; they were re-establishing agency and consequently the entire practice of engagement in online social spaces could be seen as a performance of identity rooted in protest and agency.

However, isolation is not a unique experience for RE teachers (Hargreaves, 1993). There were other, non-subject specific and non-policy based reasons for teachers to feel isolated. For example, Tracey described regretting her inability to meet with her colleagues or go on CPD courses, because she was limited by the fact that to do any of these things she had 'to make special arrangements' because she has 'two kids at home'. For her the forum was 'a way of being able to interact with other professionals, because I can't do it otherwise... because of

life'. Similarly, Grace rued the fact that she was isolated from colleagues and other professionals by her long commute to work: 'I've got the M6 to contend with, you know... it's one of the worst stretches of motorway in the country and I have to drive it everyday... I've basically got to dash out of school to try and get through the traffic and make tea for the kids'. For her the TES forum was a way of overcoming these practical difficulties and remaining in touch with 'moods and feelings' within the RE teachers community.

Thus, although taking a number of different forms, from the subject specific to the general fact of having busy lives, all interviewed users mentioned isolation from their professional, particularly subject specific, peers as being an important motivating factor for their engagement in the TES RE Forum: 'I would feel completely alone if that wasn't there, just for the specialist subject stuff and the kind of situations that our subject has gone through' (Camilla 12). In many ways therefore, isolation can be seen as a key factor underlying and interacting with the different ways in which RE teachers engaged online with the forum providing a way of overcoming practical offline barriers to peer-to-peer professional interactions. However, whether the desire to overcome isolation was rooted in practical or political motivations, online engagement can also be seen as an expression of identity rooted in agency. With teachers actively making the choice to enter the TES Forum in order to overcome their feelings of isolation, the whole act of online engagement can be seen in performative terms as RE teachers express the desire to interact professionally with peers and 'be' RE teachers in social contexts.

## **A Felt Need for Reassurance and Validation**

Many RE participants and users I interacted with on the TES RE Forum stated that something they particularly sought out on the TES RE Forum, in part due to their sense of isolation, was ‘reassurance’ from their colleagues and peers. This was an important motivating factor in their use of the forum. This need for reassurance took a number of forms. At its most basic level, reassurance was a simple confirmation that teachers were not alone: ‘I think the forum made me realize it wasn’t just me out there, there were other people like me’ (Haley 18). Underlying this was the need for reassurance that other teachers were having similar experiences and doing similar things – a general confirmation of users’ teaching practice, choices and behaviour:

I feel that sometimes you just want reassurance that you’re doing the right thing, but when none of the line managers are specifically RE trained it’s difficult, so the forum is really good for that (Dara 3).

As well as the general desire to measure one’s work against colleagues’ work and the obvious benefits of avoiding working in a vacuum, this kind of reassurance was often expressed as being an important means of ‘boosting confidence’ in users:

I think it boosts my... it does boost my confidence when I come across that people are doing the same thing as me or have the same idea, or I’m doing the right thing with certain subjects or certain kinds of topics or how I manage my non-specialists (Camilla 10).

Thus, users viewed reading about other community members making the same choices and doing the same things as them as a very empowering experience, across all aspects of their professional lives, from lesson planning through to people management.

Such reassurance can be seen as an important part of validating RE teachers' own understanding of themselves and as such can usefully be described in terms of construction of professional identity. Professional choices and behaviour were validated by the wider group of users through comparison and reassurance. Linking online engagement with offline practice, this kind of validation frequently led to users modifying their behaviour and offline performances. As Haley stated:

When somebody else kind of confirms or validates or kind of says, 'yeah I think that's a really good idea', then that will always make you stand off a bit and think, 'yeah alright. I'm doing alright.' And it gives you encouragement and it makes you feel good about yourself and what you're doing as a teacher for your subject. You're doing the right thing so you keep doing it. But more often they've got improvements or new ideas and then you change what you're doing a bit and they change what they're doing a bit and everyone gradually improves (Haley 11)

As well as dealing with ongoing teaching practice, many participants discussed the need for online reassurance when they faced specific challenges and problems in their professional lives. Some users described this kind of reassurance in more passive terms, where they simply read about other teachers' experiences in the face of similar issues. This kind of 'wisdom of crowds' (Surowiecki, 2004) was then used to inform their own reactions and behaviour, constructing a professional position in relation to a specific issue. Camilla, for example, described a situation in which her locally agreed syllabus changed and she 'went straight on the forum to check how other people have dealt with similar situations' (Camilla 10). This is illustrative of common online information seeking behaviour. However, it was frequently also possible to observe the constructive power of such accumulated knowledge with users

describing ways in which they actively sought, read, and assimilated the posts of other users and modified their positions and understandings of their professional situations accordingly.

However, other users described seeking reassurance in the face of specific challenges in more active terms where they requested advice from the whole group and users then came together to discuss actively a particular issue en masse. They then mutually reassured each other in the face of difficulties that the issue presented. This kind of online discussion was perhaps most apparent during exam season where users discussed their experiences, concerns, and frequent disgust with certain questions and exam boards, illustrated by the following extract:

**01 Orange Marmot**

Hey everyone,

What did you think of the Edexcel unit 8 paper today? I thought the first section (Rights and Responsibilities) was awful! An 8 mark question on the Parable of the Sheep and Goats and then a question on 'Am I my Brother's Keeper?' I really did think that it was a poor section, but the rest of the paper seemed okay, good infact! My concern is that our students will have missed out on their A\* grades because of bad questions like that...

Angry

Really starting to lose faith in Edexcel!!

How did everyone else find it??

....

**04 Bdr1983**

I agree - it's the wording of the questions that is hard to prepare them for - in particular - why should Christians follow the Parable of the Sheep and Goats - it's that why that will have been a problem. It was the same for Unit 2 - the first section had tricky questions there as

well. Apart from that my small group thought it was ok (except the 2 who hadn't come to revision classes or revised!)

### **05 Blue Boar**

Was pleasantly surprised with the peace and conflict and crime and punishment sections, but totally agree with the awkward wording on the rights and responsibilities bit. We shall see...

### **06 John Jeeves**

Good paper, I think.

The Year 10 paper (Unit 1) on Tuesday was good, too.

Don't worry about certain sections being tough. Remember, it's the same for everyone, and they'll make sure the %age of A\*s will be fairly similar to last year.

In this extract the initial poster expresses concern about a particular exam question and how his students would do as a result. Other users express similar concerns, pooling their experiences, and in doing so, reassuring each other that their worries are shared. John Jeeves then summarizes the sentiment by emphasizing the point that the situation is 'the same for everyone'.

This kind of pooling of experience and mutual reassurance also resulted in active collaborative decision-making, where those participating in a thread about a specific issue or problem decided on a solution together with action taken together en masse. This can again be seen in the context of exams, as described by Grace:

It's [the TES RE Forum] brilliant in terms of like when we had the exams the exam paper and everybody goes on there straightaway and it's like 'how did you find the paper?' You think they got the question dodgy and you're not necessarily sure if it's just the way you've interpreted it, but then when everybody else says it, then you know. Then we all decided that we want to send that question for review, which I eventually then did in my school once I knew that all the people on the forum were going to do the same thing (Grace 8).

Grace's description of taking the decision to send her schools' exam papers in for review illustrates the importance of a sense of safety in numbers when making difficult decisions. By communicating about a particular problem online with a number of other teachers with similar concerns, she was able to feel confident enough to take action and, in this case request a remark, validated by the fact that her online colleagues were taking the same action. This sort of collaborative decision-making rooted in mutual reassurance is further illustrated by the following extract from a much longer thread on issues relating to AQA that Grace was referring to:

#### **09 Exod**

I have read the comments about AQA Spec B with interest. Our marks for both Year 10 and Year 11 were awful this year. I felt like throwing myself off the top of the school. Last year the Year 10 results were stunning. This year the same cohort dropped by over 30%. I sent 5 off to be remarked. All came back moved up a grade. Two of the 5 moved by by 10 UMS marks. I also sent off a couple of Year 11 papers. So far I have only had one back but it moved up by 10 marks...

It is a relief that I am not the only one with mystifying results. ... I feel utterly deflated by the injustice of the system this year.

#### **10 Hansel**

Similar situation. Our year 11s took their second short course AQA 'B' unit 2 and many of them achieved a lower grade than their Yr 10 unit 4 exam. Very disappointing...

#### **11 Big Pixie**

...

Something is very very wrong at AQA.

#### **12 The Trapdoor**

I am so glad it's not just me!

#### **13 Oak Tree**

We've now been onto AQA and they insist the marking was fair. We've had one remark which went up 3 on the UMS and up a grade. We've sent off for 10% of the cohort to be remarked and are waiting to hear on that.

#### **14 JD&Coke**

We finally got the rest of our results back yesterday - all 20 have gone up - most have doubled their marks. We are now however fighting with AQA to get the rest of the cohort remarked, as apparently 1/2 being changed by 3-4 grades does not constitute a significant change!

#### **15 Exod**

I think we all need to keep in touch and when our remarks are through perhaps we might write a joint letter expressing our joint concerns. There is strength in numbers and, if you think how many of our AQA regular contributors to TES have been affected, it would appear to be a real problem with lots of AQA RS marking this year.

This extract illustrates the ways in which knowledge and experience could be combined, validating users' own individual feelings of dissatisfaction with the exam board in question. These private feelings then, by being aired in public and added to the growing number of similar posts, combined to create a public representative mood. This reassured those, like Grace, who had been considering taking action and led them to seek reviews and even question the validity of the exam board. These different kinds of reassurances and validations can be seen as influencing both ongoing professional behaviour and reactions to specific issues. As such it is an important part of professional peer-to-peer interactions and an affordance of participating in a mutually supportive space. However, the constructive influence of the space can also be observed where users' behaviour and perceptions of themselves were held up against their peers within the wider group of TES RE users and modified or reinforced as a result, constructing professional identity positions, which could then be enacted in offline school based contexts.

However, such active validation and reassurance can also be conceptualized in performative terms. While the above example illustrates ways in which such

topical threads afforded users with the space to express feelings of frustration, anger, disappointed etc., which often appear in personal and identity related language, they can also be seen in terms of a performance of group membership. Through the repetition of feelings of frustration etc. and the repeated description of similar experience, such threads appeared to become semi-ritualized, in which the expression of shared experiences and feelings became the means of establishing a group identity. Such validity posts consequently can be seen as both the forging of such an identity and a performance of group membership and group identity based on offline professional experiences. Such behaviour, in addition to the clear practical implications related to support and professional decision making, can therefore also be seen as a form of semi-ritualized performance of a group-identity.

### **Politics and Engaging in the Current Educational Context**

As described in the Introduction, online social spaces and interactions are necessarily situated in social and historical contexts. Given the high profile and controversial educational reforms taking place during and prior to the fieldwork, it was perhaps inevitable that much discussion on the TES RE Forum focused on current issues and politics. In fact many participants described discussions related to current issues as being particularly important for them. Three different kinds of users could be seen engaging in discussions and debates focusing on the current political issues, which consequently shaped the form such threads took: users who simply wanted to keep abreast of educational changes and policy developments by staying informed and sharing news stories;

users who wanted to engage (either actively or passively) in political debates; and users who actively attempted to foster and engage in both online and offline political action through the forum.

### *Staying Informed*

As might be expected, participants described the reasons they came to and engaged in the TES RE Forum in a variety of different ways. However, a common entry point was feeling a need to keep up to date with education and RE related news:

I first used it [TES RE Forum] to keep up to date with current issues in education, particularly in the RE world, in case anyone asked me about them. Then kept using it in case anyone asked me about them again 😊 (Charlotte 1)

The motivation to stay up to date with current educational and RE specific issues expressed by Charlotte was a common one, particularly for teachers who felt they didn't have time to get information from other sources. Haley, for example, emphasized this point:

I don't have time to go and read newspapers all the time and find articles about certain things like politics, so it's good that other people post them on there because I do read them from there (Haley 4).

This sentiment is echoed by Dara:

At the moment my life is just really hectic and I don't have time to sit down and really watch the news and stuff. So I guess I kind of use it as a way to kind of catch up without having to sit down and trawl through (Dara 6).

Underlying this desire to stay up to date with educational and RE issues appeared to be a general concern for the impact of Governmental policy and the

rapid changes taking place in education. Therefore, participants often described the kind of news and issues that they wanted to stay informed about in political terms: 'I'm there to find out what Mr Gove is doing, basically; it all moves so fast, like the EBacc; it helps me stay on top of it all' (Amy, online interaction). These news related posts were usually based around an external link, e.g. an article on a news site, blog, Hansard etc., and included a little commentary, as illustrated below:

### **Cooperville**

Watch Gove in front of the Education Committee the other day at

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/education-committee/news/secretary-of-state-ev-session/>

At 32 mins in, he is asked if the EBacc, the changes to vocational education and other things are creating a two tier system. In reply he said that he was fully in favour of schools 'taking a different approach' and 'as long as they're doing well in other measures', choosing to ignore the EBacc as there would be 'no penalty' for doing so.

So, you've heard it from the top. Recommend to your Head that your school takes 'a different approach' and ignores the EBacc.

Such a desire to 'stay informed' can be related to professional concern for one's subject and profession. It was also expressed in terms of self-interest as users felt the affects of policy changes in their own local contexts. However, in addition to this, there can also be seen an underlying assumption that staying up to date with policy and political information is linked with a wider view of what is expected of teachers as professionals. The quote from Charlotte illustrates that she wanted to stay up to date in case 'anyone asks' her about current issues. Her assumption was that, as a teacher, she should be aware of developments in education and in her subject. Implicit in this is the view that a teacher should be

a politically informed professional capable of discussing national debates and issues. As Camilla, an experienced Head of Department, commented, 'it's all the stuff I should know, what I need to know to, you know, excel at my job'.

Thus, staying up to date can perhaps be thought of as a performance or enactment of a projection of 'what a teacher should be'. In De Ruyter and Conroy's terms (De Ruyter and Conroy, 2002; Beauchamp and Thomas, 2010), it is a performance of an ideal professional identity that is politically informed and policy literate. Engaging online in news related threads can be thought of as a performance of such an identity, where users enact their understanding of an ideal professional identity and project themselves as politically informed professionals. Additionally, this activity can be thought about in constructive terms. The internalization and appreciation of current affairs leads to the development and construction of such an ideal identity by equipping users with the knowledge to be performed in offline school based contexts.

### ***Engaging in Political Debate***

The reading and sharing of information related to the current educational context was not the only way in which political interests were manifested and many teachers stated that they used the space to engage actively in debate about educational and RE specific political issues. This is illustrated well by Abney's summary of why he started using the TES RE Forum:

I guess the starting point was the EBacc for me to sort of wake up to the wider national picture... I had a sort of direct personal experience of feeling the need to stand up for my subject and the kind of EBacc was around at the same time. So it was kind of you know, hang on a minute this is actually a

debate I want to get involved with, so for me, debating these issues is what the forum is all about (Abney 5).

The sort of debates that Abney mentions here tended to involve reference to or description of a policy change, current event or issue, frequently with the discussion focused on the affects this might have on teaching and RE, as illustrated by the following extract from a thread about '*A Level changes and GCSE reforms - any opinions?*':

### **01 BeetleBum**

Lots and lots of change seems afoot (again!!!). How do we think RE will feature under the new O Levels? Could a new highly academic course allow us to really show what an academic and traditional subject we are or will we be ignored?

### **02 Shugarr**

The return to a two tiered system really worries me, particularly for RE. I agree RE does need to be more widely recognised as a rigorous academic subject, but one of the things I love about teaching RE is the "learning about" vs "learning from" aspects, and in my experience the more academically able students tend to be much stronger in the "learning about" aspect, whilst the less academic are stronger in the "learning from" aspects and we need BOTH to be valued and the students to learn from each other. The idea of RE becoming more traditional (ie Religious Instruction rather than RE) fills me with dread!

### **03 Meitreya**

I just hope they don't go to a two tiered system of O levels and CSE's. Personally I think that with courses that exist at the moment like with OCR, that RE can be seen as a highly academic subject. However what worries me is that by only having one exam board per subject, the new exams may not suit all students. OCR is great for our top three sets, but Edexcel is more accessible for sets 3-6. This will be interesting to see.

These kinds of conversations illustrate debates focused on politics and current issues. They can be seen as opportunities for users to express concerns about the changing educational landscape and collaboratively forge meaning in what they viewed as uncertain times.

Such threads also offered opportunities for professional identities rooted in political interests to be performed. During the course of my fieldwork there were a number of users of the TES RE Forum who only engaged in political debate. For them, the act of debating such issues was the primary motivation behind their use of the forum. Their posts did not fit into a wider pattern of engagement within the online social space. Rather they were single-issue users: 'It is all about the politics for me' (Abney 5). Debating allowed them to present their wider knowledge of politics to the community and build up online personas linked to this – 'I like to be seen as the politics guy' (Abney 5). Thus, for users like Abney, the TES RE Forum afforded them the space to perform identities rooted in their political interests. Online political debates provided performance spaces for the expression of such politically oriented identities.

However, not all political identity work was quite so agentic, where users chose to construct and perform their political identities within online discourses. Instead several participants described ways in which political conversations had influenced the way they viewed themselves, their subject, and their colleagues, passively constructing their professional identities in political terms. This is illustrated well by Benjamin:

I first came on for lesson plans and resources, you know, that sort of thing, then I started reading about what Gove's doing to RE and I realized we were in trouble. It sort of woke me up to the issues. I realized that RE is treated really badly in my school. You know, I can see the Geography teachers and History teachers going out there at options evenings and things and to the head and just slagging us off. Then you just think, well hang on, you know, well I'm a bit of a character in the corridor and the kids won't play me up and I'm thinking well hang on I've got you out of trouble a few times, that ain't going to happen again (Benjamin 10).

Benjamin' account shows how he became politicized or perhaps even radicalized through his unanticipated exposure to online political debate and discourse. This got him interested in, in his words, 'the political side of things', which changed the way he then perceived his subject, its place in his school, and his colleagues, who he felt were trying to undermine him. This is an example of a political identity being constructed not through agency or performance but through the power of an online political discourse. Such political discourses in the TES RE Forum tended to emphasise the negative effects reforms were likely to have or were having on RE and its place within schools. This can be seen as leading to the adoption of identity positions for those engaging within it. As illustrated by Benjamin, these identity positions were often politicized leading to negative, hostile, even pugnacious attitudes towards changes, the subject and colleagues and professional identities rooted in anger and feelings of victimhood. Thus political discourses embedded in political debate had a constructive power over some users engaging in the TES RE Forum, as users modified their understandings of their subject and themselves as professionals in relation to them. This also illustrates the relationship between online and offline contexts, online discourses and offline identity performance, with users describing the constructive power of online discourses manifesting itself in their identity performances in their offline working contexts.

### ***Engaging in Political Action***

Within the online political discourse, several users frequently adopted the word 'survival', arguing that since RE is facing significant challenges from, for example,

the EBacc, Academies and Free schools etc., teachers needed to debate its future if it is to 'survive' as a subject. Dara, for example, stated 'we're just trying to find a way to ensure the subject survives' (Dara 15). Lucia took this further preferring to express this kind of survival in terms of 'an opportunity to redefine ourselves'. She argued that:

I find religious education is redefining itself especially because of this latest attack from the government. It's in transformation. If you compare in the beginning of RE let's say the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it was Christianity and very morals oriented and then things changed and now we're at the point where we're trying to redefine ourselves again. We've got to keep the debate up! (Lucia TES Thread *Can RE Survive*)

This illustrates the view that some users of the TES RE Forums had of themselves as agents of change, setting the agenda for the future of the subject, moulding it through their engagement in online debate. Such users viewed the TES RE Forum as giving them a platform to reconstruct their subject at a national level. For these users the forum afforded them the chance to take ownership of their subject and set the agenda for determining its future while performing politically oriented identities rooted in agency and a desire for control of change. For a group frequently describing the political situation and changes in terms of 'an attack' on their subject, such ownership fostered professional pride in some users and was instrumental in, for them at least, re-establishing a sense of subject direction and agency at a time where feelings of being disempowered were common.

Other participants and teachers I interacted with online shared this view and sense of ownership through political debate but expressed it in more concrete and practical ways. Dara for example argued that political debates were

instrumental in fostering a 'campaigning community', 'strengthening the RE community and bringing it together as a whole' in the face of a common enemy – the DfE (Dara 13). Such a campaign community had tangible aims and activities, illustrated by the following post encouraging forum users to contact their MPs requesting that they join the All Party Parliamentary Group on RE:

**JaneDog**

<http://www.retoday.org.uk/news/letter-mp-appg>

You may already know that an All Party Parliamentary Group on RE has been launched. It is the first time such a group has ever been established and it hopes to bring about greater public understanding of the purpose and value of RE.

Please could you look at the link and consider writing to your MP and asking them to join the group. There is a sample letter, written by Dave Francis, which you could adapt. The more support gathered, the more successful the group will be.

Such threads and the activity encouraged within them were common during the fieldwork period and an important part of the lives of users of the TES RE Forum. Every RE teacher I spoke with, including those who deliberately avoided participating actively in political threads (see the section on practical issues below), had, based on the kind of post above, become actively involved in the political campaigns and participated in political activity. For example, Charlotte stated, 'I signed a petition posted on the forum and used online letters to write to my MP' (Charlotte 12). Thus with such posts actively encouraging the formation of a campaign community, many users appeared to incorporate the role of political campaigner into their professional identities. This appeared to be an expected part of engaging on the forum, illustrated by Camilla's lament, 'It feels like I fill out petitions and questionnaires and surveys all day long, but it's something that's got to be done' (Camilla 5). Performance of identities related to

political activity can consequently also be seen as an expression of belonging within the online social space. As such it should be viewed as part of the wider group identity attached to the TES RE Forum, with the forum acting as both a performance space and a constructive influence on users' understandings of themselves as professionals, as identities rooted in political activism could be observed extending beyond the online context.

However, political action was not necessarily confined to the above campaigning activities, nor was it necessarily confined to overtly political threads. Some participants argued that online interaction and networking was itself a form of political action. As Dara put it, 'the simple fact that we're on there means that we're showing RE can be good, that it matters and we need to keep doing that if we're going to survive and change things'. For her online engagement was a way of showing that RE had a cohesive subject oriented community; that together users were producing examples of good practice and showing that the subject is vibrant and mattered. Jeanette makes a similar point arguing that:

If RE is to survive nationally, we've got to help each other out... I mean if some schools are having bad RE because there's no support then we all have a duty to help each other out because if it's bad somewhere then it gives a negative impression in society. There are lots of comments about RE that are poor so it's just making sure that you do something about it (Jeanette 3).

For Dara and Jeanette all online engagement was a form of political action, a political action that is embodied in every professional action a teacher takes. All displays of good teaching, all online collaborations, all networking, all political debates can all be seen as part of an ongoing politically motivated identity, performed and embodied in all aspects of users' professional lives, aimed at

portraying the subject in the best possible light and generating national improvement. As such the TES RE Forum afforded these users with the performance space to express these politically oriented identities rooted in a desire for wider subject improvement.

Thus political threads were both key motivators for users to engage in the online social space and an important part the every day working of the TES RE Forum. They can be viewed as opportunities for RE teachers to perform their politically oriented professional identities by engaging in the debate and taking up identity positions within the discourse. Equally, political threads can be viewed as dominant discourses which influenced the construction of RE teachers' identities as politically active professionals as the debates were internalized and translated into both online and offline political action. In fact such political identity positions spilled into all aspects of users' lives and political identities were, for some, embodied in all professional interaction and behaviour in which engagement on the forum was part of a fully enacted political identity.

### **General Debating, Arguing and Conflict**

Despite the regularity of political conversations about the current educational context more general discussions, debates and arguments focusing on a variety of topics were frequent on the TES RE Forum and were reported by participants as an important part of their online professional lives. The topics of these debates ranged from specific subject knowledge related issues (e.g. the thread *African Jesus*, see below) to more existential topics (e.g. *Are RE Teachers Religious*; and *RE: What's the Point*, see below).

Participants reported engaging in these sorts of threads in a number of different ways and for a number of different reasons. However, a major motivating factor was simply that 'arguing is fun' (Abney 4): 'it gives the brain a really good work out; every teacher loves a good debate' (Abney 4). Part of this enjoyable intellectual exercise, according to one participant was the fun of causing controversy within the debates by 'stirring things up a bit' (Camilla 7). Thus the discussions were intellectually stimulating, in some cases inspiring, and provided a space for what users viewed as a performance of 'slightly naughty', argumentative, intellectual, fun identities.

For other users arguing online was an important expression of themselves as teachers. With a vision of education, particularly Religious Education, as being rooted in debate, some users saw their online discussions as an embodiment of their subject and teaching practice: 'RE's all about debate, and fostering debate, that's why we love doing it online' (Grace 6). Engaging in subject related debate can therefore be seen as a performance of professional identity positions rooted in a particular understanding of the aims and methods of teaching and the nature of RE. As such, the importance placed on debate in the TES RE Forum can also be seen as contributing to the reproduction of a particular understanding of RE as a subject and the construction of associated identity positions which value such debate and conflict.

Participants also reported being professionally influenced through their engagement in online debates not just in terms of being stimulated and given

ideas, but also in terms of collaborative meaning making about important topics related to teaching and RE, leading to better understandings of themselves and their subject. This is expressed by Benjamin, who comments:

What I think is really important in the forum are the debates, that kind of stuff. Just reading it really helps you work out where you stand, you know, your opinion on it all. It's even better if you get involved because you're forced to put your opinion into words (Benjamin 3).

Debates, then, can also be seen as important collaborative acts of meaning making which in turn influenced the construction and expression of users' professional identities as they developed opinions and understandings of their subject and their profession. Debates facilitated professional insights into subject specific practices and ideas and more general professional identity positions as key topics and issues were explored.

However debates and arguments, though an important part of the daily activity of the forum, often involved conflict that manifested itself in a number of different ways. Some users expressed a dislike of the kinds of highly personal and offensive comments that often appeared on threads (often with very limited moderation), as Haley stated 'sometimes it just gets so catty out there, I hate it'. This kind of conflict is illustrated in the following extract from the thread *The African Jesus*, in which DoloresHowell is attacked for her Christian focused approach to RE:

## **22 Symbiosis**

Where is the proof for Jesus? Where is the proof for God?

## **23 DoloresHowell**

There is abundant poof that Jesus lived, that he was a real man. When it comes to the question of his divinity [sic], it is an inner thing which is partly given by Grace and partly grows in response to prayer.

#### **24 Symbiosis**

We all have our hang-ups. You should be in my RE classes and then you wouldn't have such dumb ideas!!!

...

#### **27 Supersonic**

...you spell horrendously. What year are you in at school? [aimed at DoloresHowell]

The insults here are obvious but interestingly delivered in educational terms. They strike at the heart of Dolores' professional identity by attempting to undermine her position as a teacher through the implication that she is a student in need of re-education. In making these comments Symbiosis and Supersonic are asserting their own professional identities and assuming positions of power and expertise through their insults, displaying identity performance through conflict. These kinds of interpersonal conflicts were heightened by the fact that a large number of the users of the TES RE Forum chose to remain anonymous and use pseudonyms. This anonymity appeared to give users a sense of freedom to explore and perform antagonistic identities in safety, without risking the negative opinions community members might have of them being attached to their real names.

However, although some users expressed the importance of anonymity in this way, many were concerned that their sense of anonymity might be misplaced: 'You think Okay your name's not on there but people probably would recognize you if they looked back through your history. They could probably work out who you are so you need to be careful.' (Camilla 5). Part of this concern appeared to be related to a fear of the online and offline contexts colliding and a

connection being made between users' online argumentative identities and their offline, presumably calmer, identities. As Haley explains:

It's very easy to respond when you maybe are a bit worried or upset or preoccupied with something else and then you see some of these comments, or even the positive ones, you kind of react in certain ways that maybe under other circumstances you wouldn't react to. And then, you know, people read into things in a certain way or misunderstand what you've written or pick you up on your spelling or your grammar or whatever and things just get so complicated. It's best to keep it all separate (Haley 6).

Underlying this desire to keep the online and the offline apart seems to be a worry about jobs, that users' hastily written posts, their arguments, insults, and general interpersonal conflicts may come back to haunt them at an interview and cost them a job: 'I'm quite reluctant to give away too much about who I am or where I am or what my current job situation is because I don't want it to be awkward you know at a job interview or something like that' (Haley 6).

Implicit here appears to be an assumption that such online debating, arguments, and conflicts were at odds with being a professional teacher. Thus there appeared to be a tension between users who viewed arguments as a performance of identity rooted in values that emphasized the importance of debate and users who saw the conflict inherent in argumentative threads as being at odds with their professional identities. For the latter group conflict was more of an escape from offline professionalism, with the forum offering them an opportunity to engage in debate, vent frustrations, let off steam, and even insult their peers in a way that would be unacceptable in their offline lives. Therefore, for some users, debates and arguments afforded them the space to set aside their

professional identities and engage in behaviour, though associated with their professions, would be seen as inappropriate in other professional contexts.

However, conflict, as well appearing in interpersonal hostility, also occurred at an intergroup level in which different parts of the user group of TES RE forum clashed over certain issues. One of the best examples of this kind of interaction came in relation to the issue of whether RE teachers should or should not be religious themselves. This topic occurred with some regularity during the fieldwork period and in a variety of different ways but was best expressed in the thread specifically dedicated to it, entitled *Are RE Teachers Religious*.

This thread actively ran for several weeks and consisted of 66 posts. It was initiated by a PGCE student questioning whether RE teachers should or should not be religious themselves:

**ParsleySage**

I'm on a PGCE RE course and pretty much 27 out of the 30 RE students begin a sentence in University with "I'm not religious right, but....." or "I'm an atheist and...". Even recently one student told me that the whole of the RE department where they're on placement is atheist. There's also a large portion of the RE PGCE students who "went to a catholic school" but "Wouldn't say I was a catholic". You can't make this stuff up! (ha ha!). What is fascinating is that when I have spoken to Science PGCE students, they find it strange that most RE PGCE students have no faith or practise whatsoever and have said that irrespective of their own beliefs, they would prefer to be taught by a teacher who was a practising religious person. I appreciate that a phenomenological approach to RE is fine, but I wonder that if such a high percentage of RE teachers do not practice any religion at all then how can they fulfil a criteria that seeks to promote 'spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils'? And furthermore, what is it that they are passionate about? The fact that within Judaism they have 'spinning tops'? (dreidels). I'm not saying that faith should be rammed down people's throats in School but If I met a music teacher that couldn't play an instrument and had no interest in playing or engaging with music other than watching X-factor I would struggle to appreciate that they could offer my child anything worthwhile

other than some drab facts! So please, if you're an RE teacher (or PGCE student) can you reply with a: "I'm not religious" or a "I'm a practising....." so I can get an idea if RE really is slanted towards non-religious teachers who are more fascinated by colours, noises and ringlets than they are about the transforming grace that many religious aspire to. Thanks

Although a small group of early posters agreed with the original poster arguing that their teaching practice was enhanced by their own beliefs and religious experiences the discussion quickly became dominated by users arguing against this point, illustrated below:

### **08 Old Gnome**

...

You don't need to be from France to teach French, just be able to use the language!

### **08 Carlisle**

I wasn't aware that you had to be religious to have a spiritual, moral and cultural life. I teach RE from Year 3 to Year 6. I am also an atheist. I do not offer drab facts as you so put it as testified by the "exceptional" rating of one of my lessons by Offsted. How can you be so insulting to non-believers? I assume that you are religious yourself. Maybe you need to reflect on your post and think about what tolerance means.

### **09 Scilly**

On what grounds would you say you know anything about what draws anybody to the subject? Colours, noises and ringlets! Deary me. I'm one of your "I'm not religious, but" teachers but I am fascinated by the beliefs and practices of others and see myself as a very reflective person, someone who shares the same desire to answer life's big questions, but who also just enjoys discussing the questions. Your own knowledge of what makes good RE, or RE at all, seems remarkably limited to me. Tell me, when you've explored grace, what else do you plan to discuss? And when a student says to you, "I find it difficult to understand. I don't feel like I have a relationship with God"- are you going to tell them they are losing out, what a shame, etc?

I'm not religious, but I found religion so interesting I spent 3 years of my life and thousands of pounds studying it.

### **10 Rough Sam**

I'm not religious, but I then decided to spend a further year learning how to be a teacher.

I'm not religious, but I spend my days talking about religion & showing young people how interesting I think it is.

I may not be religious (although that definition is open to interpretation) but I understand & respect others points of view & teach my students to do the same.....

In this kind of intergroup conflict one group dominated a smaller group into silence through the sheer number of oppositional posts. This kind of conflict is illustrative of the way in which dominant discourses were asserted through the forum – in this case the view that religious education teachers are not and should not be religious. Such threads therefore enabled a form of group performance of identity within the discourse, with users taking and enacting performative identity positions within the discourse that then reproduced and perpetuated it. While some positions were taken in opposition to dominant discourses, these were forced into outsider positions by the power of the group.

However such conflict was not necessarily always divisive. In some instances the assertion of a dominant subject discourse led to unification of the TES RE Community against a common outside enemy. This is illustrated through the thread *RE: What's the Point* where the idea that RE is a valuable vibrant subject is fiercely asserted against an 'intruder' who questioned its validity, illustrated in the extract below, where the 'outsider' is first attacked then a positive discourse reproduced.

### **01 Johnny Smith**

Do we really need to be taught RE as a separate subject or can it be browsed through SMSC [Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural] agenda?

### **02 Candlemas**

What is your knowledge, as a Science teacher, about the content of today's RE? What do you mean by 'browsed'?

### **03 Voltage**

Are you having a laugh??? What do you mean by browsed???? Infuriated Head of RE asks what do you know about the role and purpose of RE, have you spoken with your RE Department to see what they do?

### **04 Delia**

RE is one of the most important subjects in the curriculum. It helps our students to understand themselves and explore the great eternal questions about life and existence, which we engage with throughout our lives. It explores the aspect of life which is subtle and spiritual which no other subject can engage with in the same focussed way.

...

### **09 Michaela**

As an HT and an ex University Lecturer in a humanities subject I can assure you that RS is an extraordinary subject which, teaches students to think, to construct an argument and the value of an independent mind. This are transferable skills for life and for higher academic study.

As can be seen here a large number of users of TES RE Forum united against a common enemy asserting their shared values, in this case the fundamental importance of their subject. Thus, through the medium of extra mural conflict, shared values could be expressed and forms of group identity performed. Instances of such threads appeared to provide users with the space to engage in expressions of belonging, reinforcing a sense of common identity, and providing users with a sense of community. In the above example, the original poster did not re-join the conversation, but a large number of users continued to post in the thread for over 4 weeks. This illustrated the way that the act of engaging in conflict in this kind of situation didn't appear to be based on winning an argument, but rather a semi-ritualized expression of unity and a performative expression of values and identity through discourse. As described above, such

performative reproduction of dominant discourses also had a constructive influence on users, motivating others to actively express the shared values and adopt identity positions within the discourse.

### **Practical Issues: resource and ideas sharing and getting help**

Despite the extensive number of political and conflict-ridden threads, there was also an important practical side to the forum. Indeed, there was sometimes tension between those users interested in politics, philosophical debates and conflict and those who saw the forum as a more practical space, where resources, advice and teaching tips could be shared:

There's some of them that go on there that are extremely intellectual and then they argue this and they argue that and they give quotes and this and that and the other, I'm not about that. I'm more trying to give practical advice (Tracey, online interaction).

Tracey's comment illustrates her dislike of people who dominated the space with overly intellectualized political and philosophical debates about national issues, when, in her opinion, the forum should be focused on practical issues that arise at a classroom level. Others took this attitude further, arguing that political debates were fundamentally a waste of time and a diversion from 'proper teaching', illustrated by Grace's comments:

I could get involved in all the political stuff but I just think it wouldn't matter. We're not really going to change anything. I think that sometimes there's no point getting yourself worked up about it. It's better just to focus on the teaching. That's what we are, anyway! (Grace 23).

Thus as described above, for some, engaging within the political discourses that dominated the forum led to the adoption of politicized identity positions.

However, for users like Grace and Tracey the identity positions within the political discourses were rejected and more practical ones were instead adopted. Grace's professional identity was rooted in the practicalities of teaching and this is expressed in the kinds of threads she engaged in. An example that she particularly highlighted in our interviews was a thread entitled *For anyone doing RE/Olympics*. Here a user uploaded a self-produced Power Point resource onto the TES website and then shared the URL with the community:

**MassedOpium**

*For anyone doing RE/Olympics*

I don't know how useful it will be to people but I have created a session for an enrichment day where we have to have an Olympic theme (ideas that I have stolen from this very board so thank you!!!)

<http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/RE-Olympics-Project-6262105/>

Hope it might cut preparation time for at least one of you...

Users downloading this kind of resource commented that as well as getting the obvious benefits of ready made materials that they could use or easily adapt, such resources were also a useful source of guidance for and comparison with their own work. This was described by Sasha:

Being able to share just makes me a better teacher. I can do my job better. Now resources are so much more plentiful than when I started where I had to create everything myself. Doing that you don't always have a marker to say this is good, this is not good. Now you can look at somebody else's stuff and compare (Sasha, online interaction).

Those users uploading resources (as opposed to simply downloading them) expressed their decision to place their work in the public domain in similar terms. They wanted to share their resources with others to get guidance and feedback from their peers: 'I actually use the TES to upload some of my resources to get feedback from other professionals that I don't come into contact with'

(Dara 3). The space offered such users with the opportunity to gain constructive feedback and modify their professional practice and resource provision accordingly.

However, some users also viewed posting resources as an important part of professional 'self-promotion'. Teachers deliberately shared their best resources with the community and built up an online persona linked with these, presenting themselves in the best possible light. In the interviews this was usually described as a practical and pragmatic approach to employment: whether users were actively seeking a job or simply conscious of a potential future job search, one aim of presenting oneself positively through sharing resources was to make oneself attractive to potential employers and colleagues who might use the site. Jeanette summarized this attitude in her description of the advice she gave to the trainee teachers at her school:

It's [TES] great for promoting yourself, particularly by putting resources on because we have a lot of student teachers here as well and we always say to them to post resources on the TES under your proper name and make sure they're the best resources you've got because at some point when you're going for a job, somebody will associate you with those resources and they'll know the type of teacher you are (Jeanette 6).

Thus for Jeanette, practical resource sharing on the TES offered an opportunity for identity performance and the ability to present the type of teacher one is, managing other users' perceptions through the careful selection of materials.

Despite this potential for offline links with the job market, many users preferred to remain anonymous when promoting their own resources. However, resources are linked with their usernames meaning that while an identity linked

with an offline persona isn't presented, a purely online identity is constructed. Although some users just shared resources as a philanthropic gesture, others viewed the opportunity of creating an anonymous online persona as an opportunity to construct and perform an ideal professional identity – being the teacher they wanted to be and wanted to be seen as by their peers. Benjamin, displaying reflective insight, described this perspective in his explanation of the way he uses the forums:

I think the almost anonymity of the forums and of your profile on there is nice because you can almost become the teacher that you would want to be. You know because I don't upload bad lessons, my period one on a Friday morning on the last week of term, that doesn't get uploaded, but my Ofsted inspection ones that have been graded outstanding, you know, are there and you're able to paint a picture. You know, for all I know some people that I hold in high esteem on there could be bullied by the kids Monday to Friday but for some maybe it is that opportunity to be the teacher that they would really like to be (Benjamin 13).

Thus some forum members used anonymity and resource provision as a means of constructing and performing an idealized professional identity and becoming the 'teacher they would really like to be' in the eyes of their online peers.

However, anonymity was not always perceived in this way with others viewing the benefits of anonymity in very practical terms as providing an opportunity to anonymously ask for help in situations where they didn't want to discuss the issues with their offline colleagues. Grace, for example, described one way she used the forum in these terms:

I use it for advice that I don't want to ask for in my school. Like I used it not that long ago cause we had a timetable thing at school and I didn't want to talk to anybody at school about it so I put it on there and people answered my questions. It meant it was easier for me to work out then whether I should go and speak to someone or not (Grace 2).

Other users took this kind of use further stating that, for them, the benefit of the forum was being able to ask for help anonymously without showing weakness to their offline colleagues:

Online I don't have to pretend that I know everything about teaching or pedagogy. Because no one knows me, there's no picture, if I don't know anything, I don't, you know, feel ashamed to ask (Charlotte 13).

Thus some users viewed the anonymity provided by the forum as an important practical function of the forum. They viewed it as a space where they could leave their normal school-based professional performances behind. In their schools they were concerned with managing the impressions of others and the dangers of displaying weakness in front of their colleagues. However, the forum provided them with a space to interact with peers without worry and feeling the need to maintain a professional performance rooted in strength and expertise. As Charlotte put it: 'I do feel that I can kind of ask anything that I need to without being shot down or without that expectation that you should know this by now'.

The TES RE Forum could therefore be seen as providing users with a variety of practical affordance. Some of these were linked with online performance and the careful presentation of ideal identities, particularly through resource sharing. However, the forum also provided users with a space where they could set aside their offline professional identities, enjoy the anonymity provided by the space, and ask questions without feeling that they were jeopardising the professional performances they maintained in their work related contexts.

## TES Agenda for Forum

In the above sections I have described the different ways in which RE teachers used and were motivated to use the TES RE Forum and the different ways in which professional identities were both constructed and performed through that online engagement. However, an important part of the conceptual framework for this study, understands online social spaces as being embedded in wider contexts. Throughout my time in the field the question of how the structures behind the space, in this case particularly those structures associated with the aims and agendas of the TES, influenced the ways in which users engaged online became increasingly pertinent as I observed the power these aims and agendas had over the space. Therefore, using my observations of the forum, interviews with users, and particularly the several meetings and interviews I had with the Forum Convener, this section is focused on exploring these issues.

The TES is a business and having invested a significant amount of money into the social side of its site, the forums are consequently viewed as a major part of the organisation's commercial strategy. This strategy appeared to be aimed at creating an active and loyal community around the TES brand that not only linked with the printed supplement (improving sales) but also provided a recognizable group that could be marketed to. The forum convener described this in simple terms:

lots of clicks means lots of people; lots of people means lots of people to market to; lots of people to market to means you can charge more to people who want to take out ads. Easy (Convener 4).

Thus, a major part of the forum convener's role was to promote the site and grow the community:

it is literally your job to drive the contents in any way you can... all the TES people care about is clicks and they push that really hard. We've currently got 2 million clicks a week across the site. What would you say if I told you they want to double that by the end of summer?' (Convener 3).

The Convener had a number of tools at his disposal to drive up the number of clicks, an important one being the aforementioned competitions. Here iPads, vouchers, meals etc. were awarded to users with the most number of posts and resources. However, on a more day-to-day basis the maxim of 'traffic makes more traffic' was adopted with the convener generally ensured the forums looked busy by staying an active member himself. As he said, "you know I don't like the noughts on there<sup>13</sup>, so if someone's question doesn't get answered, I make sure I answer it myself" (Convener 9).

However, the TES's use of the forum was a little more complex than simply a repository of loyal customers to buy the supplement and to be marketed to. The TES also viewed the forums as a means of story and quote generation and opinion testing. By growing a community<sup>14</sup> of educational professionals, the TES was able to build up a network of key contacts, stay on top of breaking stories and community feeling, and test community opinion on current issues. These all informed published articles and quotes taken from the forums were often used in a number of sections of the supplement. Such use drove the content of some

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<sup>13</sup> Referring to the number of replies a post has received

<sup>14</sup> Use of the word 'community' here reflects the language adopted by the TES

aspects of the printed supplement, and by involving the community in content generation, community members were likely to feel more loyal to the brand.

The influences that these aims and agendas had on the workings of the TES RE Forum could be seen throughout the site. With the TES's emphasis on increasing click counts through user activity, there was pressure on users to continue to post and load resources. This pressure could take the form of simple official posts from TES representatives encouraging activity or it could appeal to users' competitive streaks through competitions. Competitions rewarded those who were most active, which sometimes led to certain community members 'over-posting' simply to increase their personal statistics in order to win the competitions, with little concern for quality or usefulness.

This was an issue that the RE Forum Convener was concerned about: 'it's a little bit dirty at the moment, the website, because the competitions are brilliant for getting numbers on but the quality... some of the quality is shocking' (Convener 3). Almost every participant I interviewed complained about over-posting, with one particular user of the forum frequently singled out as being particularly guilty of this:

I don't want to knock [this person] because I think a lot of what she says is interesting but you know she probably posts too much. It's like whenever there is a thread on a particular topic, you know she's going to jump on it and actually she jumps on practically all of them (Abney 6).

Over-posting was frequently viewed as a problem because it killed real dialogue since others felt inhibited to continue a thread once it had been taken over by certain individuals: '[this person] just posts so much it just kills it. I can't be

bothered getting involved once [this person] has started posting' (Grace 14).

Users also described reflecting on and moderating their own behaviour in an effort not to project the same persona as over-posters:

I'm kind of feeling at the moment that I want to post more, but sort of hesitate and post less than I might if you see what I mean, rather than get a reputation. I don't want to overstep the mark. One or two people completely overstep the mark and I don't want to be seen to be like them (Abney 5).

Thus over-posting not only inhibited the natural flow of online conversation but also led to the taking up of oppositional positions to it, with some users anxious not to present themselves in an irritating or over enthusiastic way.

However, despite a general dislike for over-posters within the community, the TES and forum convener actively encouraged such behaviour through their competitions and posts. This kind of formal sanctioning of over-posting implied a connection between activity and structural professional success: those who won the competitions were viewed in the eyes of the TES as the elites of the profession; ultimately the most active users were rewarded with VIP passes to TES meals and events and consequently viewed as subject experts. This bestowal of professional success and expertise by the TES, based on the TES's own criteria, was described by the forum convener. He discussed being challenged in his role as TES RE expert by people saying "'who are you to say you're an expert". His response was 'actually not me but the person who employed me says that I'm an expert' (Convener 9). This illustrates an attitude that the TES, as a highly influential organization within the teaching profession, could endow expertise simply based on its reputation. The forum convener

described a TES executive hammering this point home in a meeting: 'they're experts because we say they're experts'. For forum users, they were told they were experts because they conformed to the TES vision of expert – someone who uses the forums a great deal – which is a vision motivated by commercial interests.

This bestowal of expert status by the TES on prolific users was, understandably, empowering for those teachers receiving the status, as illustrated by Amy's description of her visit to a TES Awards meal: 'it was really good to feel recognized in that way... I felt really proud to be there' (online interactions). However, by generating a discourse that promoted the perception of an ideal teacher as simply a highly active member of the TES forum, those unable or unwilling to build up their profiles through extensive online activity often appeared to adopt the implied opposite identity position – a non-expert. Participants not spending a lot of time generating an online profile often expressed a sense of guilt and failure that they were not meeting the TES's ideals:

I know all the time they [TES] do their own threads and they want to encourage people to post more and that's something I'm just on the point of doing and it is sort of right there I keep saying to myself, right I must do it now, I must do it now, but I just get too busy. But I know I should. (Charlotte 4)

Thus the commercial agenda of the TES can be seen as leading to a dominant discourse within the forum and a projection of an ideal identity in which those most active and embedded in the community were deemed subject experts. Such a projected identity potentially undermined the sense of professional self of

users unable to devote themselves fully to the forum who were left in a state of striving for a TES sanctioned ideal identity they had yet to achieve.

## **CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF THE NATRE FACEBOOK PAGE**

### **Introduction**

This chapter reports the findings of fieldwork undertaken in the NATRE Facebook Page. Following a detailed description of the online social space, the different ways in which RE teachers engage within it is described and discussed using the concepts of identity construction and performance as tools to frame the presented data. Particular attention is given to the kinds of discourses that dominated the space and the ways in which users engaged with and within them. Finally the page's relationship with its parent body, NATRE, and the ways in which NATRE's aims and agendas influence the structure of the space, the discourses that dominate it, and teachers' engagement is presented.

### **Description of the NATRE Facebook Page**

The National Association of Teachers of RE is the subject association for RE professionals 'providing a focal point for their concerns, a representative voice at national level, and publications and courses to promote professional development' (<http://www.natre.org.uk/about.php>, accessed December 2014). The NATRE Facebook Page was started in September 2009 initially 'as a way for NATRE to communicate with its members'<sup>15</sup> (NATRE Representative 5) and partly because 'everyone's using social media these days, so we thought we should set one up' (NATRE Rep 5).

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<sup>15</sup> in addition to physical mail outs, emails and news posted on the organisation's website

Like all Facebook pages (as distinct from Facebook groups), membership is expressed through users 'liking' the page, which then subscribes them to it so that posts made on the page feature in subscribers' own Facebook timelines. Users are also able to engage with those posts through comments and 'likes' or can make their own posts directly on the page. By the end of the fieldwork period, the page had received 334 'likes'. The list of people who have liked the page is private to all except the page administrator(s), so it was impossible for me to conduct any analysis on the user demographics<sup>16</sup>. However, the NATRE representative informed me that the majority of the subscribers were secondary RE teachers and that, although she hadn't checked membership lists, a significant number of users were not NATRE members.

This suggests that, although the page's original purpose was for NATRE to communicate with its members, it had come to be seen as a general space for all RE teachers to use and stay in contact with the subject organization, whether subscribing members or not. This was borne out in comments made by interview participants, only one of whom was a signed-up member of NATRE. Most said that they thought NATRE was an 'excellent organisation' but were unwilling to pay its membership fees: 'I think NATRE's great, but it's like 60 quid to sign up and I always find somewhere else to spend my money, but the Facebook page isn't just about NATRE. It's about RE isn't it? So everyone just uses it' (Lilah 2). This situation was recognized and actively encouraged by the

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<sup>16</sup> Although I requested the data, the NATRE representative was not comfortable making me an administrator, which would have given me access to this information and she felt that removing the information from Facebook and sharing it with me would contravene her duty to protect users' data.

NATRE representative who saw the value of communicating with a general RE teacher community in both PR and commercial terms. It enabled the promotion of NATRE's message and vision for RE to a wider audience and facilitated marketing the organization, which is funded through subscription fees, to non-members, encouraging them to join.

The page was managed by a NATRE representative who acted as its primary administrator and was responsible for making official NATRE posts. Facebook page administration involves linking the page to a personal Facebook account. Administrators, logged in as themselves, have access to a set of management tools when they visit the page – including editing and moderation powers as well as access to use-statistics. In addition to receiving messages and alerts for on-page activity, administrators are also able to decide whether they make posts using the official page profile or their own personal profile.

Facebook allows any number of administrators to manage pages, but the NATRE representative told me that only she and one other person were listed as administrators, although she was the primary manager, with the other representative mainly posting through her personal account (and only rarely)<sup>17</sup>. However, several other official NATRE representatives (employees and official consultants) also used the page, formally representing the organization through posts made via their personal Facebook accounts.

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<sup>17</sup> Where the 'NATRE Representative' is mentioned in this chapter the primary administrator is being referred to.

During the fieldwork period there was an average of 14 posts per week. While there was usually some activity most weekdays the figure doesn't represent days where there was a significantly large number of posts as a topic took hold (for example on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2012 there were 22 posts). 82 of the 334 subscribers were active posters and 207 users liked at least one post during the fieldwork period. Although a number of users frequently posted on the page, these user-contributions were normally in response to official posts made by NATRE (the NATRE Representative using the NATRE page identity) or NATRE employees and consultants (using their own identities). This meant that almost all online engagement was initiated by an official post. Thus conversation topics were for the most part determined by NATRE, giving the organization (whether intentional or not) control over the discourses that dominated the space. Such a situation gave the NATRE Page a distinctive ethos since, during the fieldwork period. NATRE's posts particularly emphasised political, strategic, and national discourses opposing educational policy changes, generating evidence to illustrate the adverse affect these changes were having on RE, promoting political campaigns against the DfE, and lobbying MPs.

This situation was emphasised by the visual layout of all Facebook pages, which were initially conceptualized as 'fan pages' and tend to be seen operationally as avenues for the dissemination of information (e.g. from a band to its fans). This distinguishes them from Facebook groups, where the emphasis is more clearly placed on discussion. Facebook pages have Facebook's Timeline layout as a default since March 2012. Timeline highlights the posts of the parent organization, while placing other users' primary posts in a small expandable box

on the right of the page, generally hiding all but the last three or four posts.

Users are required to actively open and expand the box if they want to see initial starter posts (i.e. those initiating conversation rather than responding to posts already made) made by anyone other than NATRE. In other words the page layout prioritizes the voice of the parent organization that owns the page.



Figure 2 - Screenshot of the NATRE Facebook Page

Thus, with NATRE dominating initial posts, the themes and content discussed by other users were usually determined by NATRE, which consequently limited the discourses embedded within posts and the discussion topics that were available

within the space. Users, then, tended to engage within these discourses and topics, constructing and performing identity positions within and in relation to them. Therefore the following sections detail the ways in which users engaged within the space and the online discourses that helped shape that engagement.

## **Interacting in a Political Space**

With user engagement tending to be limited by the initial starter posts made by NATRE or its representatives, the kinds of topics discussed were almost entirely focused on the current political situation, due to NATRE's national political focus and interests. The page can therefore be thought of as a political space, though, of course, RE focused. All participants described being aware of the political nature of the NATRE Page, but were drawn to and engaged within the political sphere in a variety of ways.

For many users, the political ethos of the page was an important motivating factor in their decision to use the space. Like users of the TES RE Forum, NATRE Facebook Page users viewed the space as an important place to stay up-to-date with political developments: 'it's good for looking at the likes of Government changes and new legislation and just staying informed on things like the EBacc' (Thelma, 5). Such users, given that most initial news bearing posts were made by NATRE and its representatives, viewed the page as being particularly trustworthy and, due to their busy lives, prioritized the page as their main source of educational and RE related information: 'I just have so much to do, I need information that I know I can trust' (Lilah 9).

Given the trust some users placed in NATRE and its representatives, they described using the posts made on the page and the opinions contained within them as their main source for understanding their subject and its situation in the wider educational context:

I don't have time to follow everything in detail, you know all the EBacc stuff and that, so Facebook is great. I get messages popping up on my homepage and it keeps me informed about what's going on and it's like, sometimes I don't really have time to get all the information and form an opinion myself so it's good to have someone I, you know, trust to give me the right stuff. (Trina 9)

Trina describes a more passive form of use where the posts made on the NATRE Facebook page simply entered her Facebook newsfeed, keeping her informed of developments in the RE world and helping her form opinions of the state of RE. This is illustrative of a desire to remain informed about professional matters and the space providing users with an RE news feed, affording users a key professional service. However, this more passive form of engagement with the page also had the potential to play an important role in her and other users' professional lives. The discourses embedded in many of the posts on the NATRE Facebook Page often appeared to influence the ways in which some users understood their subject ('I get to learn a lot about RE just through all the different posts people make on there' (Helen 5)), thereby acting as a constructing force in relation to some users' subject understandings. Given the political orientation of the discourses dominating the page, users' perceptions of their subject and themselves were consequently related to the current context and political and policy developments. As such the page can be seen in constructive terms, influencing users' opinions and perceptions of their subject and their

profession. In doing so, it was also possible to observe the influence the page had on the users' developing politically oriented professional identities rooted in the politically oriented content and dominant discourses embedded in many of the posts.

However, in addition to affording users a key service, keeping them professionally informed about developments in the RE and educational worlds, the news stories provided by NATRE and its representatives also afforded some users the opportunity to engage actively with the stories. Such engagement could often be observed as taking on performative elements. At the most basic level, it was possible to observe performance through expressions of political values through 'liking patterns'. Liking is a Facebook specific system that enables users easily to indicate things that they felt were important – that they 'like' – by simply clicking a 'like' button attached to each post. Some posts proved particularly popular, with a large number of users showing approval for the themes and content they contained. For example, a post made by NATRE reporting on and particularly criticizing the DfE-promoted project in which a King James Bible was sent to every RE teacher in the UK, signed by Michael Gove, received 214 likes. Liking afforded users with a quick and simple means of showing approval and support for messages embedded in posts, in this case that the project was ill conceived and that Michael Gove was incompetent and worthy of criticism.

Such mass approval also reinforced such messages, providing them with a form of social validation. However, with the names of those liking posts available to

the whole group of users, this behaviour can be seen as a form of performance, where users deliberately linked their identities to opinions, posts and discourses with which they agreed. This is described by Trina: 'I like something because I agree with it, but I guess that's sort of saying who I am. It's me showing everyone what I stand for' (Trina 7). Therefore, such expressions of political opinions and values can be seen as an important tool for users to demonstrate their own professional values to the wider NATRE Facebook group.

Furthermore some users commented that they were conscious that their engagement with posts on the NATRE Facebook Page sometimes went further than the page's immediate audience. Depending on users' Facebook settings, their activity on a Facebook page often showed up on their personal timelines, which in turn showed up on their friends' timelines. Thus, for some users, liking a post on the NATRE Page could be seen by their friends, whether these friends had liked the NATRE Page or not. Engagement on the NATRE Facebook Page can consequently be seen as part of users' wider presentation of themselves to others through their Facebook profiles. Tamara discussed this:

I know if I do something on NATRE it can be seen by my friends, but that's cool isn't it. I only like or post on things I agree with. It's like I'm saying I'm an RE Teacher. I'm proud of that. And these are the things I care about, you know, I care about what the Government's doing to RE (Tamara 14).

Thus engagement on the NATRE Facebook Page, for some users, can be seen as part of a presentation of self and performance of identity for their wider group of Facebook friends, where the professional part of their identities is acknowledged, expressed and presented. Given that the majority of content on the NATRE page was, in a variety of ways, political – relating to campaigning

activity, critical news stories, criticism of the EBacc etc. – such professional identities can be described in political terms. For most participants, the NATRE Facebook page was their only professional behaviour on Facebook, so the professional identities presented through the medium were solely political: ‘to be honest, I only use the NATRE page for work stuff and that’s just all politics, so I guess my friends probably just think I’m obsessed with hating Michael Gove and writing to MPs’ (Tamara 14).

However, engagement on the NATRE Facebook Page was not simply limited to the expression of values through liking official initiatory posts. Many users also actively expressed themselves through commenting on these posts. Unlike the TES RE Forum, where users’ political interests were often expressed in personal and conflict driven debate, arguments were rare on the NATRE Page. This is likely due to the fact that all interaction on Facebook is linked to users’ personal Facebook profiles. The anonymity that appeared to foster both debate and conflict on the TES was not possible on the NATRE Facebook Page. Internal disagreements were therefore rare and users were careful to preserve the integrity of their professional profiles. As Simone stated: ‘I don’t want to say anything controversial, because people will link it with me straight away and I don’t want to get a bad reputation’ (Simone 4).

Such an absence of internal conflict meant that users who did post often simply agreed or added weight to the initial post, illustrated in the following exchange:

**NATRE**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-17068153><sup>18</sup>

513 likes<sup>19</sup>

**NATRE**

Great to see that our campaigning continues to have an impact.

**Benjamin Davies**

Great news story. Everyone share!

**Michelle Green**

Just goes to prove... you may think you have a small voice but it can be heard! Come on, let's keep RE in our classrooms and high on the Govt's agenda.

This kind of affirmatory participation was different from the debate and conflict driven meaning making seen on the TES RE Forum. While such affirmatory posts appeared to be an important part of fostering a sense of unification with a shared group identity (as will be discussed in more detail below), they additionally acted to enhance the dominant discourses embedded in the initial posts. With most initial posts being started by NATRE and the majority of subsequent posts acting to affirm and validate the points made within them, discourses promoted by NATRE almost entirely dominated the space. They were reproduced, reinforced and given a sense of community-wide approval and agreement. Those who disagreed privately were reluctant to challenge the apparent status quo publically: 'you know, it's not as bad as NATRE sometimes makes out. I don't know anyone who's suffering that badly. But I don't want to say that when everyone else seems to agree' (Simone 4).

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<sup>18</sup> An article reporting that the All Party Parliamentary Group for RE had stated the RE should be a priority in schools

<sup>19</sup> The inflated number of likes reflects the fact that many users shared this post on their own timelines, so it also received likes from non-members

The positive ethos generated by these kinds of affirmatory posts was seen as an important benefit by some users who viewed such posts as an important outlet to get behind their peers and their subject organization: 'it's great to support each other' (Helen 1). This was linked to some users' perceptions of what it means to be a teacher, a positive supportive presence. As such positive affirmation can be thought of as a projection of this perspective. This is described by Helen:

I think teaching's all about supporting the kids, you know, you have to cheer them on a lot. But teachers need cheering on too, so I think I'm just being a good professional supporting people online. Speaking from experience, it can really mean a lot for someone just to say 'yeah, you're right, good on you' (Helen 2).

Thus, online positive affirmation was viewed by some users as a key aspect of being a professional. Thus, it is possible to view the offering of support as part of a social interactive performance of being a good teacher.

However, such an affirmatory ethos left some users feeling too inhibited to express opposition to the discourses that dominated the space, leaving them feeling that they were alone and in private opposition to the majority of users. In order to preserve a sense of community they preferred to avoid expressing their opinions: 'I don't want to be judged if I speak my mind. I reckon I'd be jumped on. Better to smile and agree and be part of the community' (John 8). Thus through engaging in the political space, some users felt the need to tacitly agree with whatever political discourses dominated the page, even if that was in tension with their own understandings of their subject and the current situation facing RE. In order to feel a sense of belonging to the NATRE community some

users appeared to hold views that they might not otherwise have held. The expression of those views could be seen as part of a membership ritual that established a sense of unity and brought users together under a particular vision and shared set of values. Therefore, to a certain extent, while the page afforded users an important sense of belonging to a group of peers, it also acted as a controlling power ensuring conformity in their engagement with the expression of particular perspectives and opinions being closely tied to users' sense of belonging.

Other users appeared to be actively influenced by the apparent group affirmation of particular discourses, particularly those emphasizing the problems facing the subject, internalizing them and constructing and performing identity positions based on community wide affirmation. For example, Lilah described becoming angry reading posts concerning the way RE and RE teachers had been treated (a reduction in teaching time and teachers being made redundant), although she had not experienced this in her wider teaching life: 'I'm alright in my school, and people I know, but I read such awful things. It makes me really angry' (Lilah 11). In other words the power of the discourse combined with group affirmation had a constructive influence on the way Lilah understood herself and her subject in negative politicised terms. She later added that her anger was a motivating factor in becoming politically active in campaigns for the subject, illustrating the cross-contextual power of the discourse as her political understandings of herself and RE manifested themselves in political action. This can be seen as an example of the way in which group affirmation appeared to validate dominant discourses for some users of the NATRE Page, which actively

influenced their professional understandings, behaviour and identity, in both online and offline contexts.

Although it is perhaps unsurprising that the organization that lends its name to a social space should dominate the content and ethos of it, most participants viewed the NATRE Facebook Page as ‘teacher owned’ rather than a vehicle for an organisation’s agenda: ‘it’s our space. It’s really nice to have a space on Facebook for RE teachers that we can own’ (Tamara 2). This meant that while most users appeared to believe they were engaging in an open space, the range of content with which they were able to engage with and the range of discourses in which they could interact were limited by the provider of the space since embedded technological structures associated with Facebook pages as well as general practice allowed NATRE to control the majority of initial posts. This dominance was validated and reproduced through the affirmatory ethos that occurred on the page. The discourses that consequently dominated the page were limited providing a controlled and controlling environment for users to engage in leading to the construction and performance of political identities rooted in conformity, community wide acceptance, and a desire for unity and belonging.

### **It’s War Out There: Anger and Combative Language**

Despite the affirmatory nature of much of the interaction and the lack of internal debate and conflict on the page, the tone of many of the posts was often combative and the conflict driven themes of RE being ‘under attack’ and the subject being ‘at war’ were frequently expressed. Although, as described above,

such language was often initiated by formal NATRE posts, it was frequently then affirmed, echoed and reproduced by other users. This combative tone was most often expressed in pugnacious language referring to 'the fight' or 'the battle' to save RE, in relation to 'Govian attacks' or general 'attacks' on the subject, and 'the government's conspiracy to destroy RE'. This sort of language most frequently appeared in posts where both NATRE and general users expressed their anger and frustration at the situation RE faced: 'What can we do to stop this stupid man's attack on our subject... we'll keep fighting... he's got to get shuffled soon' (a user reacting to the fact that RE was not included in the EBacc).

Many users described such combative language as part of an important way in which they used the online social space: the page offered them a space in which they could express their anger and frustration. Due to the affirmatory ethos, users felt they could 'let off steam' in a safe and supportive environment where they knew their peers would agree with them without needing to justify and argue about their feelings. As Thelma described: 'it's great to vent in because you know everyone feels the same as you and you don't have to start from the beginning explaining why RE's important like I have to if I want to moan with my mates' (Thelma 6).

Anger as an integral part of one's professional practice and professional identity is not something frequently encouraged or even discussed in professional circles. However, for many participants, anger at RE's current situation was an extremely important part of their subject specific identities: 'it just seems to be normal to be an angry RE teacher these days' (Rupert, online communication).

The NATRE Facebook page provided many with a space to perform this aspect of their professional identity through the encouragement of politically pugnacious and combative language and the positive affirmation of angry sentiments when they were expressed.

Such language also served to propagate combative discourses rooted in the idea that RE was at war with hostile forces, spearheaded by the Government and expressed through policy changes, seeking to undermine, weaken and eventually destroy the subject. Several participants commented wryly on the ways in which such discourses were emphasized on the page: 'we do tend to exaggerate a bit on there don't we. I do sometimes worry what some people take away from it, but it's easy to get caught up in that sort of language, isn't it' (Cova, online communication). Cova appears to be describing an agentic performance of an angry political identity expressed through occasionally hyperbolic language. Thus some users appeared knowingly to engage within a discourse, utilizing the language and themes it provided in order both to express themselves and to perpetuate such hyperbolic discourses.

However, other users' engagement in such combative discourses appeared to be less led by agency and more led by the discourse itself. As described above, the constructive power of the discourses could influence the ways in which users thought about their subjects and themselves as professionals. This is illustrated by Simone who, using similar combative language, described the way in which her engagement within the NATRE Facebook Page and the pugnacious discourses embedded within it, caused her to feel angry:

it's awful isn't it? You read about all these attacks that Gove is making on the subject, all the stuff that's going on and it just makes you so angry. But it's good that it's [NATRE Facebook Page] there to tell us all about it... I usually say something on there... it's good to let your anger out isn't it (Simone 12).

Thus Simone appears to describe a way in which a combative angry discourse influenced her emotional response to her subject and the changes taking place in the wider educational context, causing her to feel anger. The page then provided her with a space to express that anger, letting it out. This then reproduced the discourse, emphasising its dominance and an ethos for the space rooted in anger. Thus, it was possible to see a reflexive relationship between users and the discourses that dominated the page. Users, engaging with such discourses, made an emotional or cognitive response to them, which often involved the reproduction and perpetuation of such discourses emphasising their dominance. While the views and emotions embedded in the discourses may have already been held by many users, a number of users described adopting such views and emotions only after engaging within the discourses, illustrating the constructive influence the page could exert over those engaging within it.

### **Black and White Politics**

Alongside expressions of anger, an important feature of the combative language frequently seen on the NATRE Facebook page was a tendency towards reductive politics, where current events and policy changes were described and understood in 'black and white' terms. This can be seen in some of the interpretations and analyses of political events that appeared on the page. For example:

**Liz**

I have to say this again today 'why isn't RE part of the English Bacc?' My year 10 students have done fantastically on 1 lesson a week... my A level students surpassed their predicted grades last week... it is surely comparable to history and geography in the world of today????.... I will just continue to plan my lessons about what is a just war, social injustice, the case for non violence... (year 10 and 11)... and human relationships... (year 9).... Shame it's not relevant enough for the EBacc?!

**Neil**

Agree, we are all saying this, such a shame the Government and others do not listen.

**Luci**

Meanwhile religious extremists are growing as well as ignorance about religion and cultures. Shame on Gove!

This exchange begins with an angry post lamenting the government's inability to appreciate what the poster sees as the value of her subject – teaching community cohesion, social justice, non-violence etc. These sentiments are echoed and validated by the second poster. However, by the third post, the tone of the language has changed and the passive 'it's a shame the government...' has been replaced with the personal and active 'shame on Gove', who now is viewed as being personally responsible for growing religious and cultural ignorance, the rise in the numbers of religious extremists, and presumably associated terrorism. In other words, by not actively supporting RE, the Secretary of State for Education is seen as being responsible for all of society's problems.

Some users expressed a dislike of this kind of reductionism that occurred on the page:

It can be a bit black and white, us and them. We've got to hate them; they're doing this; they've caused that. I wouldn't let my students get away with the kind of sloppy thinking some people put up there (Theresa, online communication).

These feelings were expressed privately to me by a number of users, but, as described above, they were rarely expressed in the public sphere. However, other users clearly enjoyed the moral panic and righteous anger that the reductionist discourses provided: 'I know it's sometimes silly, but just saying what a bastard Gove is and that he's about to destroy the world as we know it is surprisingly fun' (John 15).

Thus again, it is possible to observe users entering into a discourse propagated on the NATRE Facebook Page, in this case a reductionist political discourse, and reproducing it. Although some users viewed the kind of behaviour associated with this particular discourse as being in direct opposition to the values of logic and critical thinking associated with their subject, other users appeared to actively enjoy the online performance, deliberately engaging in extreme political statements. It is arguable that, through positive affirmation of such positions, a form of group identity was constructed based on a position of antagonistic opposition to the current government, with users placing themselves within a space-wide 'for or against us' subject politic. Seen in this way reductive politics can be viewed as a simple way of expressing allegiance to a particular side or viewpoint – another membership ritual in which group unity was emphasised through the expression of shared values, made all the more powerful by reducing them to their simplest form. In doing so users also appeared to engage in an act of collective catharsis, often knowingly coming together to express their frustrations and emphasise their unity. As John described: 'I know I've said some pretty silly things about the government, but it's about where I stand politically,

you know, and we all do it together to get out that anger at what's going on' (John 15).

This kind of reductionism combined with angry rhetoric and combative discourses was also an important part of what many participants described as a key role of the NATRE Facebook page – acting as a campaigning community.

This was expressed by Thelma:

I think that it's [NATRE Facebook Page] quite important for RE teachers because it has a focus and it has an element of anger in a campaigning sense so I think that's important. It feels as if you are part of a campaigning community (Thelma 9).

The angry rhetoric and black and white politics were frequently used to act as a motivating factor in official calls to take action as part of the campaign against governmental policy. For example:

**NATRE**

Evidence from our first survey clearly showed the incredibly damaging affect the EBacc is having on RE. We must act now if we are to save the subject from these vicious attacks. Contact your MP asking them to support RE and fill out our second questionnaire.

All interview participants were motivated by these calls and actively joined in the campaigns: 'I've written to my MP, filled out questionnaires...' (Tamara 4).

As such the majority of users expressed the feeling that they were part of a campaigning community and it was possible to observe a close link between reductionist politics, combative language and the fostering of this sense of community based on political activism.

For some users engaging in such a community became a particularly important part of their professional lives, often expressing their participation in political action in similarly combative and emotive language: 'I spend a lot of time getting involved in saving the subject. It's what we all should be doing' (John 12). Thus engaging in a campaigning community provided some users with the opportunity to express politically active professional identities. Through combative and emotive language and associated calls for participation in the campaigning community, the NATRE Facebook Page afforded users the space to perform political identities where they were challenged to convert political anger into political action. Some users took such action fully into their professional lives, even viewing political action as an essential part of any RE teacher's identity, thereby projecting an ideal identity into the group through their own performances: 'we all should be campaigners now' (John 12).

It is arguable that the tone of the political, combative, and reductive discourses in the space along with the projection of a politically active ideal identity also had a constructive power over users' identities, encouraging political performance and action. With the political situation being discussed in black and white terms and the subject being described as 'being under attack' and 'fighting for its survival', a categorical imperative was placed upon those who engaged within the space: become part of the campaigning community or allow your subject to die.

Embedded in this is a vision of professional identity: 'if you want to be an RE teacher you have to be a campaigner'. This projected an image of an ideal RE teacher – one actively involved in political activism and fighting for the subject.

Through engagement in the NATRE Facebook Page, users were challenged to integrate this ideal into their own understandings of themselves as RE teachers.

While some users clearly relished taking an activist identity, others struggled with the ideal political identity that was presented to them through their engagement in the page. Often the pressures of daily life hindered the performance of such an ideal: 'I should get more into the fight an stuff, but it's hard what with teaching and the kids' (Cova, online communication). Thus the projection of an ideal political identity challenged some users to aspire to and adopt such an identity. However, other users were left feeling guilty or inadequate about their inability to meet the ideal.

### **'It's all about PR'**

Many users reported that the NATRE Facebook Page's political role was fundamentally rooted in it acting as a public relations (PR) space where the importance of RE could be emphasised and a particular understanding of the subject and its place in a wider educational context promoted. As Tamara said: 'it's all about PR, it's all about getting the message right and holding to the line.' (Tamara 12). As discussed above the most common message observed was related to the state of Religious Education and the negative influence that governmental policy was having on the subject. Such a message was carried in a variety of complementary discourses emphasizing the negative impact of policy changes, particularly the reduction of RE in schools, the loss of RE jobs and the increase in non-subject specialists teaching the subject, the increase in schools

refusing to allow RS GCSE and A Level choices, and the personal responsibility that Michael Gove should take for this.

The importance of the Facebook Page for PR was emphasized by the NATRE representative, who stated:

That's [PR] one of its key purposes, I think, to help people have a better understanding of RE and try and make informed decisions about it and of course that includes school leaders, government bodies and increasingly politicians (NATRE Rep 1).

Such a vision of providing people with a better understanding of RE through the space involved two main aspects. The first was the gathering of information relating to the users' experiences of the affects of policy changes within their schools and the second was through user dissemination of posts to their wider networks.

This evidence gathering was led by NATRE and took the form, during the fieldwork period, of three lengthy online questionnaires asking for user experiences of how they and RE were treated in schools. This led to a substantial number of posts, by both NATRE and other users, promoting the questionnaires and the importance of the evidence they produced. This evidence was then used to validate the message that governmental policy was having a negative impact on RE and the findings were presented to the media, the APPG and sent directly to Michael Gove.

This PR based emphasis on the importance of evidence led to a repeated cycle of posts on the NATRE Facebook Page. The cycle would begin with an emphasis on

the need for all users to complete the questionnaire in order to show the DfE the effects its policies were having on RE: 'Comon [sic] everybody. Fill out the NATRE survey and share it with your friends so we can show Gove what he's really doing to RE' (user post following an official NATRE post promoting the questionnaire). Following the analysis of the results and the release of the report, posts would tend to focus on the need for the government to listen and support RE now it had been provided with clear evidence: 'Good work on the report. They've got to listen now' (a user responding to NATRE sharing a link to an article in the Daily Telegraph Online which reported on the findings of the first NATRE survey). This phase was then followed by posts displaying anger and frustration at the fact that the government had not changed its attitude to RE despite the evidence: 'why won't they listen? What is that pointless man's [Gove] problem with RE?' (a user venting frustration following a link to an article on the BBC mentioning positive RE GCSE results).

This cycle took place three times during the fieldwork period in relation to the promotion of the three NATRE surveys and each time ended in clear signs of user frustration and anger. This is perhaps related to the value attached to evidence and data that could be observed on the page and the perception that such evidence would be the tool that would influence policy change. The majority of the users of the NATRE Page completed the questionnaire<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, since the evidence presented was a record of users own professional experiences, it is unsurprising that many felt strongly invested in the data. It is arguable that this

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<sup>20</sup> Although it is important to note that other RE teachers who did not use the page also completed the questionnaires.

presentation of personal experiences contributed to a discourse emphasizing the importance of evidence, and was an important factor in the generation of a cycle of professional investment, associated hope and eventual feelings of frustration – all intimately linked with users’ perceptions and understandings of their subject, the current situation and themselves as professionals.

Such a cycle can be seen as perpetuating and amplifying negative feelings users felt towards the situation they felt they and their subject were facing. This was described by Cova: ‘You fill in all these questionnaires and, you know, you really think it will make a difference. But actually of course it doesn’t make any difference and so you just end up feeling more and more annoyed and upset about it all. What do they call it... a shame spiral’. Thus it can be seen that the PR oriented nature of the space and the associated evidence generation, to some extent, contributed to users’ feelings of frustration, disappointment rooted in a sense of failure and ‘us vs them’ discourses. This could be observed as contributing to feelings of helplessness that sat in tension with the agentic attitudes and behaviour linked with the campaigning aspects of the space.

Thus, the page can be thought of as a space that promoted agency and the active involvement in the national politics related to RE. However, those engaging in political activism often found themselves frustrated by the government’s apparent refusal to be influenced by their activity. As such agency often gave way to feelings of helplessness with the page providing users with opportunities to rant and express frustration that their activism and evidence gathering had not succeeded. A clear tension could therefore be observed in the space between

discourses of agency and identities rooted in action and discourses of passivity and the performance of identities rooted in anger and frustration.

The second important aspect of the NATRE Facebook Page acting as a PR space involved both NATRE and other users encouraging all subscribers to share the links, news stories, and general opinions posted on the page with their wider group of friends. In other words, users were encouraged to use the Facebook 'share' function to post statuses from the NATRE page onto their own timelines so that the posts could be viewed by users' own groups of personal friends. An example of this can be seen in the following post reacting to a story about the establishment of the All Party Parliamentary Group for RE: 'great news story. Share everyone!' Many participants acted on these encouragements, presenting the links to their own networks: 'I regularly share NATRE statuses' (Simone 5).

Users shared links from the NATRE page with a clear PR agenda – with the aim of informing their friends about important issue relating to RE, even hoping that those friends might share the stories:

I've got a lot of friends who are teachers or just interested in education so I like to share some of the RE stories because I know those people might still be interested and they might share them with their friends and spread the word (Simone 5).

For some users, this kind of PR-oriented activity had a performative element to it, in a similar way to how liking patterns were described in performative terms above. Such activity provided users with the opportunity to express values, implicit or explicit in the links and news stories, to their wider groups of friends, while highlighting their membership of the NATRE Page and engaging in an

activity that expressed their belonging through socially validated behaviour. For example, through linking to news stories emphasizing the problems facing RE and criticizing the EBacc, users were able to show their friends, whether teachers or not, the kinds of issues they cared about in their professional lives while deepening their sense of belonging in the NATRE community by engaging in a form of membership ritual. This type of sharing, therefore, illustrates a way in which the discourses embedded within a dedicated professional online space expanded beyond the immediate environment of that space into users' own personal networks through a performance of shared professional values rooted in a PR agenda.

However, while some users viewed sharing NATRE links as an expression of their own values and an identity they were willing to construct and perform for the benefit of their friends, other users described ways in which the links shared on NATRE made them feel uncomfortable. These users described feeling a tension between the ways in which they would want to express themselves as professionals to their wider group of friends and the discourses carried in the NATRE Facebook Page. This tension was particularly expressed in terms of the dominance of discourses negatively portraying the subject:

It can make me feel pretty negative about being an RE teacher at the moment. I know it's all about PR and they need to emphasise how bad things are to help make a case, but it can get you down a bit and then you're kind of just living in this negative world where everyone's out to get you and your subject (Lilah 6).

Thus several users like Lilah consequently felt uncomfortable about perpetuating a discourse that they saw as negative within their own circle of

friends: 'I share some stuff sometimes, but it can get a bit much can't it?' (Lilah 7).

These users felt a tension between the injunctions to share negative materials from the NATRE Facebook page and their own professional values and sense of themselves as professionals and their subject. This tension was problematic for some users who felt torn between the demands of what they saw as the majority of their peers and their subject organization and their sense of their own professional identity and how they wanted to be seen by their friends:

I know I should share those news stories more, but I just don't really want to keep going on about how rubbish my subject is, you know. I'm proud of it. I actually think it's really good in my school. If I'm going to talk [post information on Facebook] about work, I prefer telling my friends about things I've done well, not this crap about RE being taught by non-specialists who are rubbish (Trina).

Thus, the PR agenda embedded in the NATRE Facebook page actively encouraged users to present information to their wider group of friends and, to a certain extent, perform professional identities rooted in the values and discourses that dominated the space. However, these values and discourses, primarily embedded in official NATRE posts, could be seen as limiting the kinds of opinions and identity positions available to users. Some users found the values, discourses and associated identity positions that dominated the space in harmony with their own understandings of themselves and their subject. The page consequently afforded these users the space to express these values and opinions and perform discursive identity positions to their wider group of friends. Other users felt identity positions were constructed for them through the discursive dominance of such values and opinions and consequently rejected

the negative discourses that they felt were in tension with the pride they felt for their subject and the kind of identity they wished to project to their friends. As such, while actively or passively approving the values, opinions and identity positions embedded in negative discourses, such users refused to project them beyond the page itself.

## **Feelings of Unity**

As described above, many users described their engagement in the NATRE Facebook page as a unifying experience: the page allowed them to feel connected with teachers and professionals in a way that might not otherwise have been available to them. This feeling is described clearly by Andrew: 'it is the sense of community and a feeling of being part of something that's interesting and encouraging and that you can't get anywhere else' (Andrew, online communication). These feelings of unity can be seen as being fostered in a number of ways. Although briefly alluded to above, these will now be described in more detail.

Given the political emphasis of the NATRE Page, much of these feelings of unity were described in political terms, commonly expressed in the form of users coming together with an active political purpose, as described above in relation to the idea of the campaigning community. In addition to the influence such a community had on users' sense of themselves as politically active professionals, it also helped to provide a sense of unity that many users appeared to desire by offering them a clear sense of purpose, shared communal values and shared

activity. As Lilah described: 'it's like as soon as there's any kind of campaign everyone comes together and you feel part of something bigger' (Lilah 17).

Thus, participation in a campaigning community could be observed as providing users with a sense of belonging that fostered a shared identity rooted in shared political values and a worldview that saw the subject as 'under attack'. Engaging in a campaigning community can be seen as providing users with the space to perform such a shared identity, expressing cohesion and solidifying social relationships. As described above, this also served to project a politically active ideal, so social unity also had a constructive power, perpetuating discourses and reproducing that ideal.

However, group unity was not only felt through positive campaigning activity, it was also expressed through conflict. As has already been discussed, conflict was rarely inter-personal between users of the page. Rather it was almost entirely extra-mural, aimed at those outside the NATRE Facebook community. The focus of such attacks was generally the government and the Department for Education, but frequently they were targeted specifically at Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, who often appeared to function as a scapegoat or straw man upon which the community could come together and focus its anger: 'This is Mr Gove's excuse for leaving our subject out of his Ebacc! I hope he gets shuffled!' (NATRE Poster).

Such aggressive behaviour was most frequently initiated through official posts made by NATRE and its representatives. For example, during the

aforementioned series of posts focused on the sending of a King James Bible to all RE teachers in the UK, a teacher asked if anyone had any ideas on how to 'use it in lessons to teach students'. A NATRE representative gave a practical reply, suggesting a lesson plan making comparisons between the KJV and other versions of the Bible, but concluded by reintroducing the dominant pugnacious Gove focused discourse: 'Homework: write to Mr Gove asking the ill-informed little chap to supply two more sacred texts of their [the students' doing the assignment] choice, and put RE into the EBacc this year'. This was then followed by a series of affirmatory posts ('well said' etc), which appeared to provide a sense of unity in opposition to the government and the criticism of Michael Gove.

Communal unity rooted in extra-mural conflict appeared to afford some users the opportunity to perform aggressive, hostile even slightly arrogant identities within a safe environment. For example, one user, with a certain degree of angry bombast, commented:

I note that we have had 12 education secretaries in the last 22 years. This means they last, on average, one year and ten months. Mr Gove has done 1 year and 3 months now, but I think he is below average. Conservative ministers last a shorter average than Labour. Compare Baker, McGregor, Patten, Shepherd, Gove with on the other hand Blunkett, Morris, Clarke, Balls. Here's for sure: I intend to be around repairing RE from damage done when Mr Gove has moved along (NATRE Poster).

For others, engagement within such Gove focused extra-mural conflict took more childish forms. For example, when a picture of Michael Gove meeting several teachers with his hand relatively near his face was posted, one NATRE user commented 'why is Gove picking his nose?'

These kinds of comments, as Simone commented, 'let us focus our anger and let off a bit of steam' (Simone 9). However, it can also be argued that the Department for Education and Michael Gove specifically provided the users of the NATRE Facebook Page with a scapegoat, upon which they could vent their frustrations and strengthen community bonds. By giving shared anger an external focus, the community was able to join together in expressing that anger and unite against a perceived common enemy. With the focus of anger sitting outside the community, the difference between the inside group of RE teachers and the outside group of people perceived as hostile to RE, personified in Michael Gove, was particularly emphasized bringing the inside group closer together in their shared insider identity and sense of unified belonging.

In a similar way to users of the TES RE Forum, such a sense of unity was valued by users of the NATRE Facebook Page as a means of overcoming feelings of isolation and forging a sense of shared subject specific identity. However, it was occasionally possible to observe extreme forms of unity on the page manifesting in what can best be described as a sectarian ethos rooted in extra-mural conflict. In data analysis, I described occurrences of this using a theme that I termed *contra mundum*. This was an attitude that RE and more specifically users of the NATRE Facebook page were together opposing not merely a series of specific policy changes, but a whole hostile world of people who didn't 'get' RE. This particularly featured in posts bemoaning the 'ignorance' of, not merely Michael Gove or the DfE, but the whole general public in relation to the aims and actualities of RE. This is illustrated in the following exchange:

**NATRE Shared a link**

Interesting article: RE is compromised because free schools and academies aren't bound into local SACREs and adoption of agreed syllabuses

[www.t.co](http://www.t.co)

22 Likes

**Rachel**

Interesting to read the comments after the article. I think many demonstrate a complete ignorance to what RE in schools actually is. It seems like the number of these people is growing all the time. How do we educate these people?

2 likes

**TS**

I know, they're just awful. I face this ignorance from parents and fellow teachers all the time. So many people just don't get it.

This attitude that the wider society was ignorant or hostile to RE was echoed in a number of participant interviews. Thelma, for example, commented that 'people are just ignorant about RE' (Thelma 12), while Lilah stated that, playing on people's fear that the subject is at heart confessional, 'it's the parents we have to convert' (Lilah 4).

This attitude of *contra mundum* projected the image of an ignorant hostile society constantly threatening RE and its teachers. This appeared to strengthen the walls drawn up around the NATRE Facebook Page, providing users with a stronger in-group identity and occasionally providing the space with a sectarian ethos where those *intra muros* possessed the true *gnosis*, while those *extra muros* did not. Such an ethos projected an image of RE teachers as being particularly distinct from teachers of other subjects and so had implications for the way in which users understood their subject and themselves as professionals in ways rooted in insider-outsider tensions and *extra mural* conflict.

This sense of conflict was reinforced by the almost complete absence of internal conflict within the page. As described above, users often deliberately avoided posting anything that conflicted with other users' comments, instead preferring to interact through the medium of positive affirmation. This can be seen in the following extract.

**A NATRE Representative**

Is this a fair GCSE question: "Explain, briefly, why some people are prejudiced against Jews?" AQA asked this recently. On BB's Radio 4 Today programme, I defended this as a classroom topic, but queried its use as an exam Q. What do you think?

On reflection, if I was interviewed again at a sensible time of the day (rather than midnight?), I would argue that it is a perfectly valid thing to ask teenagers about, given that good GCSE RE teaching will have trained students to explore a variety of views around such an argument.

This issue of whether the GCSE question relating to anti-Semitism was appropriate or not caused a great deal of controversy on both the TES RE Forum and the Save RE Facebook Group. However, despite the NATRE representative specifically inviting comments and encouraging debate, the only responses made validated the points made in the original post:

**Peter**

Really Mate Nice One!!!  
4 Likes

**Richard**

Your anecdote seems legitimate!  
3 Likes

**Liza**

Absolutely NATRE Rep x

The responses to a relatively controversial issue display a clear sense of unity and a desire to express that unity through agreement, perhaps even to the point of appearing obsequious. As Laura said, 'it's [the page] a great place for cheering

each other on' (Laura, online communication). Even users actively disagreeing with certain posts privately preferred to maintain a sense of unity through agreement or silence, rather than risk causing disharmony. For example, when discussing the above post, Helen said 'that question made me really mad and, as a Jew myself, I think it's totally inappropriate to have it... [but] it's [NATRE Facebook Page] not really the right place to make a fuss, it's more about showing a combined front not showing our divisions' (Helen 17).

Thus the sense of community and emphasis on unity could be observed through campaigning activity, particular uses of language, the use of scapegoats, extra mural conflict and the avoidance of intra mural conflict. Many users described the sense of belonging and shared identity associated with this as key affordance their engagement in the NATRE Facebook Page. However, such unity could also be observed acting as a socially controlling force, with users preferring to uphold a sense of unity at the expense of expressing their own feelings and opinions, no matter how deeply held. The shared sense of identity and the feeling of belonging to a wider RE specific professional community were held as more valuable than the expression of individual values and identity and so participation in particular kinds of language and the discourses that dominated the space became key expressions of belonging and took on the form of membership rituals. Thus, to a certain extent, the page can be seen as a socially controlling space, where cultural norms and values were embedded within it and their expression were key parts of community membership.

## **Feelings of Elitism: Unity and Community Hierarchies**

However, the frequently reported feelings of unity fostered by the NATRE Facebook page were sometimes in tension with a sense, expressed by some participants, that there was an implicit community hierarchy and those who actively engaged most frequently in the online social space were intimidating and elitist. This was expressed clearly by Simone: 'it sometimes seems like it's a page for people who are very high up in RE terms... I mean people who use acronyms that I don't even know what they stand for and stuff like that' (Simone 11). The top levels of such a hierarchy were seen as being made up of RE elites and subject leaders and this meant that the idea of posting on the page was too intimidating a prospect for some users: 'there's quite a lot of people on there who are obviously quite important. I don't want to write anything that's really ditsy because then I think they're going to think that I'm silly or stupid or something like that' (Simone 10).

This fear appeared to cause some users to doubt themselves and lose confidence in themselves as professionals, even questioning their right to belong to such a community. In the face of the knowledge and experience of those professionals that were most active on the NATRE Facebook page and were also often active at a national level in organizations such as NATRE and the REC, several participants felt their own inexperience more acutely: 'they're so professional, so experienced, I feel a bit inadequate... is this the right space for me' (Laura, online communication).

However, although exposure to a space dominated by elites perhaps negatively influenced the professional confidence of some participants, most users appreciated and valued the links with such a group of people that the Facebook page afforded them:

It's really nice to know these people are there and to be connected with them. It's like you live in the classroom all day, but then you go on Facebook and you see another sort of world and you kind of get drawn in and you see what's going on with your subject at a wider level, you know, not just in your own little school world (Lilah 7).

As described by Lilah, an important reason for this was the view that connections with subject elites opened users up to a level of subject understanding that was not so easily available to them at their local school level – an understanding rooted in national strategic concerns for the subject and its future development. The page therefore provided users with exposure to national strategic discourses around their subject.

Some users also described being connected with subject elites as beneficial in aspirational terms. The space provided them with inspirational figures with knowledge, expertise, experience and influence to which users could aspire: 'it's good to see, you know, the subject leaders and be part of that because that's where I want to be in five years' (Emma, conference discussion). In other words, engaging in the NATRE Facebook page provided some users with personal connections with inspirational people. This informed users' own career goals and provided an ideal professional identity, rooted in personal connections, to which they could then aspire.

Furthermore, some users viewed the potential benefit of uniting with subject leaders through the NATRE Facebook page in more concrete professional development terms. Those users who did not feel intimidated or overcame their intimidation and joined the group of professionals who were actively engaged in the space, described finding themselves accepted into the community and, as such, perceived, or at least perceived themselves, as part of that group of elites.

Zoe explained this:

I finally got round to posting a link to an article on there and it was actually fine. A few people commented that they thought it was good and a load of people liked it, so it was great. I felt like part of the community and I felt much more confident and that I was part of that core group (Zoe, online communication).

Thus, some participants described the way in which they felt like they had entered the elite 'RE community' through simply posting on the NATRE page. They also described the potential benefit of becoming known to 'key RE people': 'it's really useful networking, you can get your name out there, show people you're committed, and that you're good which might lead on to other things' (John 6). For some users, then, actively engaging on the NATRE Facebook page appeared to be an important step in developing a publically validated identity rooted in confidence and expertise through networking and performance of professional identity as a national subject leader reinforced by a sense of unity with similarly situated professionals.

Thus while the sense of unity felt within the NATRE Facebook page occasionally acted as a force of social control, through a perceived hierarchy and connection with those users who were seen to be at the top of it, some users were inspired

and consequently aspired to join that group – working towards an ideal identity as a nationally active, publically validated subject leader and as such take ownership of their subject at a national level. The Facebook page afforded other users to turn those aspirations into ‘reality’ by providing them with the chance of joining that group and the space then to perform identities rooted in national leadership and political subject strategy.

### **NATRE’s Agenda: the commodification of identity**

In each section of this chapter some discussion has been given to the influence the organization, NATRE, and its representatives had over the discourses that dominated the NATRE Facebook Page and the way users engaged with and within the space. This is an important part of the context in which users of the space engaged. This section, therefore, aims to discuss the ways in which NATRE’s agenda for its Facebook page and the organization’s wider strategic agenda influenced the different ways in which the space was used.

During my interviews with the NATRE representative primarily responsible for the page, I was told that, although initially set up with the general aim of communicating with members, NATRE viewed its Facebook page as primarily a PR tool. Firstly, the page provided a way of communicating the organization’s messages to as wide a body of RE teachers as possible. Secondly, the users provided a ‘captured’ sample that could be used to generate data about the state of RE. NATRE could then use this data as a vehicle to carry its messages to a wider audience of the general public, policy makers and politicians through

press releases, articles, and reports. Thus, users of the NATRE Facebook Page can be thought of as both a passive body, the recipients of marketing material, to be converted to whatever message was aimed at them, and, at the same time, as valuable commodities whose opinions and experiences could be utilized for data gathering to promote a wider agenda.

Related to this perspective is an understanding of NATRE as a political organization. This was something the NATRE representative was very clear about. She viewed NATRE as having a wider role as a lobbying group aimed at influencing the decisions of policy makers in relation to RE: 'our key purpose is to target government bodies and increasingly individual politicians to ensure they make informed decisions about it [RE], the right decisions' (NATRE Rep 1). In other words, NATRE's aims explicitly involved promoting to politicians the organization's vision for how RE should be integrated into current educational policy developments. Specifically this vision involved RE's inclusion in the EBacc, its statutory provision maintained and extended into free schools and academies and the acknowledgement that the number of RE teachers is fewer than the government's figures and so an increase in RE specific teacher training places.

However, alongside NATRE's political aims perhaps also lay a commercial agenda. As the NATRE Representative stated, 'NATRE is not a benevolent society; it doesn't have any endowment; it costs money to keep everything going'. Aside from grants for specific projects (primarily from members of the Association of Church College Trusts) and financial assistance from NATRE's associated parent trust (Christian Education), the organization's main revenue

stream comes from membership subscriptions and the delivery of CPD.

Membership of NATRE costs teachers £64 per year (figure from 2013), which includes a subscription to *RE Today* and *Resource*, termly news and resource publications produced by Christian Education. Membership for teachers and school departments was often paid for by Local Authorities, but since 2010 and the reduction of LA RE Advisers and LA RE funding, LA funded membership has been reduced and fees have increasingly been paid by teachers themselves or membership has not been renewed leading to a reduction in the number of subscribers.

Although requested, I was unable to receive any official information on the number of teachers with NATRE membership. However, I was informally told that membership has significantly declined in the last 5 years from several thousand to below 1000 members, with less than 500 being classed as active members<sup>21</sup>. This decrease in membership constitutes a significant reduction in NATRE's income. Consequently members of the NATRE Executive Committee (the organization's managing body), were, during the fieldwork period, investigating ways of increasing revenue, improving marketing and re-establishing NATRE's role in the RE world. Social media was viewed as part of this process: 'in the action group, that's part of our strategic plan, to work on social media to increase numbers' (NATRE Rep 2). Thus it is arguable that NATRE's perception of its Facebook Page was linked with its commercial interest of increasing its number of subscribers in order to ensure the financial stability

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<sup>21</sup> I have been unable to verify these figures and, although given to me by a NATRE representative, I suspect they are very rough. The main message implied by the figures was the significant reduction in the number of subscribers, rather than an exact number of NATRE members.

of the organization. Therefore, the page can be conceptualized as a commercial recruiting space where the importance of NATRE for the RE world can be emphasized and users can be marketed to.

Thus NATRE's agenda for its Facebook Page can be seen as a combination of using the space to further its political aims and using the space for the commercial purpose of ensuring the organization's survival. These two aims were inevitably intimately entwined, but could be observed as directing a number of the discourses described in the sections above.

The existence of these two primary aims for the space was particularly apparent in the politically combative discourse perpetuating the image of RE being at war with the government. As described above, this was primarily introduced through official NATRE posts or those made by its representatives, and then reproduced by other users. The discourse itself was instrumental in solidifying and unifying a campaigning community on the page as well as generating a sense of oppositional unity among users. This campaigning community was then directed by NATRE's official campaigns, becoming the campaign vehicle for NATRE's vision of Religious Education.

Similarly, whether strategically conscious or not, commercial benefits could be discerned underlying the oppositional and combative discourses. Users described ways in which they perceived NATRE as being their leader or commander in 'the war for the survival of RE': 'NATRE are leading us in this battle' (Helen 8). As an organization, NATRE had taken on a leadership role in

matters of subject policy and promotion and a mediating role in communicating with political organizations and individual MPs. Through the propagation of a combative war-based discourse the conspiratorial nature and power of ‘the enemy’, in this case largely Michael Gove and the DfE, were all emphasized. Such emphasis inevitably suggested that the organization holding back such a foe must be extremely valuable. Therefore, while not wishing to make any value judgments related to the validity of either the discourse or the place of NATRE within it, it is possible to see ways in which combative discourse influenced users’ perception of the power and value of both policy makers and NATRE itself. It is arguable that where users perceived the organization’s value, they would be more inclined to financially support that organization and fund NATRE’s continued to fight against threats to the subject.

Similar commercial concerns can perhaps be seen as underlying the dominance of some of the discourses relating to the threats to the subject’s survival. With NATRE experiencing direct financial impact from the government’s policies – a reduction in LA funding reducing its subscribers – it is arguable that, as an organization, it felt its survival was being threatened. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that such a discourse would flow naturally from the organisation. NATRE’s commercial interests can therefore perhaps be seen as underlying some of the war and survival oriented discourses. The political and pugnacious identities constructed and performed by users within these discourses can consequently also be seen to be rooted in NATRE’s financial concerns.

Of course it's not necessarily surprising that a Facebook page bearing NATRE's name should be a vehicle for the organization's agendas and several users were aware of this, as described by Tamara:

I'm not on the NATRE exec but I wouldn't be at all surprised if at meetings this is discussed in terms of how do we promote the NATRE Facebook? How do we drum up more subscriptions? You know, let's be honest, they survive by their subscriptions and people are dropping off and therefore their income is dropping and so on; that's a worry for any commercial organization... I think we're kidding ourselves if we're saying 'no NATRE is just a lovely organization that is promoting RE'. It isn't. It's got a political agenda, but it's also got a commercial agenda. That's important to remember (Tamara 14).

However, the majority of users did not appear to have considered the role NATRE's agendas might play on the page, instead viewing it as a community owned neutral space. As such, users viewed it as free from the influence of commercial or political agendas leading to a potential tension between a vision of agency in relation to engagement within the space and NATRE's organizational power over the discourses that dominated the page and the projected ideal identities.

While it is very likely that NATRE as an organization, as well as its individual representatives, would describe its page in terms of a subject organization community without being explicitly aware of the organisations influence or agendas, the above suggests that users of the NATRE Facebook page can be described in commercial terms: as commodities to be used as vehicles for a political agenda and marketed to as part of a commercial agenda. This commodification of users can be seen as taking place through the process of engagement within NATRE-controlled dominant discourses in the space,

particularly those relating to political combat, subject survival, black and white politics and the importance of campaigning. It was possible to observe users of the page actively participating in NATRE's political and commercial agendas through their engagement in dominant online discourses and consequently constructing and performing identities limited by the language and themes available within these discourses. These identities, as described above, frequently projected a national strategic understanding of RE and were rooted in a politically active ideal. This can be conceptualized as being linked to the commodification of users as vehicles for political and commercial agendas and as such, in a number of instances, the identities performed and constructed in and through the NATRE Facebook Page can be thought of in terms of users projecting themselves as commodified selves. As such the page presents a complex picture in which agency is actively promoted through particular discourses, with teachers feeling they were taking control of themselves and their subject at a national level. However, this is in tension with the embedded social and technological structures of page which controlled the online discourses and appeared to define users in commodified terms in relation to organisational political and commercial agendas.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the findings and analysis of the ethnographic study of the NATRE Facebook Page. The study found that the page was an important part of many teachers' lives. However, the space itself was dominated by NATRE's own posts and a group of users perceived to be elites in the RE world. Many

users' engagement within the page tended to be fairly passive, but with a common activity involving the 'liking' of particular posts or sharing them on their own timelines. Such behaviour can be thought of as a form of performance, in which users displayed professional values and a sense of shared community identity to both other users of the page and their wider group of friends.

The NATRE Facebook Page was also observed as being important for users in terms of the construction of their professional identities. Through engagement, whether passive or active, in the social space, users were exposed to the dominant discourses, primarily political, emotive, and combative, that featured within it. These discourses often demanded users to take up identity positions within them constructing and performing identities rooted in anger and political activism and aspiring towards an activist ideal. The space and the discourses that dominated it also provided users with a strong sense of community and unity that facilitated the shared construction, performance and social validation of a group identity, distinctive to the NATRE Facebook Page and rooted in a shared national and strategic understanding and vision for the subject.

However, underlying the discourses that dominated the space and the identity positions that were performed and constructed within them were the dual agendas that NATRE, as an organization, appeared to have for the page. These were political and commercial. Although almost certainly not a conscious strategy taken by NATRE, these two agendas could be seen as contributing to a commodification of users, where their value could be reduced to acting as vehicles for a political agenda and a body of potential customers. Thus users'

engagement in the online social space can be conceptualized in terms of a tension between agency and structure. The page afforded them opportunities to feel that they were engaging in national policy related activity, taking control of their subject, and forging a national identity for RE; at the same time they were engaging in a structured space, within limited discourses and reacting to projected politically active ideal identities related to the parent organisations commercial interests.

## **CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF THE SAVE RE FACEBOOK GROUP**

### **Introduction**

This chapter reports the findings of fieldwork undertaken in the Save RE Facebook Group. Following a detailed description of the online social space, the different ways in which RE teachers engaged within it will be described and discussed using the concepts of identity construction and performance as tools to frame the presented data. The variety of ways in which the space was used will be discussed in detail and, since the group was not owned by any one particular organization, the ways in which different individuals, groups and organizations sought to appropriate the space for their own agendas will be described.

### **Description of the Save RE Facebook Group**

The Save RE Facebook Group was started as an open group by an RE Teacher in April 2011. 300 members joined within a month of the group's inception and by the end of my time in the field, the group had 563 members. This number has continued to grow throughout the analysis and writing up periods and, as of October 2013, the number of group members had risen to 715. The group's relative youth and growth rate meant that the ethos was fluid, with, as will be elaborated on below, different individuals and groups influencing the dynamics of the space.

As with all Facebook groups users became members of the group by clicking the 'join' button on the page and they were able to choose whether or not they wished to receive notifications from the group – allowing posted messages to appear in their own personal timelines and be alerted in their own notifications to group activity. The group was founded as an open group, which meant that anyone could join, any user could view the list of members, and any member could invite their friends to join the group. The majority of participants I spoke with had joined the group through an invitation from one of their Facebook friends. Therefore, the group can be seen as an extended social network, where the majority of users were, to a certain extent, linked through other contexts.

As the name suggests, the group was started with a single purpose – to 'save RE' – as a reaction to perceived threats to the subject from Governmental proposals and legislation, particularly the EBacc. This immediately linked the group with highly emotive political discourses emphasising RE as a victim of governmental and societal oppression and in need of salvation. However, despite the implications of the name of the group, no specific communal aims were expressed online and the 'about' section on the group's page (where administrators are able to provide information about the group) was left blank. Thus, while the name of the group implied a very specific purpose, linking the space with very specific political discourses (many of which were very apparent on the NATRE Facebook Page), these aims for the group were not explicitly expressed anywhere else.

In fact, from early on in the group's life the space quickly became a focus for much wider subject engagement, with topics of conversation ranging far beyond a single political agenda. A number of participants expressed distain for the name Save RE, arguing that it was inappropriate given the variety of non-politically motivated topics of conversation. Several even commented on a desire to change the group's name in order to move it away from an apparently single-issue space and reflect the wider range of RE related content. However, the broad focus and content of the group was contested and, as will be discussed below, there was tension between users who viewed it as a practical space covering a range of RE related topics and users who wanted to maintain a single political focus.

The group followed a standard Facebook group layout during the fieldwork period, maintaining the original Facebook design (a continuation of the pre-Timeline page). This design treats all posts equally, displaying each original starting post chronologically, sorted by the date the post was made, with subsequent comments attached to their 'parent posts'. This means that in Facebook groups, as opposed to Facebook pages, no individual voice is prioritized by the technological structure embedded in the design. Compared with the NATRE Facebook Page, the Save RE Group consequently had a more open and equitable feeling with no single agenda being structurally prioritized over others. Without a specific parent organization, the space was not dominated by a single voice, allowing for more open debate, controversy, and conflict. However, as will also be discussed below, the lack of a single hosting organization left something of a vacuum and a consequent tension between a

number of individuals and organizations seeking to appropriate the space for their own ends emerged.



Figure 3 - Screenshot of the Save RE Facebook Group

The group was a fairly busy space with a daily average of 5.7 posts, a weekly average of 40 posts, during the fieldwork period. The majority of users were secondary RE subject specialists, with many being involved in the delivery of GCSE and A Level RS as well as teaching more general statutory RE. The group included teachers at various points in their careers, ranging from NQTs (and even a few PGCE students) to teachers with over 20 years of experience, as well as a few RE consultants and currently unemployed teachers seeking jobs. This led to a mutually supportive atmosphere in which the more experienced

teachers were able to offer advice to those teachers who were newer to the profession.

## **Practical Politics**

Like both the TES RE Forum and the NATRE Facebook Page a substantial number of posts and conversations in the Save RE Facebook Group focused on the current educational context: the ways in which educational policy changes were influencing RE, and, as suggested by the political nature of group's name, political campaigning activity. The majority of this political activity was initiated by posts sharing news stories relating to RE's political situation, illustrated by the following post:

**Mathew**

RE in the news! Yay...

EBACC affecting Religious Education says Bishop of Oxford

[www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

Users involved in posting these kinds of news stories often described their activity as an extension of their professional expertise. The group offered them the opportunity to share their knowledge of the political aspects of their subject with other teachers, and to perform an aspect of their professional identity rooted in an interest in national subject politics:

I think it's important to share news stories with the wider community to help keep everyone informed... I'm really interested in what's going on at the moment, you know, I follow it all, so it's good to share that with everyone... I'm the politics guy (Jude 8).

Thus the space can be seen as affording such users the opportunity to develop and perform a role for themselves within the wider group rooted in their interest in national politics.

Some users took this role very seriously, even spending time searching through Hansard online for any mention of RE in parliament. This can be seen, for example, in Andrew's post:

**Andrew**

Interesting extract from the House of Commons on 27th Feb...

T8. [96415] Hugh Bayley (York Central) (Lab): To be topical, just a moment ago the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr Gibb), rightly pointed out the importance of the English baccalaureate in encouraging young people at secondary school to learn modern languages. In order to gain the baccalaureate, young people also have to do well in maths, science and a humanities subject—history or geography. Why not also include religious education as a possible subject here?

...

As Andrew stated, 'I like to put the effort into searching for information and sharing it with everyone. It makes me feel useful and like I'm doing something for RE' (Andrew, online communication). Here Andrew can be seen expressing his professional interest in the political aspects of RE at a national level, engaging with the debates, and performing this political aspect of his professional identity in the social context of the Save RE Facebook Group. The group afforded him the opportunity to perform this political aspect of his identity and he put effort into developing relevant knowledge to support his politically motivated performances.

However, unlike the NATRE Facebook Page, where political engagement tended to focus on national politics and Religious Education at a national level, most users of the Save RE Group did not appear to share Andrew's desire to focus the online conversation on national educational and RE related politics. Instead, following starter posts made by users like Andrew, the majority of continued political conversations that took place in the group tended to have a local focus, with users interpreting national changes in the contexts of their own schools and classrooms and then asking for practical advice. This kind of use is illustrated in the following exchange:

**Jack**

Does anyone know of any data on whether 6th forms or colleges are looking at E-Bacc in terms of entry requirements? I'm doing GCSE choices stuff with Year 9 PSHE and I want to tell them that no one's taking any notice of the E-Bacc but I also don't want to lie! Any and all info welcome!

**Jenny**

Ours are told (accurately) that no school/college that we send students to has made the EBacc an entry requirement. Some say 5/6/7 C or B grades, including subjects they want to study (if applicable), but none have said EBacc. Closest one has come is saying from Sept 2013 they must have a C or above in a language.

Clearly, Brizzle could be different to Norfolk!!

These posts, taken from a much longer exchange (11 posts), show the way in which users took a national issue and discussed it in relation to their own local contexts, attempting to deal with local problems linked with national issues. This is noticeably different in tone from the NATRE RE Page where, although similar issues were discussed, the focus was on a national agenda, PR, and campaigning rather than on the practical local issues that emerged from policy changes and working solutions for teachers in schools.

This apparent localisation of national issues and a focus on the practical aspects of dealing with political and policy changes provided the space with a very practice based ethos, perhaps influenced by the grassroots nature of the group's foundation. As such the identities that were performed through this kind of locally oriented political engagement could be observed as being particularly linked with users' teaching practice. While related to national politics, the identities performed through collaboratively working through problems were rooted in the users' schools and classrooms. Thus users appeared to be engaged in a local practice based politics rather than in campaign-focused national politics. As Aisla commented, 'it's just a massive help for dealing with everything that comes up at school' (Aisla, 4).

Such a focus on local practical issues was often explicitly maintained despite occasional attempts from some users to move the conversation into national politics and national campaigning. For example, when a user had posted a question on the possibility of teaching GCSE RE in a reduced number of lessons (because the school was prioritising EBacc subjects), a number of users shared their experiences, positive and negative, of teaching with limited time allocation and discussed whether a GCSE was a viable possibility in the time the original poster had been given. However, one user attempted to shift the conversation away from the dominant practical tone into more angry rhetoric concerning governmental policy changes and national campaigning:

Ask for the 5 lessons of time with the separate classroom, like physics. I wonder what that little fascist mr Gove would say - perhaps we should write

to him? If we did we could say it was a case from History AS level. That wd [would] get him going. Who's with me?

This short post was completely ignored by the other users who continued to post practical advice and experiences and kept the conversation firmly rooted at the local practical level. This reflected a dominant attitude among most users I interacted with, that the space should be kept focused on local issues experienced by teachers in their professional school-based lives. As Megan commented, 'I'm just there to talk about teaching, I haven't got time for campaigns and all that. We should just be helping each other get through difficult times' (Megan 12).

Where the NATRE Facebook Page appeared to project an ideal identity rooted in national politics and active campaigning, the localised practical focus of users' online engagement in the Save RE Group appeared to place value in teachers who were willing to offer practical advice to their peers. The way in which this value was emphasised, and with attempts to bring in alternative discourses rooted in national politics and political activism being largely ignored, a more practical ideal was projected in the online social space.

Thus, while the group provided space for the performance of what can be thought of as political identities, for most users these political identities were rooted in local and practical issues, with national policy changes discussed in local practical terms. With the projection of a practical and local ideal rooted in this ethos, the group also had a constructive influence over some of the users engaging in the space. Several could be observed entering the space and

performing in accordance with this projected ideal. Similarly, with discourses rooted in national activity and political activism largely being ignored, some users were forced to reconsider the local and practical implications of their posts. As Andrew commented, 'I used to try and get people a bit more fired up, but people just want the news not the rhetoric 😊' (Andrew, online communication).

## **A Practical Space**

The practical aspects of the Save Re Group were not restricted simply to interpreting national politics in practical terms. In fact the majority of the posts focused on practical issues relating to teaching practice in a variety of forms. The majority of participants I interviewed primarily described the group as a practical space in which issues could be communally discussed, help requested and provided, and general teaching practice enhanced through sharing and conversation. When coding, I divided these kinds of practical posts into four main, interrelated types: advice – requesting and providing advice; resource sharing; posts related to employment; and general unburdening through venting and ranting. These will now be described.

### **Advice**

Advice is a very general term for the substantial number of conversations that were started by users requesting help with specific issues or concerns and asking other users to share their experiences in order to gain a number of different perspectives to aid decision making. These requests were then

generally responded to with advice, ideas, experiences etc. as the users came together to help each other. For example, an issue that frequently arose and led to a number of users requesting advice at various times during the fieldwork period was the difficulty associated with choosing an appropriate GCSE or A Level exam board. A number of users requested advice relating to this issue, which led to many other users offering support and sharing their experiences in order to collaboratively aid the initial poster's decision making. As Lorraine commented, 'it's just the best place to get all kinds of teaching advice and get lots of different people giving you their ideas and talking about what they've done' (Lorraine, 3).

Those users involved in the starting of conversations by asking for such advice described using the space in terms of 'professional learning' – learning from their more experienced peers and gaining practical profession related knowledge from established 'masters' of the profession. Aisla, for example, commented, 'you know there are some really experienced people on there. I just try and learn from them all' (Aisla 11). As such, those users asking for advice were often early career teachers and thus often defined themselves in this way. In order to elicit advice from more experienced users, initial posters often explicitly emphasized their lack of experience, expressing themselves as relative novices when asking for help. For example, posts requesting advice often began with the user describing the stage they had reached in their career – e.g. stating that they had only recently been appointed or had just been given a new role: 'I've just finished my NQT year...'; or 'I'm a newly appointed head of department...'.

Thus, by emphasizing his or her own inexperience, the initial posters appeared indirectly to flatter those who replied by implying that responders were necessarily experienced and experts in RE, thereby eliciting potentially more responses. As such the process of eliciting advice took on a semi-ritualized aspect, where the initial posters performed novice identities, rooted in projected inexperience, as a precursor to a request for assistance, denigrating themselves while flattering the wider community. Some users suggested that this was simply a way of being polite: 'it's just polite to ask for help in that way' (Annabel, online communication). However, with others viewing such behaviour as 'just the way it's done' (Lev, online communication), it's possible to suggest that such performances were more likely repeated empty rituals, with users simply reproducing performances and denigrating discourses because they had observed them previously. As such, the influence of the modes of communication in the group could be seen, with specific ritualised modes of initiating posts leading to the performance of identities rooted in the projection of inexperience.

This emphasis on inexperience by users requesting advice offered responders the opportunity to perform identities rooted in expertise and experience through the sharing of their practical knowledge. This opportunity was welcomed by many users who appeared to enjoy acting as mentors and sharing their experience with the Save RE Group. A number of these more experienced advice-givers, described the group as affording them the space to perform expert identities when such a space didn't exist for them in other aspects of their professional lives. Lorraine, for example, stated:

I've been teaching for years and years. I've got a huge amount of experience now, but it's just not that valued at my school. I don't have that many people to share it with. It's just a small department. So coming on here means I can help loads more people and me, as a resource, I'm not being wasted (Lorraine 14).

Thus, the Save RE Facebook Group can be seen as a space fostering a practical advise-giving ethos, where more experienced users could share their expertise with newer teachers. This provided these more experienced users with an opportunity to express identities rooted in their own experience and expertise – where many users felt opportunities to perform in this way were limited in their places of work or their own experience and expertise were not valued in these work related offline contexts.

However, other users described ways in which the ability to share their expertise and act as mentors in an online context also supported their offline work. For example, Monica described feeling that the experience of providing online support helped develop her confidence as a professional, which in turn led to her offering support to her colleagues offline at her school: 'I really like helping people out on it [Save RE] and sharing my experience. It's made me much more willing to say something at school and help people out there' (Monica, online communication). Thus, the group provided some users with a safe space to take on and express identity rooted in their own experience and expertise, developing confidence in that identity position, before expanding such a performance into offline school-based contexts.

This dual performance of novice and expert identities appeared to lead to the establishment of a stable relationship base within the group in which valuable practical knowledge could be exchanged based on an initial ritualized performance. It was noticeable that all users I interacted with and interviewed referred to the group as a 'community'. As such, as will be explored in more detail in the subsequent chapter, it is possible to conceptualize the group as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), where users shared practical profession related knowledge and engaged in similar roles to the apprentice-master relationships described by Lave and Wenger as operating in communities of practice as individuals move from legitimate peripheral participant to full community member.

In some instances it was possible to observe movement from online behaviour that expressed professional inexperience to the active sharing of advice and experiences with users taking on more expert roles through the sharing of their experiences as their comfort in the group grew and their teaching practice developed. For example, part of such a transition can be seen in the following post responding to a request for ideas for lessons on the Olympics:

**Glen**

I have only been teaching for a couple of years but here are my ideas. What about Global appeal of the Olympics and how it brings people together. Global community, How do the different religions bring people together. Symbolism of the 5 rings comparing with different faiths symbols. The sacrifice of the athletes in achieving their end goal. The different countries and the faith they practice. Life is a journey compare this with an athlete's personal journey and religious leaders ie Muhammad/ Jesus journey etc. Do you have to win to achieve?

Here Glen acknowledges his potential lack of experience but offers advice, moving from his self-described identity as a relatively new teacher to a new identity as a developing expert able to offer advice and share ideas that others might find useful. Similarly several users described their online experiences of asking for advice, then gradually feeling more comfortable and willing to offer advice themselves, taking on more and more expert-oriented online roles.

Holden, for example, describes the process: 'I really needed some help with some things and people were great. But after a while, I got work sorted and I felt I was able to help and I am really enjoying giving people advice at the moment' (Holden 12).

Thus, practical posts, rooted in teaching practice and requesting and offering advice, not only helped deepen users' practical knowledge and provide immediate assistance, but also provided a platform for more experienced users to perform identities rooted in their experience and expertise in an environment where they felt confident and valued. Such posts also could be seen as providing a space for users to perform not only 'novice' and 'master' identities, but transition from novice to expert identities in a relatively safe and welcoming environment, supporting peer-to-peer knowledge and experience sharing and providing room for development and an ethos that accepted that development as it took place. As such, it is arguable that the online context provided a distinctive environment in which requests for advice and the advice itself was welcomed, freely given and freely accepted. As opposed to school based contexts where individuals' experience and expertise might be judged on a number of varied factors, the Save RE Facebook Group afforded users with the opportunity to

present their advice without the complexities of a school based environment and have their identities rooted in experience and expertise accepted based primarily on the quality of their advice.

### **Resource sharing**

Linked with the offering of advice and a significant part of the practical aspects of the Save RE Facebook Group, and, was the sharing of resources. A number of posts were made throughout the fieldwork period requesting resources on specific topics (e.g. 'Anyone got anything on the Olympics') in a similar way to users requesting advice, although generally without the proceeding ritualized self-denigration. Users would simply post a message asking for resources on a specific topic and, for the most part, other users would share resources they were aware of or had written themselves. However, the majority of posts in which users shared resources tended to be unsolicited. Users frequently 'discovered' resources while researching a lesson and decided to share them with the wider community, illustrated by the following message:

**Mike**

Found this while planning a lesson about the morality of Fantastic Mr Fox, thought it might be of interest. It is a bit American, and aimed at primary school kids, but think some of it could be adapted up...

[Teaching Children Philosophy](#)

As was discussed in relation to the TES RE Forum, the sharing of resources shouldn't necessarily be solely viewed as an altruistic act. While a number of users did describe sharing resources simply to 'give something back to the community' (Lorraine 3), others were perhaps more self-aware, describing ways in which resource sharing afforded them the opportunity to portray themselves

to other users in a professionally positive light. As Holden stated, 'yeah I like helping people, but if I'm being really honest, there is an element of look at me, aren't I great. I don't think it's a bad thing. We all like to show off a bit' (Holden 11).

As such resource sharing can therefore be viewed in performative terms.

Through the sharing of resources, users were able to show the community that they were diligent, creative professionals coming up with innovative, interesting topics (the morality of *Fantastic Mr Fox*) and resourcing them appropriately, thereby performing an identity rooted in experience and expertise. This kind of performance appeared to afford users the opportunity to build stable profiles rooted in experience and expertise that could be recognised by their peers. As Holden stated, 'it's good to get your name about and for people to think highly of you. You never know when you might need or good word or a job or something' (Holden 12). Thus some users saw the group not only as a space to 'show off' through the construction and performance of particular identities, but also viewed it as having value in terms of an instrumental, practical agenda of improving their public image in order to facilitate future networking.

Such activity can be linked with the fact that, as a Facebook group, all posters' identities were known. Posts made in the group necessarily came from personal Facebook accounts and even where users' security settings were at the highest level, a name and profile picture could be seen. Therefore, while some users expressed the need for caution in relation to what was said and who might see it, others saw the space as also providing an opportunity to manage people's

perceptions of the self and construct and project identities that they wished the wider professional group to see.

However, although this self-interested agenda could be observed as underlying much of the resource sharing that took place in the group, it is arguable that the performance and presentation of ideal identity positions associated with such sharing was rooted in a general, socially validated ideal projected within the group. With value placed on teachers that actively contributed to the online group through the open sharing of resources, the group projected such an ideal and users aspired to it, performing identities that conformed to it. Thus it was possible to observe the Save RE Facebook Group propagating and projecting an image of an ideal RE teacher, someone who was an active member of the community, practically engaged with the space, offering advice and sharing resources. Through these activities and the performative appropriation of this image, users actively reproduced this ideal image, projecting it within the space and reinforcing its power.

### **Issues of Employment**

For many users, underlying the presentation of a positive online identity was the issue of employment. As described in the two previous chapters, users were conscious of building up a positive picture of themselves in all their online activity in case they came across a fellow user in an interview situation. This is unsurprising given the professional nature of the online social space. However, while employment concerns may have underlain a number of posts, the issue of

jobs was also explicitly raised within the group. Posts that focused on employment generally took three forms: posts attempting to recruit for a job; posts seeking a job; and, perhaps unusually, and certainly rarer, posts advising or inciting teachers to resign from their existing jobs as a protest against the ill-treatment of their subject.

As perhaps an indication of the current context in which RE found itself during the fieldwork period, with a significant amount of RE teaching being undertaken by teachers with other specialisms and RE specialist redundancies, posts made by users seeking jobs far outnumbered recruiting posts. However occasionally people did use the space to advertise jobs, as illustrated below:

**Cassie**

If anyone knows anyone who'd be available from September to teach RE in Manchester, please can you point them in my direction! Thanks :-)

This elicited a large number of responses, all requesting further details.

However, when I discussed this post and its responses with Cassie in private, she described her reactions to some of the users who had replied:

'I don't know who we'll ultimately get, but I can tell you that a lot of the people who responded on the group haven't got a chance. I've seen those names before and I've seen some of the, not wanting to sound rude, but... some of the crap they post. They've got 'no way' written all over them. On the other hand, there were a few people on there that I was pleased to see... I know their names from here and they seem like good reasonable people who've said interesting things. We'll definitely give one or two of those go' (Cassie, conference conversation).

This response reveals the ways in which users built up a sense of their peers' personalities through their online engagement and activities and the potential importance of 'impression management' in social contexts. As described above,

some users had made a good impression on Cassie through their posts and projected a positive self-image. However, equally important were those users that had failed to make such a positive impression.

Cassie revealed that in several cases she was unimpressed by the controversial tone of some people's posts. In others she questioned users' ability to teach appropriately based on the quality of their posts and the resources they shared, despite those users' own portrayal of themselves as 'good teachers'. This illustrates that while the performance and construction of positive identities in online contexts may facilitate some impression management, such performances are necessarily social, with all parties needing to be willing to enter into and interact with the projected roles. If one user tried to take on a role that another user was uncomfortable with or didn't believe, a different kind of interaction took place, with some users refusing to accept overly positive projections if they did not appear to be rooted in classroom based professional identity. Thus a tension could be seen between online performances and the wider social acceptance of those performances when online and offline contexts met: where users might have been prepared to accept positive performances purely in the online space, they appeared more willing to judge such identity performances when issues of offline employment were at stake.

A number of teachers did use the group to post messages stating that they were job seeking. However these were rarely responded to and, as far as I could find out, did not lead to successful employment. In fact, people making such posts were, according to several users I discussed the issue with, viewed by the wider

group as desperate and ultimately unemployable. Sandra, for example, highlighted this issue and described a way in which she attempted to avoid appearing desperate and manage other users' views of her appropriately.

I need a job, but I don't want everyone to know that. You see some people going – 'please give me a job, does anyone know of any jobs' and sounding really desperate. After a while, you start to see the same names and you start to think 'you still haven't got a job? Why is that? What's wrong with you?' It's probably just bad luck, but you start to wonder. I don't want people wondering about me, so I only message people privately and don't say anything about needing a job in public (Sandra, online communication).

Thus, some users were concerned about the public nature of the group and chose to manage the presentation of themselves by limiting their public performances within the space and avoiding contexts that they felt could damage their public identity. In the context of potential employment, although such users did use the space to look for jobs, they preferred to avoid the apparent stigma of being an unemployed/ job hunting teacher and followed up leads in private. This limited the exposure to unwanted attributes (in this case unemployability) being attached to their identities. Instead they were able to construct and perform desired identities by choosing to perform in contexts and posts that they felt were appropriate to the image they wished the wider to community to see and used the technical affordances of the space to privately message key individuals without risking jeopardising their public identity.

As mentioned above, the third way in which the issue of employment arose in the group was in the form of posts recommending that teachers resign from their jobs. These were fairly unusual occurrences and in many ways ran counter to most of the communications that took place in the group, which as discussed

above, were aimed at enhancing teaching practice, as opposed to leaving it. Such posts were made by a small minority of users and were invariably in response to requests for advice in relation to local difficulties – a reduction in teaching time for RE, GCSE RS no longer being offered as an option, etc. While most advice offered in response to these issues was practical and positive (e.g. hints on how to fit GCSE teaching into small blocks of time or intensive revision sessions), occasionally someone responded, from their own experience, recommending resignation – leaving the situation out of principle. This is illustrated in the following post, responding to a call for advice on reduced teaching time for GCSE RS:

**Nats**

Resign! I have. After 13 years I have never experienced anything like the past 12 months. I absolutely love teaching, but the job (and the constant fighting) has made me truly miserable!

These angry responses at first appear simply to advocate that the original posters remove themselves from the profession, setting aside their professional identities, leaving the situation that is causing problems. However, these advocates of resignation were held in high regard within the Save RE Group and the act of resignation out of principle appeared to be viewed as the ultimate expression of bravery and ultimately the ultimate expression of subject specific identity. Ironically, being willing to give up one's professional identity could be regarded as the strongest performance of that professional identity. As stated by Megan, 'I like the way [name] resigned over the way RE was treated at her school. I wish I had the guts to stand up for my subject in that way' (Megan 11).

Thus, users advocating resignation can be seen, through their own experience of resigning out of principle, as representing (in some ways) an ideal form of subject specific professional identity. They represented teachers who cared so much about their subject that they were willing to make a stand and give up their livelihoods. As such, they perhaps projected an ideal to which others could aspire. By advocating resignation, when most teachers would not follow that advice, they were reminding the community of their 'ultimate sacrifice'. This advice can also be seen in performative terms: resignation advocates were performing an identity rooted in their strongly held values related to the importance of RE, performing the ideal identity they advocated and projected by reminding the group of their decision. Thus the group also provided such users with the space to continue to express their professional identities when, in some cases at least, this opportunity was not available to them in a normal school based context.

### **Venting and Ranting**

Associated with identities rooted in idealism and the expressed in anger was the fairly common occurrence of 'ranting' in the Save RE Facebook Group. Although practical conversations tended to dominate, these were often punctuated by users making long angry posts lamenting the state of RE, the state of the Government and even the state of the world and its attitude towards RE (although as described above, these were often in relation to specific local issues experienced by the poster). In the majority of circumstances the poster would usually end these kinds of posts by acknowledging them as 'rants'. This would

usually involve the user closing his or her post with a phrase along the lines of 'rant over'. Such acknowledgement often appeared apologetic, as if the user was embarrassed about his or her outburst. As such it was often couched in a wry, humorous tone deflecting some of the anger, as illustrated by the following user closing a long post about the number of hours RE had been allocated in his school: 'Discrimination and opinion. I have fat fingers today! [i.e. I've been doing a lot of typing]'.

While the self-deprecating acknowledgment of ranting appeared to imply that the activity was in some way shameful, the acknowledgment of a rant often appeared ritualistic and did not appear to reflect any real desire to apologise. The majority of posters tended to use the same stock phrase ('rant over') to close their comments, utilizing the same language to distinguish their text as a particular kind of post, marking it out for the wider group of users. Thus, rather than apologising for the content or tone of the post, the ritualistic acknowledgement of ranting appeared to act as a signifier of high emotions and anger. This appeared to inform users that the post occupied a different kind of space within the group when compared with posts explicitly requesting advice or help. This distinct ranting space appeared to be almost explicitly oriented towards performance with users revelling in their anger with verbosity and insults. The group could, therefore, be seen as providing users with a space in which they could exorcise themselves of their anger and frustrations in a ritualistic and socially acceptable manner where the expression of such emotions on its own was a sufficient end in itself.

I have included this aspect of the Save RE Group in this section on practical issues because most users described it in very practical terms. While rants were very common on both the TES RE Forum and the NATRE Facebook Page, they tended, in those spaces, to focus on a variety of topics, particularly in NATRE's case, political issues at a national level. However, in the Save RE Group, rants tended to be locally focused and related to practical issues and frustrations users experienced in their schools and classrooms. As such, the act of ranting appeared to have a highly practical function. Through expressing anger and frustration in a safe and supportive public space, users were able to release those emotions in a context where their feelings could be acknowledged and validated. Other users would respond with empathy and sympathy and the original poster could then move beyond those emotions and discuss practical problem solving. The group provided users with a space in which they could express their anger and frustration without jeopardising the offline relationships in their schools had they expressed those feelings in that work based context. Thus the group afforded users with the space to express aspects of their working lives (aspects rooted in anger and frustration) that they realised might be problematic if they were expressed within their places of work. As Jude stated: 'it's really useful to let off steam online. Some of my rants, I would never say at work, but they need to be said somewhere otherwise I'd probably just explode' (Jude 6).

## Meaning making and Negotiation of Subject Ownership and Subject Identity

As on the TES RE Forum, the Save RE Facebook Group was used as a debating space. Unlike the NATRE Facebook Page where particular discourses and views about RE in its current political and social context dominated, the debates on Save RE tended to be more open and internally conflictual. Without one particular view dominating and no apparent PR-motivated need to maintain a cohesive community, debates and arguments were generally in depth and involved users taking multiple opposing positions. This is illustrated by a short extract from a conversation relating to teaching time (an often repeated topic of conversation), with some teachers lamenting the lack of time given to the subject, while others took the more controversial position of arguing that since GCSE RS is easier than other subjects, it can be taught successfully with less teaching time and so actually deserved to have lesson time cut:

...

### **Matthew**

Hmmm, you can take longer to teach it, but I don't think the content is as deep as some other subjects. And over 90% a\*-c for 4 years suggests you can do it well on not a huge amount of time ;)

### **Samantha**

That is not what I meant! I want everyone to have the best possible experience. And to be honest I don't think you can do that in an hour a week. I would love to get 90% in an hour a week, but when the kids themselves say things like, "isn't it a bit weird that we only have an hour a week" and then go on to say that it can't be all that important then. Just sick off the battle!

Although at times appearing heated, this kind of conflict, for the most part, remained focused on the topic of the debate and rarely became personal, aggressive or unpleasant. Unlike the TES Forum, no participants complained

about the argumentative nature of the online debates or reported feeling uncomfortable or upset by them. In fact most users described the debates in positive terms, equating the nature of debating with the aims and purpose of teaching and teaching RE in particular: 'RE's all about debate, we're just being good teachers continuing debating outside the classroom' (Holden 7).

Thus, some users appeared to view profession related online arguing as an important expression and performance of their professional, and more specifically subject, related identities: free debate, even if bringing one into conflict with colleagues, was seen by some as being part of what it means to be an RE teacher. Although explicitly stated in interviews, this attitude could also be observed online in the group throughout the debates. As arguments expanded, posters would sometimes precede their points with a reflective comment on the positive nature of debate, perhaps as a way of showing that any emerging conflict was rooted in the debate and not in personal animosity. These positive comments focused on the ways in which the debates mirrored 'good RE', as illustrated in the following post:

**Percy**

Crikey this is all very exciting! Nice to see passionate people engaged in serious debate - the skills and passion we are trying to instil in the students we teach!

Users appeared to view debating as a means of modelling and expressing subject specific identity and subject specific values. The Save RE Facebook group therefore afforded them the space to engage, in depth, with key professional issues that they viewed as being important for themselves and for their subject.

These debates can be viewed as a way for users not only to express their professional identities and values through arguments and conflict, but also to forge meaning collaboratively through rigorous discussion of key topics related to RE and being a teacher in general. As Aisla said, 'it's really fun to get stuck into a debate, but it's also really useful to have an argument about something that's really important to you. You see other perspectives that you hadn't thought of. It's good for your understanding.' (Aisla 9). Good examples of these key topics can be seen in debates over the relative difficulty of GCSE and A Levels, discussions over the statutory nature of the subject, issues related to parents' right to withdraw their children from RE, etc. It's arguable that for this type of meaning-making to take place, users had to feel comfortable and confident enough to come into conflict with each other. Through the expression of opposing positions, deeper understandings could be reached and this was facilitated by the fact that users appeared to view the group as a safe environment (free, for example, from trolls and outsiders that sometimes entered the TES) where conflict was primarily rooted in debate rather than in interpersonal relationships.

However, despite this dominant attitude locating conflict in debate and seeing it in a broadly positive light, certain topics produced the expression of much more vehemently held positions that did occasionally lead to personal comments. These topics were varied, ranging, for example, from gay marriage to abortion and generally focused on religious issues rather than teaching issues. Underlying these debates appeared to be a long running conflict between religious RE teachers and non-religious RE teachers – a clash between the religious and the

secular. This divide can be seen in the following extract from a debate concerning Baroness Warsi's comment that 'Britain is under threat from a rising tide of militant secularists':

...

**Zeb**

She is, of course, wrong. Britain isn't under threat from anything of the sort!

**Martha**

I disagree. Public religion is knocked all the time by secularists and others. Perhaps we should have a symbol for this to stand alongside the 9 major faiths???

**Andy**

Religion should not be free from being 'knocked', any more than any other view someone holds (for example being a socialist). There is nothing which prevents people belonging to any faith, or none. This is simply an attempt to try and con people into thinking they belong to a persecuted minority.

This argument extended to 68 posts and involved a large number of users. The issues contained within it were often repeated in a variety of posts, prompted by various news stories and topics, throughout the fieldwork period. While it is possible to suggest that debating the place of religion in society is unsurprising on a board dedicated to Religious Education, it was possible to observe an underlying conflict taking place, manifesting itself in these topics. This conflict appeared to concern the issue of whether the subject was best represented by non-religious teachers or religious ones – a fight between religious teachers and non-religious teachers for ownership of the subject. For example, in the above discussion, although RE hadn't explicitly been mentioned, one user, made this underlying issue clear by bringing a debate, apparently about secularization, round to discussing whether atheists/ agnostics or the overtly religious were capable of teaching RE appropriately and highlighting that the issue is rooted in the subject's own identity:

**Laura**

The British Humanist Association has a long history of working with religious colleagues to ensure quality, inclusive RE. I guess most of us in that camp would prefer it to be called "Human beliefs and values" rather than "religious education". I actually think re-naming it thus would go a long way to ensuring its survival as a valued subject.

This illustrates the long running inter-group negotiation for the ownership of RE and conflict over how the subject's identity should be conceptualized. Users engaged in conflictual meaning-making, negotiating the wider identity of religious education and often performing their own identity positions linked with the positions they took in the debate.

These debates over subject ownership and identity can be seen as a form of inter-group intra-mural conflict and, although that conflict occasionally became personal (e.g. 'the Fundamentalists are out! Here endeth rational debate'), an expression of a key meaning making activity within the Save RE Facebook group (and arguably within RE as a wider subject community). The debates offered users a space to take up and perform identity positions rooted in their personal beliefs, but expressed in professional terms as they attempted to forge an identity for their subject. It is arguable that through these debates, negotiations and conflicts over subject ownership and identity, individual professional identities were constructed and performed in relation to the negotiated vision for RE, its aims and purpose. Users expressed their professional selves and associated values through debate concerning the core purpose of their profession and the identity of their subject.

Such key conflicts also served to project different ideal identities linked with the different positions in the debate. On what can best be described as the more religious side of the debate, the arguments appeared to project a teacher capable of using his or her own beliefs to deepen understanding of others' beliefs and so lead their students to deeper understandings of the subject matter. On the other side of the debate, the projected ideal professional identity appeared to be rooted in teachers' atheism or agnosticism, allowing academic rigour and objectivity in discussing the world and people's beliefs without personal beliefs biasing teaching. These two ideals were frequently alluded to or even explicitly described in the group, with a number of users claiming them for themselves: e.g. 'I don't have any beliefs, and that allows me to teach RE as the academic subject that it should be without getting side tracked in personal religious agendas'.

These kinds of comments and assertions of secular or religious identities often acted as quick convenient badges for wider subject specific identity, carrying with them a set of beliefs, an understanding concerning the aims of the subject, and even pedagogical roots. They were identifiers of internal micro-communities within the wider macro-community, an in-group marker reflecting an evolving negotiation of the subject. Thus the Save RE Facebook Group provided a space for users to explore their core subject specific values and construct and perform professional identities rooted in inter-group conflict over the core values of RE.

## Negotiated Ownership of the Space

Linked to the negotiation of subject identity and subject ownership was the issue of the ownership of the online space. As previously noted, unlike the TES Forum and the NATRE Facebook Page, the Save RE Facebook Group was not explicitly managed by one organization with a particular interest and investment in the space. In fact, having founded the group and after spending a few months promoting it, the teacher who created the space appeared deliberately to fade into the background, apparently handing the space over to the community of users. New users were unaware of the identity of the founder and simply viewed the group as 'community owned'. While a sense of community ownership appeared to foster a grass roots based ethos and perhaps contributed to the practical focus of the group, it left something of a power vacuum and a number of individuals, groups and organizations could be observed attempting to dominate the space and, in some cases, attempting to appropriate it for their own commercial and political ends.

Thus, whilst in the two preceding chapters the influence of the parent organizations' agendas on user engagement were explicitly analyzed and discussed, this has not been possible in the case of the Save RE Group. Instead, this section is focused on the ways in which competing individuals and organizations negotiated for ownership of the space or attempted to appropriate it in order to further their own agendas (commercial, political etc.) and the ways in which these ongoing ownership negotiations influenced users' experiences of the space.

The most prominent organization involved in this kind of attempted appropriation of space was an exam board whose representative targeted posts relating to GCSEs and A Levels. As mentioned above, users frequently asked for advice on selecting a GCSE or A Level exam board, illustrated in the following post:

**Emma**

Good morning, I was hoping for some advice & to pick your brains about GCSE exam boards. I've recently been made the head of RE at my school & want to get a GCSE option group up & running...

...

So, basically, what course do you teach & why do you teach it?!

As with most posts on this topic, it produced a large number of responses (34 replies). The majority of these involved teachers sharing their experiences of various exam boards and discussing practical advantages and disadvantages. However, these were supplemented by posts made by an RE representative from a prominent exam board<sup>22</sup> who used the conversations to promote the board he worked for, in effect, bidding for custom.

This is illustrated by his response to Emma's post:

**Duncan**

Have a look at the [board] specs - there is something there for everyone. Traditional or new. Religion specific or philosophy or ethics... having seen the other offerings I do think that [board] have the most interesting specs. We are able to run some courses on feedback but also on ideas to help teach the courses and get good results. Let me know if you're interested.

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<sup>22</sup> I have avoided providing details related to the exam board as it would almost certainly reveal this users' identity

This was part of a series of promotional posts in which the representative recommended his exam board and dealt with a number of criticisms that had been levelled at it by other users. He also used the conversations to offer his offline services as a deliverer of CPD and exam board consultant. In other words it was possible to observe him appropriating the space for marketing and the promotion of the products and services he provided.

Several users were critical of the approach that this particular exam board representative took, feeling that the group should have been a space free from marketing and that commercial interests and agendas should not have featured in it: 'you see him coming on and going on about [exam board], but that's not what we're about. I don't think he should be doing that, it's not what it's [the group] for' (Lorraine 9). However, in this case, the majority of users welcomed a representative from an exam board to the group, and, although aware there was bias in his recommendations and that there were commercial interests embedded in his posts, expressed gratitude for his active participation in the group: 'it's brilliant that he's here to answer our questions; there's not many situations where I'd actually get a direct answer from someone from an exam board' (Kathryn, online communication). Users saw value in having access to this representative since it provided them with insight into how the exam board functioned, the ways in which its syllabuses and materials were developed, as well as giving them a key source of advice and the opportunity to have their questions and concerns quickly and personally answered. Thus, in this case, although rooted in an apparent commercially motivated appropriation of the

space, the Save RE Facebook Group afforded users with access to a key individual willing to offer practical professional assistance in a personal manner.

Some users described these kinds of benefits in terms explicitly relating to their professional identities. Whether commercially motivated or not, they saw the presence of representatives, in particular the exam board representative mentioned above, although other less high profile providers of CPD activities also used the space as a marketing environment, as helping them make important decisions about the exam board they would use, the subject content they would teach, and the methodology they would employ. This consequently influenced the kinds of teachers they considered themselves to be and the kinds of professional identities they adopted and performed. This perspective was clearly expressed by Holden:

It's really useful to hear about all the options, you know, and all the options within the different boards. Insider knowledge helps so much. It's a really important decision. This is something you're going to have to teach for at least two years... What you teach is like... it's who you are. You've got to think am I more of a philosophy teacher or a religions teacher? Am I interested in community cohesion or ethics? So choosing the right exam and the right options is really important (Holden 6).

Thus, here the exam board representative can be seen as providing advice and assistance to teachers in selecting GCSE and A Level boards and options within them. As such his commercially motivated approach to the space could be observed as having a constructive influence on users' professional identities, since users' sense of themselves as teachers is implicitly linked with the kinds of topics they teach and the kinds of knowledge they root their teaching in. The

representative's guidance helped users forge understandings of who they wanted to be as teachers and the kind of subject they wanted to teach.

However, appropriation of space was not always welcomed. A number of other individuals also attempted to use the group for self-promotion. While, as has been discussed above and in previous chapters, an element of self-promotion can be found in a number of online interactions, particularly where a specific positive representation of the self is presented, the kind of self-promotion described here related to individuals' personal businesses and commercial interests. This generally involved teachers attempting to set themselves up as educational or RE consultants, commercial resource providers or deliverers of CPD, and treating the group as a marketing space in order to promote their businesses.

This kind of use can be seen in the following post:

**Shelley**

... you can see more about my RE and Community Cohesion consultancy, my [products<sup>23</sup>] and workshops on [www.xxxx](http://www.xxxx) and [www.yyy](http://www.yyy). I am happy to come and give talks, workshops or be 'hotseated' about why I think RE is so important etc... I will negotiate a rate which meets your budget.

Here Shelley, a part-time RE teacher, could be seen attempting to establish a new professional role for herself beyond her teaching practice, and using the group to promote this business venture. Although such posts rarely received responses or appeared to influence the way other users engaged with and within the space, when discussing this use of the group with Shelley, she told me that saw her

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<sup>23</sup> The products provided by this user are very specific so explicit reference to them has been removed to protect her identity.

consultancy work as an important extension of her teaching practice: 'I want to deepen my professional knowledge and experience... I've been teaching RE for 10 years now so I think it's important to give something back... share my expertise'. The Facebook group afforded her the space to develop and perform this additional aspect of her professional identity while marketing herself to a potential group of clients, providing her with an opportunity to develop herself as a professional.

While Shelley described the value of the Save RE Facebook Group both in terms of extending her professional identity into that of a professional trainer/consultant and in terms of furthering her commercial interests, a number of other users criticised this kind of self-promotional appropriation of space. As Megan stated:

You get these people coming on here and they're like trying to sell you something – usually themselves. They just treat it as a space for their adverts and it really annoys me (Megan 7).

For these users, the appropriation of space was at odds with their vision for its aims and purpose and the kinds of activities that were acceptable within it.

This conflict illustrates the way in which different users and different groups of users had relatively strongly held opinions about how the group should be used and what its purpose and aims were. As has been described above, some users saw the page operating as a political space that should be used to drive the campaign to 'save RE'. Others kept the political aspects of their interaction firmly rooted in local interests. Another associated group of users appeared to

view the space in purely practical terms, arguing that any politicking diverted attention from school based practice, and of course there was tension between those users who viewed the group as a vehicle for their commercial interests and those users who vehemently opposed this. In other words different visions for the space were manifested in the different kinds of interactions that users engaged in on the site.

Each post that emphasized a particular vision for the group, whether implicitly or explicitly, projected or promoted that vision onto the wider community of users. Such posts can be viewed as a form of negotiation for ownership of the group with each smaller micro-group attempted to establish the space's purpose and identity, emphasising their own vision for it. In other words, much online engagement in the Save RE Facebook Group could be seen as being part of an ongoing negotiation over the identity of the space. Similarly, within such engagement users could be seen to be projecting a particular professional identity tied to their vision for the space and the micro-group that they interacted within: practice based identities were performed within micro-groups oriented towards local teaching practice; political identities were performed within a politically oriented micro-group, etc. Furthermore, the variety of performed identities, linked with the variety of micro-groups, also appeared to be rooted in the variety of understandings of the Religious Education as a subject and what it meant to be an RE professional. Therefore, the space could be observed as contributing to multi-level performance and multi-level negotiations as users engaged with each other in the group to make sense of themselves, the

space they were using and their subject, performing related identity positions across all three aspects of the debate.

It is arguable that without a parent organization and with the absence of clearly expressed aims for the Save RE Group, the space became an open forum for micro-groups with different visions and agendas for the online social space and the subject. This provided a space that fostered meaning making and the negotiation of individual professional, space-specific, and subject wide identity. As such the Save RE Facebook group appeared to afford users a variety of values, visions for RE, visions of the space, and projected ideal identities all held within a series of micro-groups making up the main group. This offered users the opportunity to perform within intra-group discourses, selecting the kinds of engagement that were most appropriate to their needs and interests, constructing and performing identities rooted in these and well as performing in inter-group discourses, forging subject meaning and negotiating wider identity issues.

Thus while no specific parent organization could be observed dominating the Save RE Facebook Group, a number of smaller, user generated groups (and some individuals) brought their own agendas to the space. These micro-groups can be seen as both manifestations of professional identities generated by the values and visions that users brought to the group, coalescing through mutual recognition, as well as well as providing a space for these identities to manifest: users could perform particular professional identities, rooted in the values and

visions implicitly projected by the micro-groups, through inter and intra-group engagement.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter's presentation and analysis of the Save RE Facebook Group, it has been shown that the type of engagement that took place within the space was typically rooted in practical school and classroom based concerns, with users seeking and providing advice, sharing experiences and developing master/mentor and apprentice relationships. Even in circumstances where national politics were discussed, the focus of these posts tended to be on local practical issues – the ways in which national politics would influence or were affecting teachers and their subject in their own schools. These kinds of conversations led to the construction and performance of professional identities that were very much rooted in classroom based practice.

The structure of the design, the lack of a dominant parent organization, and the absence of a clearly stated purpose for the group contributed to a space with an open feeling and a sense that the group was owned by its users. This general ethos led to the practice of free and open debate in which opposing positions could be comfortably expressed without users feeling the need to portray a cohesive united front (as occurred on the NATRE Page). Since the group was not anonymous and rarely featured personal and malicious attacks embedded in debate, conflict that occurred was generally located within the debates themselves maintaining a constructive meaning making ethos. The construction

and performance of professional identities rooted in an understanding of RE as promoting open debate could be observed in these sorts of arguments and conflicts, with users expressing values embedded in their vision for their subject. Such debates also fostered important communal meaning making as users discussed key subject and profession-related issues.

The open ethos and an absence of any explicitly stated aims for the group also led to a power vacuum with a number of individuals and micro-groups, each with a particular vision for the space and for RE, attempting to appropriate the group for their own purposes. The existence of these micro-groups afforded users the opportunity to construct and perform a variety of different professional identities through both intra and inter-group interactions based on the values that they brought to the space. As such, the micro-groups that made up the larger group can be seen as both a product of the variety of the professional identities that users brought to the group and a staging space in which those identities could be further developed and performed across discourses negotiating individual identity, the identity of the space, and ultimately the identity of RE.

## CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

### Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion and synthesis of the findings of this thesis, looking at similarities and differences between the research sites and drawing particularly on the themes of politics, practical collaborations, conflict, and dominant discourses that were discussed in the three preceding chapters. The range of topics users discussed online, the variety of modes of interaction RE teachers utilized, and the importance of embedded structures within the spaces in terms of shaping users' engagement are discussed. It is argued that the online social spaces provided RE teachers with an online space in which to engage in the presentation and performance of professional identity and Goffman's dramaturgical theory and the concept of front regions will be drawn on to provide a theoretical basis for this discussion. However this will be contrasted with users' more constructive forms of engagement in the online social spaces and this will be discussed in relation to both Goffman's concept of back regions and Lave and Wengers' Communities of Practice theory. It will finally be argued that the online social spaces are best conceptualized as hybrid spaces in which users' performance and construction of identity is understood as a form of online professional learning, but learning that envisages a broad understanding of what it means to be a professional and what it means to be an RE teacher.

## Comparison of the Online Social Spaces

The three case study spaces were selected for fieldwork since they were the only available spaces in which RE teachers engaged online in significant numbers.

They were not selected in order to represent different kinds of spaces available to teachers. However, throughout the fieldwork period, it became clear that the spaces were in many ways quite different from each other, providing distinctive case studies and valuable analytical opportunities to compare and contrast RE teachers' online engagement across them. The differences between the spaces took three main forms. Firstly, the focus of users' online discussions, the particular kinds of topics that were discussed, was often distinctively oriented in each space. For example, topics on the NATRE Facebook Page were often politically focused, while users tended to focus on more practical classroom based topics on the TES RE Forum and the Save RE Facebook Group. That is not to say that political topics were not discussed on the TES RE Forum or Save RE, or that practical issues did not feature on NATRE. However throughout the fieldwork period, certain trends could be observed in which particular topics or broad areas of interest were emphasized in users' online interactions: users of the TES RE Forum tended to focus on practical classroom issues; users of the NATRE Facebook Page tended to focus on political issues; and finally users of the Save RE Facebook Page often focused on political issues, but from a practical local perspective.

The second clearly observable difference between the spaces was the way in which users engaged with each other – their modes of interaction. Again no one space provided a completely distinctive mode of interaction, with users of all

three spaces using a range of interactional modes. Rather, the differences across the spaces should be thought of in terms of trends, where users of one space tended to engage in a particular way more than in the other spaces. This was most clearly seen in the extreme examples of anonymous interpersonal conflict of the TES RE Forum compared with the deliberate avoidance of conflict through positive affirmation on the NATRE RE Facebook page. The Save RE Facebook Group tended to hold a middle ground, dominated by arguments and conflict, but avoiding the interpersonal hostility and attacks that appeared on the TES RE Forum. Of course hostility and conflict did occur on the NATRE Facebook Page and positive affirmation did appear on the TES RE Forum. However, it was possible to observe particular modes of interaction dominating in each of the online social spaces, contributing to the distinctive feeling of each.

In part, both the distinctive dominant modes of interaction and the topical trends within each space were related to the third main observable difference across the case sites: the structures embedded within the online social spaces. In each of the three preceding chapters, the embedded structures of the online social spaces were described. Each space had relatively distinctive structures that could be seen shaping, influencing and even limiting the ways in which users engaged within them, encouraging particular modes of interaction and placing emphasis on particular topics of conversation. These embedded structures were often constructed, carried, and reproduced through dominant discourses and were observed as being closely linked with the agendas of the parent organizations of the spaces or the interest groups within them. For example, NATRE's political interests were often embedded in dominant discourses

relating to the place of RE in relation to policy development, which in turn emphasized political topics of interaction and positive affirmation as a dominant mode of interaction.

Linked with these embedded structures were also projected understandings of an ideal professional identity for RE teachers: within each space a distinctive emphasis on a particular way of being an RE teachers' could be observed, leading to the projection of relatively distinctive ideal identities. For example, users often understood and aspired to an understanding of ideal identity on the NATRE Facebook Page that placed significant value in political activity and participation in national campaigns. In contrast, the structures within the TES RE Forum, closely linked with the TES's commercial agenda, projected an ideal identity that related value and subject expertise to the quantity of users' online activity. The Save RE Facebook Group, on the other hand, projected a variety of different ideals related to a number of structuring interest groups that sought to dominate the space, but tended to emphasis ideals rooted in local, practice oriented interactions.

Thus the main differences across the case study sites were related to these three key areas: the topic of engagement, the mode of interaction and the embedded structures within the spaces. However, while these differences can be seen as existing at the micro level of user interaction within the spaces, at the macro level, these three broad aspects of users' engagement can be seen as cross-site macro themes linking all three online social spaces together and deepening

analytical understanding of the ways in which RE teachers engaged in the online social spaces as a broad phenomenon.

### **Topics of Engagement**

While particular kinds of topics could be observed trending within each of the online social spaces, giving each site a distinctive topical feel, user engagement could generally be seen as taking place across a spectrum of topics. Engagement focused on practical aspects of being a teacher was at one end of the spectrum and engagement explicitly focused on political aspects of being a teacher was at the other end. Here, practical activity is intended to mean local classroom focused engagement and interaction – conversations focused on classroom practice, sharing resources, discussing exam boards and exam results, sharing best practice, letting off steam about the frustrations of the working day, requesting and offering advice etc. As described in the three preceding chapters, user engagement in all three online social spaces had a significant practical aspect to it. Although certain spaces (the Save RE Group and TES RE Forum) particularly emphasized this practical end of the spectrum of engagement, practical professional interaction was a core part of most teachers' use of online social space.

At the other end of the spectrum of topical engagement, political interaction is intended to refer to social interactions focused on wider political issues related to RE. Such engagement usually manifested in discussions concerning the place of RE as a subject at the national level, the impact of educational policy,

campaigning activity etc. As such the idea of a political-practical spectrum could also be expressed in terms of national and local, or micro and macro, spectrums. Again while such topics were most frequently observed on the NATRE Facebook Page, political engagement was a key part of all three of the online social spaces.

Thus a defining aspect of RE Teachers' use of online social spaces was engagement across this topical spectrum of practical topics and activities and political topics and activities, with local interests at one end and national interests at the other. Although easy to discuss practical and political engagement as dichotomous, extreme terms, users could be observed engaging across the whole spectrum. While some threads or series of posts may have been purely political or purely practical in their focus, the majority fell in between the two extremes. For example, some conversations – although focused on practical classroom issues – brought in political topics, referred to policy changes etc. Similarly, in some conversations that could be thought of as focusing on political issues, the EBacc for example, some users attempted to make sense of those issues in relation to their very specific local classroom based contexts. Although there were inevitable instances of engagement at the extremes, most individuals engaged across the whole practical-political spectrum of topics and activities, interacting in both political and practical focused threads and posts. Thus, practical and political engagement should be understood not in dichotomous terms, but rather the word 'spectrum' should be emphasized, with users taking up a variety positions on that spectrum as mood, context and conversation flow determined.

## **Mode of Interaction**

Working across this spectrum of engagement, RE teachers interacted with each other in a variety of ways. As described above, particular modes of interaction were emphasized within each of the online social spaces, providing interesting micro-level differences. However, at the macro level, in a similar way to RE teachers' topical engagement, different modes of interaction can also be seen as occurring on a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum it was possible to observe extremely hostile conflict driven modes of interaction, while at the other end extreme forms of obsequious positive affirmation could be seen. These various modes of interaction can be described as a spectrum of conflict. Conflict could take very mild forms, such as simply taking an oppositional stance in an online debate, or be rigorously avoided, right up to more extreme expressions, taking the form of active and highly personal attacks on individuals and their beliefs.

As described above such conflict was generally most extreme on the TES RE Forum, almost certainly due to the anonymity that some users felt the space offered them. Users were often equally argumentative in the Save RE Facebook Group, but rarely engaged in the kinds of personal attacks that were observed on the TES. On the other hand, the majority of posts made on the NATRE Facebook Page tended to be at the other end of this spectrum of conflict, with users actively seeking to avoid publically disagreeing with each other, preferring to maintain face and not present a divided, conflicted front to a potentially public audience. Conflict was implicit rather than explicit, but could still be seen as a shaping force in the space as unspoken disagreements influenced the content of posts and the ways in which they were made.

Some users perceived conflict as a negative mode of engagement, particularly in its most extreme forms, leading to a hostile ethos within the online social spaces, damaging relationships and undermining some users' confidence. However, participants from all three online social spaces said that a major motivating factor in actively engaging within the spaces was disagreeing with someone: most online interaction could be viewed as an exchange of opposing views. Users might disagree with previous posters in a fairly minor way, broadly agreeing with someone, but feeling the need to clarify or expand upon certain points; or they might totally reject another person's perspective and argue vehemently against it. However, such engagement can all be conceptualized as a form of conflict. Therefore, a significant part of users' engagement in online social spaces can be conceptualized as taking place somewhere across this spectrum of conflict.

Rather than being a negative aspect of online engagement, conflict was observed as a positive force within the spaces. As well as providing motivation for engagement, as described in the three preceding chapters, debates and arguments afforded many users with the opportunity to collaboratively forge meaning and co-construct deeper understandings of themselves as RE teachers and their subject. As suggested by Engström's emphasis on the importance of conflict in Activity Theory (1993), through such interactional engagement, RE teachers were exposed to new forms of knowledge, thinking, and understanding, forcing them to explore their own understandings and clarify and express them through their own posts. Similarly, users found that their existing views were

validated, deepened and expanded upon when they found like-minded peers who expressed similar opinions and values. Conflictual modes of interaction also afforded users with the opportunity to construct and perform identity positions within the debates, deepening their understandings of themselves and their subject. As will be explored in more detail below, such arguments and debates also served as vehicles for embedded dominant discourses, which in turn projected ideal identities to which many users aspired.

Thus conflict influenced the ways in which teachers engaged in the online social spaces and with each other, deepening self and subject understanding and facilitating identity construction and performance across the spectrum of topics and activities. In its variety of forms, conflict can be thought of as a mode of engagement that users entered into as they interacted within the online social spaces and across the topical spectrum of engagement.

### **Embedded Structures**

RE teachers' use of online social spaces, therefore, can be conceptualized as taking place across a political-practical spectrum of topic and activity based engagement with a spectrum of conflict as a primary mode of interaction cutting across it. However, as mentioned above, such engagement could be observed as taking place within limiting structures embedded within the online social spaces. Again, at the micro level the different structures within each space led to a distinctive ethos within each one, rooted in the differing agendas of the parent organizations and interest groups. However, at the macro level, the broad ways

in which the structures exerted influence on the ways in which users engaged within the spaces were very similar.

The structures embedded in the online social spaces consisted of three main mutually shaping and interrelated aspects: design/layout and technical affordances of the spaces; discourses which dominated within the spaces; and the agendas of the parent organizations and interest groups, which were linked with both the technical affordances and the discourses in the spaces. The first of these refers to the ways in which the design/layout and affordances of the spaces provided a structure within which users could participate and which shaped the ways in which they engaged. For example, the design of the NATRE Facebook Page prioritized NATRE's official posts ensuring that the majority of engagement within that space was largely in response to NATRE's initial posts. In other words, the design of the space provided a structure that allowed NATRE representatives to define the topics discussed on the page, thereby limiting the range of materials with which users could interact. By contrast, the design of the Save RE Group simply listed starting posts in chronological order so no one voice was prioritized, placing the ability to start conversations into the remit of all users and emphasizing the apparent grassroots ethos of the space.

Technical affordances could also be observed as contributing to structural dynamics and boundaries within each of the spaces. For example, the TES RE Forum allowed users to set up anonymous accounts and profiles, which, as described above, appeared to contribute to extreme forms of conflict and hostility, contributing to the communicative structure within which users

interacted. Both Facebook spaces, however, linked participation to users' personal accounts which not only shaped the ways in which users interacted with each other, but influenced the ways in which users presented themselves to their wider group of personal Facebook friends, again a clear structural contributor. Similarly, the Facebook function of 'liking' facilitated specific kinds of professional online engagement. In the case of the NATRE RE Facebook Page, liking afforded users with the ability to quickly engage in the space through a modified version of its dominant mode of interaction – positive reinforcement: liking was frequently used as a way for users to express approval and support for NATREs posts, campaigning activities etc. As such, technical affordances of the spaces could be seen as reinforcing and reproducing dominant modes of interaction, strengthening the boundaries within which users engaged, and providing a structural framework for engagement.

The second key aspect of the structures embedded within the spaces was the series of discourses that dominated each site. As described in the three preceding chapters, many users adopted identity positions in relation to these discourses in their engagement within the spaces, which frequently strengthened and reproduced such discourses, asserting their dominance. The clearest example of this could be seen on the NATRE RE Facebook Page, where political discourses relating to the national position of RE, and particularly expressed in emotive and warlike rhetoric, were emphasized and reproduced by users. The dominance of such discourses provided users with a structure within which to express themselves and take up identity positions. In this example such positions usually related to the political situation of RE, with users performing

professional identities rooted in national politics, campaigning activity and an understanding of RE as a threatened subject. Similar discourses dominated the TES RE Forum and the Save RE Facebook Group. For example, a key discourse found on the Save RE Facebook Group related to the need for RE teachers to be non-religious. Here users took the opportunity to perform identity positions within the discourse, debating and asserted its validity, and engaging in structured discursive interactions.

Frequently embedded in such dominant discourses were projections of ideal identities (identities rooted in politics and political action, for example). These ideals could be observed as influencing the ways in which users thought about themselves as professionals and their subject as they expressed such ideals, aspired to them, or rejected them. Thus, discourses dominating the online social spaces often provided a social structure within which users engaged, projecting specific understandings of professionalism. Although agency could be observed in relation to the identity positions users could take within the discourses, users' wider engagements were limited by these discourses as their dominance often led to structural boundaries that limited the kinds of identity positions and kinds of engagement opportunities that were available to users.

As described above, the agendas of parent organizations and interest groups were often embedded in the design/layout/technical affordances (whether intentionally or not) and were frequently carried in the dominant discourses of the online social spaces. As such these agendas could be seen shaping and structuring the spaces and the social boundaries within them, influencing the

ways in which users engaged online. For example, the TES's commercial interests, with the forum convener often acting as the instrument of these, were focused on growing the space's user group and projecting the image of a busy forum in order to increase advertising revenue, market products to users, and generate content for the printed publication. This led to repeated encouragement to participate through the offer of prizes and rewards for the most active users as well as the competitive posting of controversial material in order to feature in the publication. These agendas were therefore carried in the underlying discourse on the space and the associated projected ideal identity that placed value primarily on the amount of users' online activity. Such activity was validated by the TES through a system of rewards. As described in the TES RE Forum chapter, such a structure influenced the ways in which users thought about themselves as professionals in a number of ways. Those users who succeeded in meeting the projected ideal were rewarded with 'expert status' within the TES space, while many of those who failed due to time pressures (etc.) reported feelings of guilt and a lack of confidence as they could not take on the projected ideal identity.

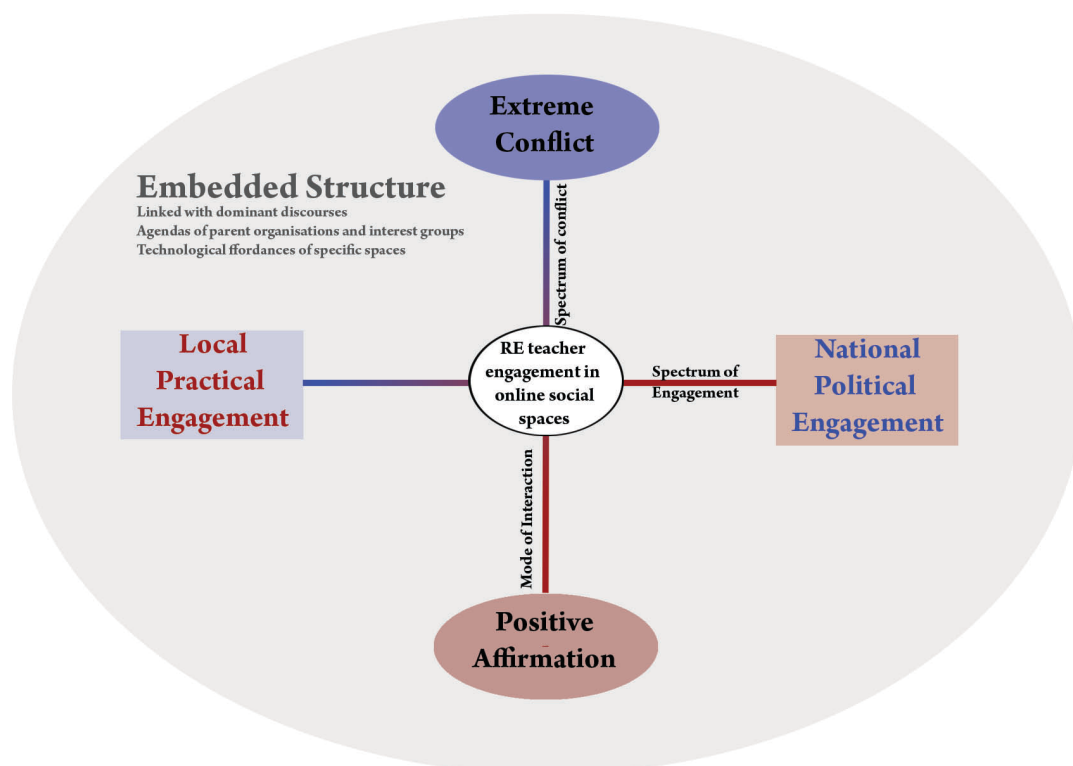
Similarly NATRE's main agendas could be expressed in political and commercial terms: focusing on gathering a community of RE teachers around itself, maintaining and increasing a subscriber base, PR and political campaigning, and promoting a particular politically oriented understanding of RE and the organisation's place within it. These agendas were often embedded in discourses that dominated the space and were emphasized through the technical design and affordances of the space. These agendas were observed as shaping

the ways in which users interacted within the space through the projection of ideal identities rooted in politics and campaigning activity, focusing users' engagement into the political end of the topical spectrum of engagement, and emphasising politically oriented discourses within which users took up identity positions. Similarly, NATRE's emphasis on PR and the need to show policy makers, journalists and the general public a united front, emphasizing the vitality as well as the suffering of RE, led to many users avoiding showing conflict and engaging in positive affirmation as a dominant mode of interaction.

Thus, the embedded structures within the online social spaces can be viewed as a complex relationship between the design/layout and the technical affordances of the spaces, dominant discourses, and associated agendas. These structures shaped the ways in which users interacted across the topical spectrum of engagement and used various modes of interaction within the spaces. In addition to this, such structures contributed to the projection of ideal identities within the space, influencing the ways in which users thought about their subject and themselves as professionals and performed and constructed their own professional identities within the spaces.

RE teacher engagement in online social spaces can therefore be conceptualized as taking place across a topical spectrum of engagement and through a spectrum of modes of interaction. As described in the three preceding chapters, a key part of this engagement related to users' professional identities, with teachers performing and constructing these professional identities across and through these topics and modes of interaction. However, this performance and

construction took place within the boundaries of a limiting structure (as illustrated in *Figure 4 - Conceptual Model of Teacher Engagement* below), which shaped users' engagements and self-understandings, influencing the ways in which identity was performed and constructed and limiting the kinds of identity positions that were available to users. RE teachers' engagement within online social spaces should consequently be seen as an expression of a complex relationship between user agency and online structure.



*Figure 4 - Conceptual Model of Teacher Engagement*

This complex relationship will be further explored in the following sections where the performance and construction of RE teachers' professional identities through their engagement in online social spaces will be discussed in more

detail. This discussion will draw on a number of theoretical perspectives attempting holistically to bring together Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical understanding of social interaction and Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's later work (1998; 2007; Wenger *et al.*, 2002) on Communities of Practice to argue that RE teachers' online engagement can be seen as a form of professional learning. However, this learning should be theorized as part of a wider understanding of what it means to be a teacher, focusing on more than classroom practice, but also national subject-wide politics and identity. However, such learning should be theorized as taking place in hybrid spaces where individual agency is held in a complex relationship with online structures.

## **Identity Performance**

The three preceding chapters highlighted the performance of professional identity as a key part of teachers' online engagement with the spaces affording teachers an environment to present themselves in a variety of ways to their peer group. Identity performance has been described in a variety of ways, taking different forms across different topics of engagement and through different modes of interaction. As such, identity performance can mean a variety of things in relation to RE teachers' engagement in the online social spaces and the following section will discuss the different ways in which such performance can be conceptualized.

As discussed in Chapter 2, identity is something that is frequently understood as being performed in social contexts through social interaction. As argued by a

number of academics (boyd, 2007; Bar-Lev and Tillinger, 2008; Chou, 2010; Planchenault, 2010; Parks, 2011), the Internet and online social spaces in particular can provide such social contexts. This was found to be the case during the fieldwork and a variety of performative identity positions taken by users of the online social spaces have been described in the three preceding chapters. Throughout the fieldwork, the analysis and the process of writing the three preceding chapters, I increasingly came to see users' performative identity in terms of the Dramaturgical Theory of Goffman. This is consequently a useful place to start this discussion of the ways in which Religious Education teachers' professional identities were performed through their engagement in the online social spaces.

Dramaturgy is a sociological perspective in the symbolic interactionist tradition first adopted by Erving Goffman. One of Goffman's key texts is *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959). In this book, he offered a close analysis and exploration of human behaviour and proposed an approach to understanding human interaction that conceives of people as 'actors' living their lives as if on a stage: people, in their everyday lives, manage their behaviour, words, appearance, setting, and non-verbal actions to present a particular impression of themselves to others. Interaction between people can be conceived of as a performance, where each performance is a presentation of the self and a form of 'impression management' (an effort to control other peoples' impressions).

Dramaturgical theory, therefore, conceptualizes identity not as a stable independent entity, but rather as something that is fluid and constantly remade

as a person interacts with others. Individuals may wish to present different impressions of themselves in different settings and in interactions with different people, leading to different performances and the presentation of different identities. However, unlike Shakespeare, Goffman does not argue that 'all the world's a stage'. Instead, in social interaction, as in theatrical performance, there is a front region where actors are on stage in front of their audience and there is a back region (a back stage) where the performers are present but the audience is not. In the back region performers are able to 'step out of character' without fear of disrupting or discrediting the performance.

'Region and region behaviour' is a core part of Goffman's performative sociology (1959: 109). Front regions or stages are characterized by often highly formal, high stake performances in front of an audience. The performance is then tailored to that audience. Performers are aware of the audience's presence and that they are being observed and perform accordingly in both manner and appearance (Goffman, 1959: 116), trying to present an idealized version of the self according to a specific role demanded by the context and audience: 'to be an appropriate server, lecturer, audience member, and so forth' (Hogan, 2010: 378). In necessary contrast, a back region or stage is 'separate from the front region's audience: performers are present but the audience is not. This enables performers to allow 'suppressed facts' to make an appearance' (Goffman, 1959: 112) and set aside their performed identities. In back regions front region formality is abandoned, performances are sometimes deliberately contradicted or subverted, and rehearsal/practice, training and relaxation/catharsis take place (Harrington, 2005: 118).

Front regions and back regions are intimately connected. Every front region necessarily has at least one corresponding back region (excluding cases of totalitarian regimes and ‘total institutions’ (Harrington, 2005: 117)). According to Goffman, the boundaries between front regions and back regions are not necessarily embedded in physical space, although his example of ‘the Shetland hotel’ where there was a division between the guests’ dining space (front region) and the workers’ kitchen (back region) is rooted in physicality. The difference between front regions and back regions can simply be a lowering of the voice, or any behaviour that excludes the audience from inter-performer interaction – of course in Goffman’s original pre-Internet theory, back region participants needed to be temporally co-present (Hogan, 2010: 278). The division between back regions and front regions is further complicated when a back region to a specific front region also acts as a front region in its own right, with participants abandoning, subverting and practicing one performance while performing another role or identity to a new audience.

### **Online Social Spaces as Front Regions**

Although Goffman was writing at a time prior to the Internet and specifically focused on face-to-face interactions, a number of academics have applied the dramaturgical perspective to online contexts, exploring the ways in which digital technologies offer users a number of different flexible ways to present themselves to others, perform identity online and present an idealized self to an audience (Miller, 1995; Donath, 1998; Schroeder, 2002; boyd, 2004; Coleman

2005; boyd, 2007; Tufekci, 2008; Davis 2010). Similarly, given the ways in which users engaged in the spaces in performative ways, it is possible to conceptualize the online social spaces in this study as online front regions in which identity was carefully presented and other users' impressions carefully managed.

As has been described in the three preceding chapters, many users appropriated the sites as performance spaces in which identity could be expressed and presented to an audience of online users. Identity was performed across the whole topical spectrum of engagement, with users presenting identities rooted in their classroom practice (through, for example, the sharing of advice and experiences) and identities rooted in political opinions and activity (through, for example, participation in campaigning communities, engaging in political rhetoric, and sharing political news stories). Different modes of engagement also offered users with a variety of opportunities for identity performance. For example, many RE teachers viewed meaning making debate as a key part of 'being' an RE teacher and consequently viewed participation in such behaviour as an embodied performance of this key RE value. Similarly, at the other end of the spectrum of conflict, forms of positive affirmation could be seen as ways of presenting an identity linked with the content of the original post, appropriating other users' words as part of teachers' own online presentations. Thus, for some users, the online social spaces can be theorized as online front regions in which identity could be performed to an online audience.

### *Performance of Ideal Identity*

Utilizing Goffman's model of performance is particularly valuable in relation to understanding the ways in which RE teachers presented ideal forms of professional identity in the online social spaces and engaged with the projections of ideal identity. In all three case studies many RE teachers could be observed consciously using online interactions as a way of presenting and performing idealized professional identities and managing other users' impressions in idealized terms. At the practical end of the topical spectrum of engagement, users' idealized presentations were frequently rooted in their classroom experiences, offering advice in a way that emphasized teaching expertise, for example, or discussing and sharing 'Ofsted inspection' lessons 'that have been graded outstanding' etc.

Similar kinds of performance of ideal identity and impression management were also observable in users' more political engagements. Some users described the importance of using the online social space to take on a political identity and forge a political role for themselves within the online community, particularly in contexts where the political ideal was emphasized through dominant discourses. Searching for and presenting political news stories and making political predictions about the future of RE can be seen as an important part of these political performances as they afforded some users with the opportunity to emphasise and present their political knowledge and expertise. However, political ideals were most frequently attached to active campaigning. In threads relating to this topic, users frequently expressed their political identities by

reporting their offline political actions (e.g. petitioning their MPs) and engaging online in powerful political rhetoric.

All these forms of ideal identity were often projected in discourses running through the spaces and understood by the wider group of users as ideal. In other words throughout their interactions many teachers, both implicitly and explicitly, attempted to present themselves in ways that other users would understand as 'a good RE teacher'. Online performance of such ideals validated them and the discourses that projected them and as such can be seen as a form of social reproduction. However, performances of ideal identity can also be viewed as collaborative meaning making activities in which performers worked together to forge shared understandings of what it means to be a 'good' teacher.

Performances of ideals could only make sense if understandings of those ideals were shared. Therefore, the act of performing can be seen as part of a mutually shaping reflexive relationship between performer and wider community, where space-wide understandings were forged through such performative front-region interactions.

Although possible to view ideal identity performances in these meaning-making terms, adopting a socially validated role of 'good' RE teacher and related impression management was also often undertaken with specific instrumental and practical aims linking online and offline contexts. For example, users often described attempting to present an ideal identity to other users, managing their impression, as a means of enhancing their employment opportunities. In some cases this was explicitly related to specific job opportunities and the application

process (e.g. responding to job offers through carefully formed performative posts). In other instances users attempted to present a longer-term stable ideal performance in order to build up a reputation for themselves with a longer term career trajectory in mind. They hoped their online performances would count in their favour if a potential interviewer became aware of them through online interaction.

This kind of instrumental performance can be seen as linking online and offline contexts together. Users attempted to present an ideal identity in an online context in order to create opportunities for themselves in an offline context (a job interview, for example). As such, some RE teachers could be observed using the online social spaces as front regions in which they could perform carefully managed idealized versions of their professional selves with the instrumental aim of merging online and offline contexts, networking with other professionals and creating potential employment opportunities for themselves.

### *Team Performance*

While the online social spaces afforded users with the opportunity to undertake individual performances of professional identity, they also sometimes acted as front regions in which group performances could take place. A key part of the dramaturgical understanding of interaction is the concept of teams. Teams, or performance teams (Goffman, 1959: 85), are groups of individuals who work with each other, managing impressions through co-operation: 'a team is... a set of individuals whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected

definition of the situation is to be maintained' (Goffman, 1959: 92). Such groups, at certain times, could be seen engaging in a front region performance space as collaborative performance teams, in the online social spaces and sub-groups existing within them.

Such team performances were observable in certain debates and arguments where the conflict took on inter-group or extra-mural forms. Here groups, or even the majority of the users, came together to make an argument. With individuals validating, corroborating and reiterating key points, they collaboratively ensured that a particular understanding of the issue being discussed was presented and maintained within the front stage online space.

Arguments about whether RE teachers should be atheists/ agnostic, or at one of the most basic levels, extra-mural conflict about the value of RE are good examples of these collaborative performances. However, the most common example of team performances was when individuals worked together to present a particular understanding of the situation facing RE. Although also taking place on the TES RE Forum and the Save RE Facebook Group, this could be observed most clearly on the NATRE Facebook Page in the way users engaged in and reproduced dominant discourses emphasising the negative impact of government policy changes and dangers RE as a subject faced. Through widespread reproduction, the use of particular kinds of language (e.g. emotive and warlike rhetoric) and positive affirmation through posts and likes, a unified front was often presented through this kind of collaborative performance. Given the emphasis some users placed on the NATRE Facebook Page acting as a PR

tool, the space can be theorized, for some users at least, as a front region in which PR-oriented performance teams focused on maintaining an understanding of the RE world rooted in a view of recent governmental policy changes.

These kinds of team performances could be observed influencing the ways in which users engaged within the spaces and performed identity in a number of ways. As seen above in relation to individual performance, such collaborative performances can also be viewed as a form of social reproduction (Giddens, 1986:138) rooted in the embedded structures of the space. Group performances emphasized, validated and reproduced discourses that dominated the online social spaces, asserting the continued dominance of those discourses and the structural influence they had on the ways RE teachers thought about themselves and their subject. Team performances in online front regions can therefore be seen as both the product of embedded structures and the means by which such structures were reproduced.

However, within such structural boundaries, team performances also offered users a way in which they could collaboratively forge an identity for RE as a subject and a wider group identity for themselves as RE teachers – a form of subject-specific meaning making and identity work. This was a key aspect of the sense of unity that many users reported feeling: as they engaged in team performances, they felt united through that activity, held together in a front region and by a team performance that provided users with a group identity and sense of belonging. Furthermore, as suggested by Butler's emphasis on agency and the fluidity of performance (1990), team based understandings of the issues

related to RE and the subject itself can be seen as organic, developing through interaction. As users collaborated in performance teams, their repeated performance, and the associated understandings and identities, could be expanded and developed through the users' evolving use of language, intertextual borrowings, resignifications and disruptive tropes (Benwell and Stockoe, 2006: 33). As such, forms of collaborative meaning making rooted in feelings of unity and belonging could be observed through the development of the team performance.

Thus, although Goffman's dramaturgical theory presents a strong understanding of agency within front regions, it was possible to observe a form of social reproduction, where the ongoing team performances validated and reproduced a structure which shaped users' engagement within the spaces (Giddens, 1986) and their understandings of themselves and their subject. Through team performances, discourses were perpetuated and users' agency in relation to identity performance was limited by those discourses. Users took identity positions within the structure of the perpetuated dominant discourses performing within the structure of the team performance. However, through the repetition of such performances, RE teachers appeared to be able to develop and disrupt dominant discourses and performance structures and, enjoying the sense of unity they found through team performance within online front regions, could engaged in collaborative meaning making and the forging and development of individual and subject wide identity and understanding.

## Performance and Exhibition

However, the presentation of identity in online spaces is not necessarily limited to performative behaviour. As discussed above, online contexts can provide certain technical affordances that were appropriated by users to shape other people's perceptions of them (e.g. online profile building) without necessitating active social performance. Hogan (2010) has theorized such affordances in relation to the presentation of self in online contexts. Arguing against an over dependence on the dramaturgical perspective in studies of social media, he has built on the work of Benjamin (1967) who makes a distinction between performance as an ephemeral act and performance as a recorded act.

Once a performance has been recorded, the nature of the performance has altered. It may still be a presentation of self... However, it no longer necessarily bounds the specific audience who were present when the performance took place. Instead it can be taken out of a situation and replayed in a completely different context (Hogan 2010: 380).

This distinction is important in online contexts, particularly social media and social networking sites, where users interact with data left by other users, often strategically uploaded with a variety of audiences in mind. Hogan argues that online social spaces and sites where users submit artifacts, profile information, musical tastes, videos, pictures etc. to share with other users are best conceptualized as exhibition spaces. Such exhibition spaces can complement more active performances, but are seen as containing self-generated artifacts to be viewed by future users in potentially different contexts to those in which the artifacts were first created. As Hogan claims, 'the world is not merely a stage but also a participatory exhibit' (Hogan 2010: 377) with users both performing and leaving artifacts that last longer than more ephemeral social interactions. Thus,

while Hogan acknowledges that some online behaviour, particularly online interaction can be thought of in terms of performance, some activities associated with social media, networking, and profile building should best be thought of as exhibition.

In the context of the online social spaces studied in this thesis, a great deal of user engagement within the spaces was interpersonal interaction. As discussed above, this can be described in terms of social performance. However, all three studied spaces also afforded users with the opportunity to submit artifacts in a way that represented their identities without necessarily incorporating an element of dramaturgical performance. For example, users were required to have an account and profile if they wished to actively engage in all three online social spaces. Although these profiles generally did not contain very much information on the TES RE Forum, liking the NATRE Facebook Page or joining the NATRE Facebook Group necessitated a personal Facebook account and, as one might expect, the profiles attached to these accounts could be very detailed and, in some cases, were left public. A number of RE Teachers described ways in which they were not only conscious of how the artifacts of their personal identities could be received by members of the professional Facebook spaces, they also described ways in which they used artifacts from their engagement in the Facebook spaces (likes and stand alone comments) in order to present themselves as professionals and their values to their wider group of Facebook friends.

However, the main way in which users could be observed practising a form of impression management through the exhibition of artifacts was in the submission of self-authored resources. Although a core practice on the TES RE Forum, many users that engaged in the NATRE Facebook Page and the Save RE Facebook Group also shared resources with the wider user groups of these spaces. Some teachers viewed the sharing of resources as an opportunity to present a specific idealized identity to their peers, managing the impressions of readers and users of the resources through the construction of a positive image of the author behind the resource.

Users submitting resources were not interacting with a specific audience. Rather they were placing artifacts into a public sphere with a wide audience and timeframe in mind. As such, rather than explicitly performing identity, they were presenting and exhibiting themselves through such artifacts, offering up an ideal identity through resource sharing. As described above in relation to performance of ideal identity, users frequently described exhibiting their work in instrumental terms, linking the online exhibition space with the offline context of employment, hoping they would become known by other teachers through their works. As mentioned in the TES RE Forum chapter, some users saw the opportunity to exhibit their work and present 'who they were' as RE teachers as extremely valuable, even recommending teacher trainees to use the spaces for this purpose.

However, with the online social spaces also acting as exhibition spaces, the parent organizations can also be conceptualized as the custodians of the

exhibition objects – particularly in relation to the exhibitory act of resource sharing. These organizations often provided a framework for the ways in which the resources were displayed to other users. The TES for example provided sorting and rating systems, while NATRE occasionally highlighted particular resources the administrator viewed as valuable. This again illustrates the complex relationship between agency and structure in the spaces, with the embedded structures exerting some power over users' agentic exhibition and presentation of their professional selves.

Thus Hogan's (2010) concept of online exhibition spaces offers a valuable heuristic for understanding the way in which RE teachers appropriated the online social spaces as an environment for uploading their self-produced artifacts and presenting a form of ideal identity through them. However, such an understanding must also be discussed in terms of agency. While users shaped the artifacts they submitted to a wider audience, they often had limited control over the way those artifacts were presented to the audience. Parent organizations and staff administrators, acting as curators, retained power over the ways in which identity-carrying exhibits were presented. Therefore, as described above, while the spaces afforded users with key opportunities to exhibit themselves as professionals, the ways in this took place should be understood as a balance between the agency of the individual users and the limiting structural power within the space.

## Online Social Spaces as Back Regions

The online social spaces can be seen as affording RE teachers not just a front region in which to perform their professional identities, but a space in which to link online and offline regions with instrumental employment-focused aims. Users were able to appropriate online tools and exhibit their professional selves as well as perform identities, albeit within the confines of the embedded structures of the space. However, throughout the fieldwork period it was clear that not all users viewed the online social spaces simply as performance regions. It was also possible to observe a great deal of activity taking place within the online social spaces that, in Dramaturgy, is usually associated with back regions. As described above, Goffman viewed back regions as separate from front region audiences. They are places where people can set aside their front region performances, abandon front region formality, mock, contradict or subvert front region performances, rehearse, practice and train for front region performances, and relax or participate in cathartic behaviour (Goffman, 1959: 112; Harrington, 2005:118).

It was possible to observe some users engaging in these kinds of behaviour in all three of the online social spaces. At the practical end of the topical spectrum of engagement, activity such as requesting and providing advice and sharing experiences can be seen as a form of back region preparation. Users were equipping themselves with the knowledge and tools necessary to ensure a successful performance in their classrooms as they delivered their lessons. Similarly it was sometimes possible to observe users' participation in debates as a form of rehearsal. This activity was frequently described as modelling 'good

RE'. As such it can be seen as a type of mock performance, a way of honing debating skills and exploring key subjects without risking disrupting performance in the classroom.

With many users describing their participation in arguments and debates as fun and relaxing, such activity can further be described in back region terms and can be seen as ways in which teachers unwound and engaged in cathartic interactions away from their school based performances. When this mode of engagement took extreme forms of conflict it can also be viewed as an expression of subversion. In most RE classrooms it would be unthinkable to mock religious believers or verbally attack opponents in arguments. Therefore, users engaging in this kind of behaviour can be seen as undermining their classroom-based professional identities, mocking and subverting the values embedded therein (Goffman, 1959: 117). As well as providing a front region for teachers' performance of identity, the online social spaces can also, therefore, be theorised as affording teachers back regions in which they could interact.

A number of studies have argued that online social spaces can act as back regions for their users (Lewis *et al.*, 2008; Tufekci, 2008, for example), discussing ways that online interaction can afford users a space in which they can set aside offline front region performances and engage with other performers in an audience-free environment. Similarly, it was possible to observe some teachers appropriating the online spaces as back regions with, as illustrated by the examples above, their schools/ classrooms acting as associated front region performance spaces. The sites offered some users a space, away from their school based front regions,

in which they could set aside their professional performances and interact with similar performers in an informal context that wouldn't jeopardize the legitimacy of their front region identities. Much online engagement can then be seen as preparatory work for offline classroom based performance or peer-to-peer subversion and relaxation following front region school/classroom performances.

Although users didn't share the same school based front regions in spacial terms, the similarities between users' school based experiences appeared to be strong enough to allow them to come together online in a meaningful way, appropriating the spaces for back region activities. This is arguably because, although in different schools, users' professional experiences took place within the same wider context – the same 'performance setting'. Performance setting is a term adopted by Goffman to refer to the location of the front region, the 'stage', 'scenery', props etc. (Goffman, 1959) – in other words it refers to performance tools and the contextual factors that shape front regions and influence the performances within them. While teachers' school based front regions may have differed, these were all part of a national performance setting linked with policy initiatives, political negotiations, campaigning activity etc.

This means that users' front regions can be understood as being linked by a shared national performance setting rooted in a national political context. As such, while much user behaviour, particularly at the practical end of the spectrum of engagement, can be seen in terms of preparation and rehearsal for school based front region performance and a form of relaxation and catharsis,

the concept of a shared performance setting provides insight into users' engagement in more political topics and activity. Educational policy changes had led to a shifting educational landscape in relation to RE meaning that RE teachers' performance setting was increasingly being perceived as unstable. Politically oriented engagement can, therefore, in part be seen as an attempt to reshape this shared national setting and regain stability in order to protect the validity of their school based front region performances. The online social spaces can be theorised as acting as a back region base for users to attempt collaboratively to regain control of their performance setting and their offline professional performance spaces.

Thus, as a back region the online social spaces could be seen as linking online and offline contexts. The spaces provided users with an environment in which they could rehearse and develop their offline teaching performance and cast off the anger and frustrations of those performances in a safe social setting. However, the spaces also provided a platform for teachers to try and regain control of the unstable wider contexts in which they worked, which were being threatened by policy development, and engage in political action facilitated by the back region nature of the spaces.

## **Professional Development, Identity Construction and Social Learning**

Although online performance was clearly a significant part of the way in which RE teachers engaged within the online social spaces, it does not sufficiently cover

all the kinds of engagement that took place during the fieldwork period. As described in the preceding chapters, users engaged in a variety of activities involving seeking and sharing information and experiences, discussing work as well as forging understanding and meaning making. While these activities often did have performative elements to them, the concept of performance does not sufficiently describe this kind of engagement. Rather, it was possible to observe the spaces affording some users with opportunities to develop themselves as professionals, with certain kinds of engagement taking the form of professional development.

The above description of back region activity contributing towards users' front region classroom based performances provides an example of this kind of development, where online engagement influenced offline teaching practice. Many users of the online social spaces highlighted the sharing of materials and resources, the receiving and offering of advice as well as debates and wider meaning making conversations as contributing to new and improved understandings of themselves as professionals and their subject. These understandings (by users' own report) then contributed towards their classroom practice within their school/ classrooms.

Such development can be linked with a number of key activities generally associated with the practical end of the topical spectrum of engagement. Teachers described how the taking of resources and the receiving of advice both influenced their classroom practice as they used the resources and put advice, be it about ideas, exam boards, teaching with reduced time etc., into practice.

Similarly, users reported the act of sharing resources and offering advice as affording them important developmental opportunities as they were able to modify the resources they produced based on feedback and take on mentorship roles, gaining professional experience, which, in some cases, translated into related offline activities.

However, it was possible to see professional development opportunities linked with the more national and political end of the topical spectrum of engagement. As users engaged in political discourses, political debates, meaning making discussions about the future of RE, and campaigning activity, it was possible to observe users developing their understandings of their subject in relation to its wider political and educational context and themselves as teachers engaged in national debate and politics. As such, this kind of engagement can also be understood in terms of identity construction, with users' online engagement contributing to their offline professional selves.

In Chapter Two the potential for technology and online social spaces to act as a determining force on identity (Benwell and Stockoe, 2006; Davies and Eynon, 2013) was highlighted. However, it is arguable that a further distinction should be made between the performance of identity and the construction of identity. Although a number of academics use these two words, performance and construction, interchangeably in a variety of academic contexts, teachers' engagement in online social spaces in this study suggests that a distinction is appropriate in online contexts. For some users of the online social spaces, interaction afforded them the opportunity to present themselves, performing

identity to an online audience with identity being located in discourse and interaction (Miller, 1995; Donath, 1998; Schroeder, 2002; boyd 2004; Coleman 2005; Tufekci, 2008; Davis 2010) illustrated in the above section. However, online environments also afforded users the opportunity to engage in the spaces in a more constructive way, changing their understandings and behaviour accordingly: online information, views, opinions, values etc. were read and assimilated, influencing the way users thought about themselves and (by their own report) behaved in social situations in the future. This kind of engagement, although it could involve active interaction, often took a more passive form with users 'taking' something from the online social spaces rather than projecting themselves into them (Orgad, 2005; Orgad 2006; Coleman, 2010; Baker, 2012).

Thus, certain kinds of engagement can be seen as constructive, contributing to self-understanding and future performance of identity. Such future performances could take place immediately after constructive engagement (e.g. a person would make a post immediately after reading other people's posts) or there would be a more significant time delay (Coleman, 2010; Baker, 2012). Such performance could take place in the online context in which the constructive engagement took place, or any online context. However, as described in the three preceding chapters, such constructed identities were also performed beyond the online contexts they were constructed in as teachers took the understandings of themselves as professionals they had collaboratively constructed through their engagement in the online social spaces and applied them to their offline school based contexts.

Thus, while the initial conceptual framework outlined in Chapter 2 highlighted the potential determining influence of technology on identity, this study has found that a modification to this conceptual framework, distinguishing between identity performance and construction, is necessary in order to take into account the variety of ways in which users engaged online. Making a distinction between active performance of identity and more passive forms of identity construction offers a framework that encompasses a more complete picture of online engagement, including both active participatory interaction and more passive information gathering and assimilation. It similarly offers a framework that, while maintaining difference and the reality of boundaries, links the online and offline worlds, providing a reflexive model where identity performance and construction interweaves both contexts. Furthermore, this distinction between performance and construction can be seen as holding together discursive (Foucault 1979; Butler 1990; Benwell and Stockoe, 2006) and social constructivist (Lave and Wenger, 1991) models of identity with psychological theories of internalization (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980) – locating identity primarily in social interaction, but providing it with the internal stability to move between social contexts. Thus it provides a post-modern and post-structuralist interpretation of identity while maintaining the possibility of identity stability through construction and performance across online and offline contexts.

However, such activity linked with professional development and identity construction can also be described in terms of professional social learning (Anderson and Kanuka, 1997; Wenger 1998; Gray, 2004; etc.). The process of development and identity construction is viewed as a form of peer-to-peer

professional learning, where users learn from each other, gaining new understandings of their profession and themselves, becoming particular kinds of professionals. This understanding of development and identity construction is often rooted in Lave and Wenger's Communities of Practice theory (1991) in which they present a theory of social learning based around processes that occur when people with a common interest in some subject or problem collaborate in a 'community of practice' over an extended period of time to 'share ideas, find solutions and build innovations' (Wubbels, 2007: 226).

Lave and Wenger argue that learning occurs within communities of practice through legitimate peripheral participation of new members: where new members participate in peripheral community activities, becoming acquainted with the tasks, vocabulary and organizing principles of the community (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 19). Such participation enables such new comers to develop and learn the professional knowledge, rules, and expertise of the domain of that particular community. Learning is consequently not viewed as the acquisition of knowledge within the mind of an individual, but as the movement from peripheral to full participation in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 29). Such a concept, therefore, places identity at the heart of professional learning and development:

Activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which are in part systems of relations among person. The person is defined by as well as defines these relations. Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook

the fact that learning involves the construction of identities (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 53).

Lave and Wenger, deliberately keep their definition of a community of practice very vague: ‘a set of relations among persons, activity, and world... an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge...’ (1991: 98). However, many academics (Wubbels, 2007: 228) have used Barab *et al.*’s (2004: 55) slightly more specific definition (‘a persistent sustained social network of individuals, who share and develop an overlapping knowledge base, set of beliefs, values, history, and experiences focused on common practice and/or mutual enterprise) and Wenger himself developed this and offers a tighter definition of ‘what a community of practice looks like’ (2007) by providing a number of example activities that take place within one. Using these activities as a set of criteria, in conjunction with Barab *et al.*’s definition, it is possible to view the online social spaces as online communities of practice in which professional learning and identity construction took place as illustrated in *Table 3 - Description of CoP Criteria and Online Activity*.

| <b>Wenger’s CoP Activity Examples</b> | <b>Examples from Online Social Spaces</b>                                                                              |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Problem Solving                       | Collaborative assistance e.g. offering advice on dealing with the removal of RE GCSE short course from a user’s school |
| Requests for Information              | Requests for information on RE statutory requirements; requests for resources etc.                                     |
| Seeking experience                    | Users seeking and sharing experiences of exam boards                                                                   |
| Reusing assets                        | Users sharing resources                                                                                                |
| Coordination and synergy              | Participation in coordinated political                                                                                 |

|                                        |                                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                        | campaigns, e.g. petitioning MPs                                                  |
| Discussing developments                | Discussing policy changes, e.g. EBacc                                            |
| Documentation projects                 | Sharing letters to MPs                                                           |
| Mapping knowledge and identifying gaps | Discussion of new syllabuses, updating subject knowledge, sharing resources etc. |

*Table 3 - Description of CoP Criteria and Online Activity*

A large number of academics (Lockyen *et al.*, 2002; Schlager and Fusco, 2003; Kirschner and Lai, 2007; Henderson and Bradey, 2008; etc.) have built on Wenger's definition (2007) and expanded theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and applied it to online contexts, including Wenger himself (1998; 2002; 2004; 2009), coining the term online community of practice. Gray, for example, describes an online community of practice (of adult learning centre members) as a 'community of active members who are practitioners in the specific domain of interest, participating in collective learning and sharing, where both experienced and novice practitioners help shape the personal identities of members and the collective identity of the greater practice' (2004: 27-31). This appears to hold analytical value for all three online social spaces studied in this thesis.

Using CoP theory as a framework, particularly as expanded to include online communities of practice, a number of key practices described can be understood as professional learning within a community of practice. The more passive forms of constructive engagement (reading other posts, lurking etc.) can be seen as a form of peripheral participation, while engagement in experience sharing, resource sharing, and meaning making debate can all be seen as ways in which

users came together in a community of practice to learn from each other, deepening their subject understandings and collaboratively constructing professional identity.

Much of this kind of social leaning within the online social spaces was overtly focused on users' classroom experiences and enhancing classroom practice. Users' discussions relating to exam boards, for example, or threads related to incorporating the Olympics into RE lesson were focused on classroom practice. However, given the spectrum of political and practical engagement described above, it is clear that the understanding of practice within the online social spaces was not limited to classroom focused work. The online social spaces afforded users with the opportunity to engage in a form of professional learning that went beyond the classroom and focused on RE as a subject in a wider political sense. Such engagement offered users the opportunity to collaboratively forge understandings of RE at a national level, its place within a wider educational framework and its future in the UK education system while also constructing politically oriented identities rooted in such understandings and in a co-constructed subject identity. This can be viewed as an empowering process in which users gained a sense of ownership of their subject and viewed their engagement in the online social spaces as part of the process of redefining their subject and themselves as professionals.

Thus, using a communities of practice framework, it is possible to understand much of RE teachers' engagement in online social spaces as a form of professional learning. However, such learning should not be seen as limited to

an understanding of teacher professional learning that sees classroom practice as a primary focus. Rather the online social spaces housed communities of practice that, while supporting such classroom oriented learning, also promoted professional learning focused on wider subject issues and the wider political landscape. Such professional learning, therefore, went beyond the classroom, promoting a model of being an RE teacher that emphasized a wider understanding of professionalism to include political knowledge and action, negotiation of subject identity, and a sense of subject ownership at a national level.

Such an understanding, as does Communities of Practice theory in general, places significant value in users' free engagement within the communities of practice, emphasising agency in the process of engaging within the community. However, as discussed above, it is important not to over emphasise agency in relation to such construction of identity and professional learning. As described in the three preceding chapter, the agendas of parent organizations and the structures embedded within the online social spaces were often powerful forces, influencing and limiting the ways in which engagement took place.

The influence and power of the embedded structures could be seen in a number of different ways in all three online social spaces. As described above, different organizations and interest groups projected specific ideal identities linked with their own agendas (e.g. politically active identities linked with the NATRE Facebook Page). These projected ideal identities often had constructive power, with users aspiring to them and modifying offline and online identity

performance accordingly. However, in addition to this performance, users' engagement within the spaces often meant an internalization of these ideal identities and the construction of identity positions in response or opposition to them. For example, as described in the chapter on the TES RE Forum, several teachers were unable to meet the online activity levels attached to the ideal identity actively promoted by the TES. These users consequently developed an understanding of themselves in response to the projected ideal and their inability to perform in accordance with it: they felt guilty and unconfident in their professions, feeling that they lacked the subject expertise of their more active online peers.

Similarly, as described above, embedded structure in relation to technical affordances and dominant discourses could also be observed. Given that users' constructive engagement in the online social spaces was based on their relationship with online content, where particular content was promoted or carried strong discourses, these embedded structures had significant constructive force. This was particularly apparent on the NATRE Facebook Page, where NATRE's own posts were given precedence, due to the design/layout of the page, leading to the dominance of particular discourses embedded in these posts, perpetuated by some users' engagement in the space through positive affirmation. A number of users described how exposure to the kind of political content and the political discourses that dominated NATRE's space (e.g. RE being a subject 'at war') influenced the way they saw their subject in both local and national contexts, politicized them and caused them to think of themselves in political terms.

Thus, as highlighted above, it can be argued that RE engagement in online social spaces should be conceptualized as a balance between structure and agency. While individual agency is seen as relatively strong in both Communities of Practice theory and in Dramaturgy, users' constructive engagement in the online social spaces should be seen as taking place within the limiting boundaries of the embedded structures, which shaped constructive engagement and online professional learning. Therefore, a tension can be identified between users actively engaging in learning and professional development and constructing their professional identities and the constructive power of the spaces influencing engagement, learning and the kinds of identity positions available to users.

### **Professional Engagement in Online Hybrid Spaces**

This chapter has attempted to hold together two diverse theoretical perspectives, dramaturgy and CoP theory. These two theories do not necessarily sit comfortably together. However, in using them to synthesize the findings of this study I have attempted to show the variety of different ways in which RE teachers engaged in the online social spaces. Throughout the data it was possible to see the spaces being used both as front regions and as back regions. Where users engaged in the spaces as front regions, identity was actively performed, often with users presenting themselves to an online audience in idealized forms or engaging in team performances to project a particular situation and understanding of RE. These uses were sometimes expanded with teachers exhibiting their work, particularly through resource sharing, and

presenting an ideal identity linked with it. However, some users also appeared to appropriate the spaces as online back regions where information was shared, professional identities constructed and users engaged in relaxation, preparation, meaning making and subject identity negotiation.

Spaces acting as front regions, exhibition spaces, and back regions may appear to present an online environment with internal tension, with different user groups attempting to appropriate the space for each of these three separate uses. To a certain extent some tension could be observed as some RE teachers criticized others for using the space in ways they thought were inappropriate. However, most users appeared to participate in performative behaviour and exhibition as well as back region activities and more general participatory activities simultaneously, using the spaces for all these kinds of behaviour depending on the context and the individual threads they engaged in. Users' engagement often involved exhibiting their work through sharing resources, performing ideal identities through sharing their experiences as well as more determining and constructive behaviour linked with requesting information, reading other users' experiences and participating in meaning making debates. Thus, rather than being in tension, the spaces can be seen as providing opportunities for both performance and construction of identity as users appropriated them as front regions, exhibitions spaces and back regions simultaneously.

However, the wider constructive activities that users engaged in can be understood as a form of professional learning. CoP theory, particularly as applied to the idea of online communities of practice, provides some insight into

the ways in which that professional learning took place, e.g. through problem solving, sharing practice etc., and suggests that in addition to acting as online front regions and back regions, the spaces functioned as online communities of practice where professional identities were constructed and professional learning took place. However, these different functions for the spaces did not occur in discrete units of interaction where, for example, one thread was used for back region engagement where a community of practice came together, while another thread was used for performance. Rather, users could be seen engaging in front region, back region, exhibition and community of practice related behaviour all at the same time. As such, the online social spaces are best understood as hybrid space, holding together all these aspects of RE teachers' online engagement, with users performing and constructing identity and engaging in participatory social learning across the topical spectrum of engagement and through a variety of modes of interaction.

Although I have attempted to hold performance and construction of professional identity apart in this analysis, it is important here to acknowledge that this distinction is somewhat forced in the messy realities of these online hybrid spaces. While it was possible to observe separate performative and constructive behaviour across the spaces, construction of identity clearly influenced online performance as well as offline performance and online performance could also have constructive power reinforcing and reproducing performance identities in a way that users could continue in offline contexts. This mutually shaping relationship between performance and construction can therefore be seen as the central part of a framework of teacher engagement within the online social

spaces, rooted in a social understanding of professional learning and identity development. The online social space acted as hybrid spaces functioning as both front regions and back regions as well as active communities of practice in which users could perform and construct professional identity, all the time deepening their understandings of themselves and their subject, learning from each other, supporting each other and benefitting from feelings of unity and belonging.

However, taking place across the political/practical spectrum of topical engagement, the online social spaces afforded RE teachers with a broad understanding of how professional practice should be conceptualized – incorporating both local and national identities. Online engagement provided users with a broad understanding of what it means to be an RE teacher as a professional rooted in local activity but participating in national political negotiations and campaigns and forging a national identity for both themselves as RE teachers and their wider subject. Therefore, while emphasis throughout this chapter has been placed on the embedded structures within the online social spaces, despite these limiting forces, engagement within the online social spaces can be viewed as a process of professional empowerment, since many RE teachers felt they were able to reclaim a national voice for the RE teaching community through their online engagement. As such it is perhaps possible to argue that the digital technologies underlying the online social spaces afforded RE teachers the opportunity to engage in new understandings of themselves as professionals offering a new mode of being a teacher in the digital age.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

This thesis has investigated RE teachers' engagement in online social spaces, analysing such engagement as taking place across a topical spectrum of engagement and through a variety of modes of interaction. Professional identity was both performed and constructed through engagement in the online social spaces, with the key finding being that such identity and teachers' conceptions of professional practice should be understood in broad terms. Engagement in the online social spaces supported this perspective, with RE teachers incorporating wider national political issues into their conceptions of themselves as professionals, as well as maintaining classroom focused identities. Using a social constructivist definition of learning, particularly Lave and Wenger's communities of practice oriented understanding, such engagement can also be seen as a form of professional learning. Therefore, the online social spaces have been theorized as hybrid spaces, incorporating front regions, back regions, exhibition spaces, and communities of practice, in which RE teachers engaged in social learning alongside identity performance and construction, in a context which conceptualized professional practice and professionals themselves in both local and national, practical and political terms.

### **The Construction and Performance of Teachers' Professional Identity in Online Social Spaces**

In the previous chapters I have attempted to describe and discuss the ways in which RE teachers' professional identities were constructed and performed

through their engagement in online social spaces, while examining the wider related issues of such engagement, in an effort to address the research question that shaped this thesis. Furthermore, during the fieldwork and analysis the importance of structure as a force shaping teachers' engagement became increasingly clear. Therefore, I have also examined the influence of context and embedded structures within the online social spaces on RE teachers' engagement and the construction and performance of their professional identities. This thesis has attempted to investigate both of these issues in a holistic way and, in a sense, everything following the second chapter has been contributing to answering the research question. However, this section will briefly summarise the key findings of this study and offer a theoretical analysis that draws on the concept of ideal identity as a framework for conceptualizing teachers' online engagement while holding together ideas of performance, construction, structure and agency within a shaping structured context of online social space.

One of the most important findings of this study relates to the words performance and construction. As argued in the previous chapter, although a number of academics use the terms indiscriminately, this study has found that a distinction should be made between the concepts of identity construction and identity performance in online contexts. Identity performance can generally be understood in active participatory terms, where users post messages and engage in online activity. Users engaging in such activity frequently appropriated the sites as performance spaces, presenting themselves as professionals to the wider group of users with both instrumental and ego-related aims. However, certain

kinds of engagement in online social spaces, particularly those associated with more passive forms of use, had a more constructive influence on teachers. Users engaged with existing material, reading and internalising it, which then had a determining influence on the way in which they understood themselves as professionals and their subjects and performed identity positions in the future in both online and offline contexts.

Thus, the ways in which teachers performed identity through their engagement in online social spaces can be seen as being linked with active participation and the deliberate presentation of identity. As such performance was linked with the expression of agency in online social spaces. In contrast, identity construction, occurring through more passive forms of engagement, was illustrative of the ways in which the spaces influenced users' professional identities and so is more closely linked with the spaces as structures which shaped users' professional understandings of themselves and their subject. In such engagement the structures embedded in the online social spaces could be seen as having a particularly strong constructive power over users as the technical and design features, the agendas of the parent organisations providing the spaces, and the dominance of particular discourses all made up a mutually shaping and determining embedded structure shaping engagement and identity. Thus teachers' professional identities were actively, agentially and strategically performed through their active online participatory engagement, while professional identities were also more passively constructed, influenced by the structures embedded in the space, through users' more passive engagement.

As described above, this study found that teachers' engagement in the online social spaces can be conceptualized as taking place across a political/ practical, national/ local, spectrum of topics. Teachers' professional identities were performed and constructed across this spectrum. Practical topics afforded users the opportunity to perform professional identities linked with their local school based practice through the requesting and sharing of information, advice, experiences, and resources and the discussion of key topics (e.g. exam boards, teaching time etc.). More political threads afforded teachers the opportunity to perform identities rooted in their political interests and activities through discussion of political and policy developments, meaning making debates and conflict over the national identity of their subject. Similarly the information contained in all the posts across the whole spectrum of engagement could often be seen as having a constructive influence on users as they took up identity positions in relation to the online content or the opinions, values, projected ideals etc. influenced the way they thought about themselves and their subject.

### **The Importance of an Ideal**

Throughout the previous chapter a number of references to 'ideal identity' were made. It is a key concept for this thesis and so, within this conclusion, it is important to outline the significance of the term in relation to RE teachers' performance and construction of professional identity and the way in which ideal identity can provide a conceptual framework for RE teachers' engagement in online social spaces. It has been argued in the previous chapter that dramaturgical theory provides a useful way of understanding the different ways

in which users engaged in the online social spaces and the different ways in which identity was both constructed and performed. It was argued that users engaged in the online social spaces as back regions and front regions, as well as appropriating them as exhibition spaces. In all three contexts the spaces acted as vehicles for the development and expression of forms of ideal professional identity. Where the spaces were used as front regions, forms of ideal identity were projected by users as they aspired to present themselves to the wider online community in the best possible light. Similarly, where the spaces were appropriated as exhibition spaces, users attempted to embed a form of ideal identity within the artifacts they presented to the wider group of users. Associated with both of these, where the spaces were used as back regions, identity was constructed often in relation to the performed ideal identities of other users or the ideals embedded in the discourses that dominated the spaces.

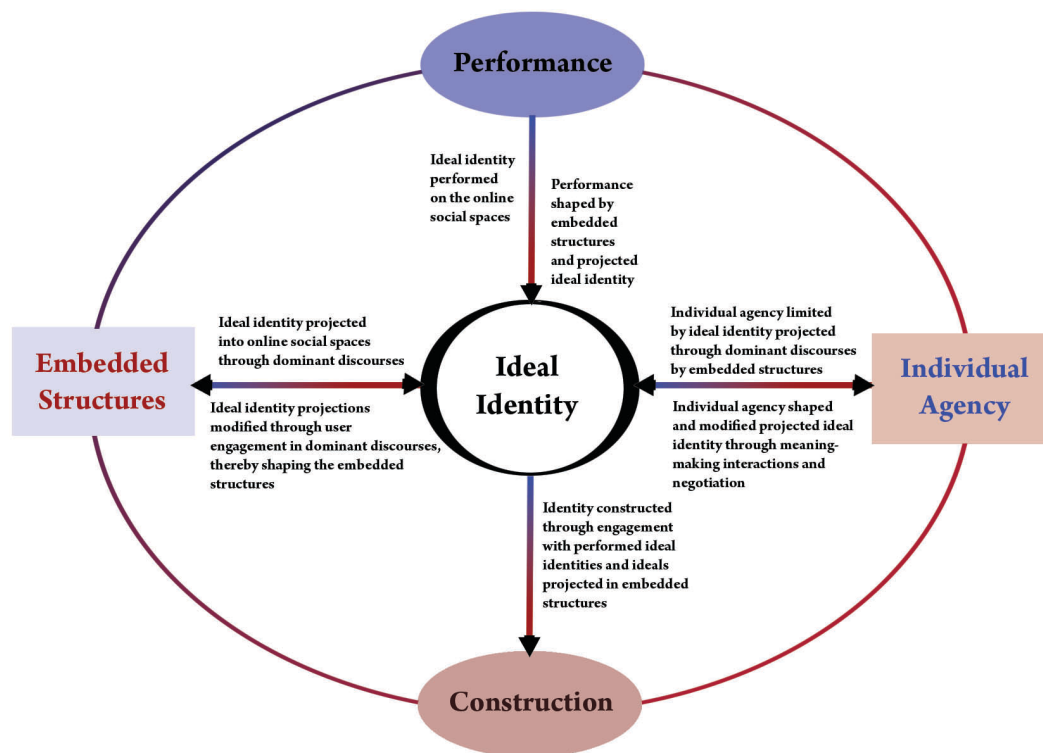
Thus, these performed, constructed and structurally embedded ideals can be seen as the common link between the different forms of engagement described in this thesis. Performative, constructive and exhibitive behaviour within the online social spaces were all linked through shared understandings of ideal identity, or what it means to be an RE teacher. To a certain extent, as described in the previous chapter, these ideals were projected and contained in the embedded structures of the spaces. However, when looking at the online social spaces through the lens of Communities of Practice Theory, it was possible to see users within the online social spaces coming together as a community of practice and participating in meaning making interaction which forged new understandings, redefined, and refined concepts of what an ideal identity meant

in each space. Through online arguments, debate and conflict as key modes of interaction, users continued to negotiate and co-construct shared understandings of RE as a subject and what it meant to be an RE teacher – in other words they continued to collaboratively define and re-define their concepts of ideal identity.

It was only through a shared sense of ideal identity that individual performances could be understood by the wider group of users and that the ideals projected through dominant discourses and embedded structures had constructive power. Thus it can be seen that not only does the concept of ideal identity link the various kinds of engagement that took place in the online social spaces, it also holds together the opposing forces of agency and structure. Although, the structures embedded within the online social spaces contained and projected ideal identity positions which users frequently performed and aspired to, these identities could only hold constructive power if the majority of users reproduced and reinforced the discourses that carried the ideals. The reproduction and reinforcement often took place within the wider act of collaboratively negotiating and forging meanings related to being an RE teacher. Therefore the agentic act of collaborative meaning making and negotiation could be seen as influenced by the embedded structures within the spaces, yet such collaboration also played a role in shaping the ideals projected by the embedded structures and dominant discourses.

Therefore, through the concept of ideal identity, the embedded structures within the sites and users' own individual agency could be seen as mutually shaping

forces, held together in tension. The embedded structures influenced RE teachers' performance and construction of identity through the projection of ideal identity through dominant discourses. Teachers then performed these, aspired to them, or were influenced in the more passive construction of their identities by these ideals. However, these ideals were taken up in meaning making interactions and negotiated and modified, subtly changing the ideals projected through dominant discourse and as such subtly shaping the embedded structures (illustrated in *Figure 5 - Conceptual Model of Ideal Identity*).



*Figure 5 - Conceptual Model of Ideal Identity*

Thus a very significant part of RE teachers' engagement in online social spaces can be understood through the concept of ideal identity. It links all the different kinds of engagement that RE teachers' participated in as well as holding

together, although in necessary tension, the embedded structures within the spaces and user agency in a framework that reflects the complex uses, interactions and structures that occurred in the online social spaces.

### **Learning to be a Teacher in a Hybrid Space**

In addition to describing ideal identity as a framework for understanding RE teachers' engagement in online social spaces, it is important to highlight in particular one of the key findings of the study in this conclusion – the way in which teacher engagement can be conceptualized as learning within a hybrid space, supporting a broad understanding of professional practice and professional identity. Building on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, Hogan's (2010) concept of exhibition, and Lave and Wenger's (1991) CoP theory, it has been argued that the online social spaces in which RE teachers engaged should be thought of as hybrid spaces, combining front regions, back regions, exhibition spaces and communities of practice all within one site. Within such spaces, a significant part of users' engagement can be theorized as social learning (based on Lave and Wenger's social constructivist understanding of learning) in which RE teachers developed their understandings of their professional practice and themselves as professionals through their online interactions and engagement.

Such social learning can be viewed as a form of informal CPD, facilitating networking, peer-to-peer knowledge sharing and collaborative co-construction of profession-related meaning. It was clear that much of this learning was

focused on classroom related practice, with teachers enhancing subject knowledge, gaining 'teaching tips', sharing advice on practical issues (e.g. which exam board to use; challenging grades; even how to gain more classroom time for RE) etc. However, such learning took place across the whole topical spectrum, covering classroom based practical topics as well as national political issues relating to the subject as a whole, its identity and the its place within UK education.

Thus, as described in the previous chapter, engagement in online social spaces could be seen as supporting an understanding of practice and professionalism that covered the whole of the local-practical/national-political topical spectrum of engagement. For many of the users, being a teacher meant engaging in political interactions and activity, forging a national identity for themselves and their subject and negotiating RE's place within a wider policy context as well as engaging in everyday classroom practice and everything that goes with that. The online social spaces supported, facilitated and projected this understanding of being a teacher by bringing users together to forge meanings across the broad topical spectrum and making such a broad spectrum available. Thus engagement for many users can be conceptualized as online professional learning in hybrid spaces, in which they participated in performance and construction and understood their professional practice and identities in broad practical and political, local and nation, terms.

It is arguable that the support online social spaces appeared to provide for this broad understanding of practice and identity is a unique affordance of the

socially oriented digital technologies behind them. The online social spaces provided a context in which users could engage in this broad spectrum of topical interaction that, according to users and confirmed by reports by the REC (2013a and 2013b) and NATRE (2012), was simply not available to them in other offline contexts. While teachers may have been able to discuss the broad range of professional issues they faced in certain CPD workshops or conferences, these occurred infrequently throughout the year and, by in large were primarily focused on classroom based practice. While, in the conferences and workshops I attended, some political meaning making took place outside the main sessions, this was not the primary focus and happened relatively infrequently. In contrast, many users accessed the online social spaces on a daily, sometimes more frequently, basis. The sites consequently provided them with a space in which they could engage in a deep, prolonged and meaningful manner, supporting in depth meaning making across the wide topical spectrum of engagement offered by the spaces.

It is therefore possible to argue that these online social spaces changed the way in which users made meaning with each other, providing them with a context to explore the wider issues of being an RE teacher and forge meaning with their colleagues in ways previously unavailable to them. Furthermore, the variety of modes of interaction employed by users to forge such meaning and develop themselves as professionals were also arguably unique to the online context. The ability to engage in the kinds of conflict observed in the spaces provided users with a means of deepening their engagement and exploring the issues through a range of perspectives. Although such conflict can occur in offline

settings, it is rare in the prolonged and extreme forms observed online and conflict is often an interactional mode that online contexts encourage since users often felt free from certain social conventions, and in the TES RE Forum at least, were able to revel in their own anonymity.

Thus, it is possible to see the online social spaces as providing some users with a new mode of being professionals, performing and constructing identity, engaged in social learning, and conceptualizing themselves as teachers both in the classroom and in national and political contexts. For some, being a teacher in the digital age meant embracing a broad understanding of professional practice, engaging in national political issues as well as relating online interaction purely to local classroom practice.

## **Wider Affordances of Teachers' Online Engagement**

Although this study has highlighted key affordances of teachers' engagement in online social spaces related to the performance and construction of their professional identities and their participation in social learning, a series of wider affordances were also found.

When discussing the benefits<sup>24</sup> of their engagement in the online social spaces, the majority of users tended to talk in very practical classroom based terms.

Many explicitly discussed the importance of their online engagement in relation

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<sup>24</sup> In this study I have deliberately avoided the ideas of benefits and costs, preferring to use affordances as a way of avoiding this reductive binary and allowing for wider nuances of engagement to emerge. However, participants frequently adopted the language of costs and benefits and often felt the need to justify their engagement in online social spaces in beneficial terms.

to overcoming their sense of isolation and separation from other subject specialists. Users saw the spaces as affording them opportunities to engage with their subject specific peers and network with a wider community of professionals in a way that was not available to them in other offline contexts. One of the main reasons given for the desire to overcome this sense of isolation was to benefit from shared knowledge, experience and expertise and discuss issues relating to classroom practice. This was most often expressed in users' desire to share resources and use the online social spaces as a source of inspiration for teaching ideas as well as receiving help with classroom related issues. Although I deliberately avoided making these value judgments, many users self-identified the spaces as contributing beneficially to the way they taught, improving their teaching practice and enriching their ability to plan and resource their lessons. Thus, engagement in online social spaces could be seen as affording users with opportunities to improve their teaching practice in very real and practical terms benefiting teachers' classroom experiences in instrumental terms.

Other explicitly instrumental affordances can perhaps be seen in the way in which users were able to expand their networks of professional peers through online interaction. Some teachers then presented idealized versions of themselves to these networks with the aim of increasing their employment prospects, benefitting from the performative and exhibitional aspects of the online social spaces and the ability to link online and offline contexts. Similarly such networks and the communities embedded in the online social spaces also could be seen as providing users with practical emotional support when it was

needed, with users seeking assistance in moments of crisis. Linked with this is the way in which some users engaged within the spaces, using them as spaces to rant and vent – important cathartic practices following stressful working days – benefiting from the relatively safe environments away from their high pressure school contexts where such behaviour would be inappropriate.

However, other affordances were perhaps more nuanced and not necessarily explicitly practical. Users valued being part of a wider community of peers not just in instrumental terms, but also in relation to the sense of belonging, unity and empowerment that membership gave them. Such a sense of belonging was vital for many users who felt isolated from their subject specific colleagues and who benefited psychologically from feeling part of a wider community and gaining appropriate peer-to-peer support. In addition to this, although the groups within the spaces were in many ways distinctive and distinct, many users described feeling part of a national community of RE teachers. It is arguable that the sense of subject-wide national identity and, as described above, the politically oriented meaning-making and identity work that participation in such spaces afforded users can be seen as an important affordance of engagement. Housing national communities, the spaces then provided a platform for political action that led to a co-constructed understanding of the subject, a co-constructed subject identity and a sense of grass-roots subject ownership at a national level. This sense of ownership was an empowering experience for many users, who as, described in the previous chapter, felt they were taking control of their subject and their own performance setting, negotiating the future of RE in a fluid educational landscape. Benefiting from this sense of ownership, some users felt

empowered and able to take control of their subject and participate in, or even take a lead on, negotiating its future.

In the context of RE, this sense of teacher subject ownership is important. As a locally determined subject the power of SACREs, local advisors, diocesan advisors, local faith groups etc. has historically been significant. At a national level, representatives of faith communities, the Association of University Lecturers of RE, the Association of Religious Education Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants, other interest groups and charitable trusts and foundations with interests in RE, held together under the RE Council, have been the dominant voices in RE. However, although NATRE has a significant and growing voice at this level, it is arguable that online social spaces are providing RE teachers with a platform to disrupt existing structures by bringing teachers together to engage in RE and wider educational politics at a nation level. As large bodies of teachers are recognized and existing organizations begin to engage with them (or attempt to appropriate their spaces), those communities of teachers are being given a greater voice in national subject specific politics and a greater sense of ownership over RE and its future.

It is therefore possible to speculate that existing power structures in the RE world may evolve, partially in relation to policy development and wider educational climate change, but partially as a reaction to the growing voice of teachers of RE and the challenge to incorporate greater teacher representation in national debates and decision making in the RE world. This has been a cause taken up and emphasized by NATRE in recent years and it is arguable that online

social spaces have provided an opportunity for an otherwise disparate group of professionals to come together and make their voices heard in a coherent and unified way, adopting a bottom-up model of communications. Therefore, digital technologies' ability to disrupt existing bureaucratic and power based structures may prove to be a key part of RE teachers' engagement in online social spaces and an important factor as it affords them the opportunity to take ownership of their subject.

Thus it is possible to argue that all of these affordances of engaging in online social spaces come together to offer users with the ability to participate in a new way of being a teacher. Users were able to interact with peers in a prolonged and sustained way that would have been unavailable to them without technology. Users were able to learn from experts and tap into the experiences of their peers that were not necessarily valued in other contexts, participating in social learning and professional development. Furthermore, engagement in online social spaces afforded users the opportunity to broaden their understanding of professional practice and engage in national politics related to their subject, forge co-constructed meaning and subject identity, and take ownership of their subject at a nation level. Therefore, the online social spaces can be seen as offering users a different mode of being a teacher: one in which they had access to silos of experience and knowledge, could easily participate in social professional learning through engagement in a community of practice, explore, develop and express new ways of understanding themselves and their subject, and engage in national debate, empowered through a sense of subject ownership. This can be seen as potentially leading to online communities of RE

teachers having an increasingly valued voice with the potential to challenge existing national structures.

However, any expression of the affordances of engaging in online social spaces risk projecting some kind of utopian world in which ideals are not necessarily in alignment with the messy realities of social interaction. While digital technologies may have the ability to disrupt existing structures, empower teachers and facilitate social learning, not all users experienced their online engagement in those terms. Some users merely dipped into spaces, probably wouldn't consider themselves community members, and took only what they wanted before leaving. Some users felt rejected by the communities, didn't like the conflict driven interactions, or were even chased out by abusive behaviour of other teachers. For these users, the online social spaces offered no sense of community or unity. The spaces were passive tools, brief experiments or unpleasant experiences.

Those users that did actively engage in the spaces also did not always have positive experiences. Some users' confidence and sense of their own expertise was sometimes weakened by their engagement as the ideal identities projected within the embedded structures of the spaces didn't accord with their own values or professional identities. For example RE teachers felt guilty and unconfident because they were unable to contribute as extensively as some. Similarly some teachers felt alienated by some of the dominant discourses when they conflicted with their own identities – teachers with religious beliefs, for

example, felt excluded due to the dominant discourse relating to teachers' need to be agnostic or atheist.

Thus the online social spaces, while providing an inclusive empowering learning community for some users, could be experienced as exclusive and exclusionary by others. Therefore, while some users clearly benefited from their engagement in the online social spaces, others felt rejected, excluded or challenged.

Furthermore, those that had been most negatively impacted by their engagement in the online social spaces were almost certainly not participants in this study as they would not have been available for recruitment through the spaces themselves. As such, the most extreme voices of negativity have not been heard. Therefore, while it is important to highlight the important and in some cases highly significant affordances that engagement in online social spaces offered teachers, it is important to remember that these may not represent the full range of user experiences and the nuances of online engagement.

## **Contribution**

This thesis has attempted to make a contribution to the growing body of literature on teacher engagement in online social spaces. Whilst the majority of the literature has thus far focused on closed online environments, this study has attempted to expand on that by focusing on more organic groups and studying both a traditional forum based model of interaction as well as engagement related to social media in the form of the Facebook page and group. The majority of literature on teacher engagement, particularly where it relates to users'

professional identities, has focused on trainee teachers using online social spaces as part of their initial teacher training. This thesis has also attempted to move that forward by arguing that ongoing identity work within online contexts by all members of the teaching profession at a variety of stages in their careers is equally as important. Furthermore, very few ethnographic studies have been made of teachers' engagement in online social spaces and by spending a year in the field ethnographically studying this phenomenon, this thesis has attempted to add depth to the existing literature.

In addition to this, I have attempted to make several theoretical contributions to this academic area. In the first instance, this thesis has attempted to generate a novel framework for understanding identity in the context of online social spaces, arguing that both active and more passive forms of engagement in online social spaces can be conceptualized as both identity performance and construction. While many scholars use these terms interchangeably, it has been argued that a distinction is conceptually vital in understanding user engagement in online contexts. Secondly, the study holds together relatively disparate theoretical perspectives in the form of dramaturgy and CoP theory as a means of explaining the full range of ways in which RE teachers engaged within the online social spaces and participated in social learning. Although dramaturgy and symbolic interactionism have been used in wider academic studies of online contexts, these theoretical perspectives have rarely been used in relation to teachers' online engagement. Therefore, by borrowing from wider Internet related research literature, I hope to be able to move forward research and theoretical perspectives in the area of teachers' online engagement and teachers'

professional identity. The perspectives described here are further enhanced by the description of ideal identity above as a core theoretical concept that holds together the variety of ways in which RE teachers' engaged within the site and the tension between online embedded structures and agency.

Additionally, the findings of this study broaden understandings of teachers' professional identity. As argued above, RE teachers' engagement in the online social spaces supported a broad concept of identity, where teachers understood their professional practice to include national political interactions and activities as well as local classroom oriented practice. This is an important finding since if being a teacher is understood in these broad terms, then online engagement can be seen as a core part of teachers' professional identity work. It is a finding that, if taken forward, could have implications for community building within teacher training and the way CPD is planned for and conceptualized.

This thesis also contributes to the quickly developing methodological field of digital ethnography and its associated theoretical perspectives and data gathering methods, all of which have implications for wider research methodologies related to online contexts. The most significant contribution to this field can be seen in the bringing together of asynchronous online interviews with a life history interview approach and then combining this with offline interviews. As described in detail in the methodological chapter, adopting a life history interview approach turned many of the frequently cited weaknesses (James and Busher, 2009) of asynchronous online interviews into strengths. Online interviews are often criticized for providing the interviewees with the

opportunity to carefully craft their answers, allowing them to present and maintain carefully constructed narratives. However, these carefully constructed narratives are exactly what the life history interviewer is trying to elicit through the interview process. Life history interviews attempt to draw out 'the stories we tell about ourselves' (Stenhouse, 1975; Goodson, 1992; Sfard and Prusak, 2005). These are often well rehearsed and carefully structured.

Thus the online medium can be seen as supporting this kind of interviewing by providing participants with the space and time to carefully construct their narratives and tell their stories in the form they would like them to be heard without the pressure and complex power relations of offline settings (Kivits, 2005). By conducting the interviews in Google Docs, the interview medium also enhanced the collaborative nature of the interview process and through careful engagement through the technology (highlighting text, requesting users to expand on particular points, returning to earlier sections to enhance them etc.) the end product was a series of extremely rich co-constructed narratives.

Boellstorff (2012) and other academics have highlighted a weakness in some studies purporting to be digital ethnographies, criticizing them for conducting interviews in isolation from observations. The method of conducting interviews employed in this study was able to overcome this potential weakness by linking observations with the interviews not only through the recruitment phase (participants were often targeted based on observations) but also through the interview process itself. Each online interview lasted for a significant amount of time, up to two months in some instances, usually with participant-interviewer

interactions taking place on a daily basis. This meant that I could raise online engagement that I had observed alongside the interview with the participants: instances of participants' online activity could be quoted or highlighted in the interviews and consequently discussed. Thus, the extended interview process of such an approach afforded me with the opportunity to bring together participant observations and interviews in a meaningful way.

Furthermore, the extended interview process allowed me to forge a strong relationship with the participants so they were happy to move the interviews offline once the online part of the process had been completed. As discussed in the methodology chapter, this combination of online and offline interviews overcame the often cited problem of identity verification with online interviews, but more importantly rooted the interview process in both online and offline ethnographic contexts. However, the online and offline interview sections were held together by the co-constructed online narrative that was used as an important offline interview starter. The offline section of the interview process also complemented the online section by moving the interview away from carefully constructed presentations of the self to a more vulnerable context where the interviewee necessarily had to be open and spontaneous.

Thus this novel integration of life history interviewing with online interviews, the length of time taken over the online section of the interview process, embedding the interview process in participant observations, and the movement from online to offline contexts, when combined in the manner undertaken in this study, offer an innovative method for online research. This method is ideally

suited to digital ethnography since it brings together online and offline contexts and field sites and overcomes the danger of undertaking observations and interviews in isolation from each other. As such I hope it provides a useful model that can be used in other digital research contexts.

## **Limitations and Reflections**

Despite these contributions this thesis has still been affected by a number of limitations, which must be highlighted and potential limitations that should be reflected upon. During the course of the study a potential issue that emerged was the question of whether, as an ethnographer, I should have undertaken classroom observations in order to study the influence of online interaction on classroom performance. To a certain extent, it's very likely such observations would have provided extremely interesting data. However, in the first instance, I was concerned that a direct influence of online interaction on the classroom would be very difficult to observe and could lead to analysis relating to teaching quality, which I felt would be inappropriate in the context of this study.

Secondly, I wanted to maintain a broad concept of engagement throughout the study and I suspect that if I had spent significant amounts of time in the classroom my understanding of online engagement would have been limited and school focused. It would have therefore been unlikely that the key finding highlighting the importance of online engagement for an expanded understanding of professional practice at both a local and national levels would have emerged with such clarity. Therefore, given the significant implications classroom observations would have had on time spent in the field and the

potential to distort understandings of professional identity, it is arguable that the issue of simply basing understandings of teachers' classroom activity on their own report is acceptable.

However, the main significant limitation in this study was my inability to interview any users of the online social spaces who did not actively participate. As described in the methodology chapter, I did make a number of attempts to recruit non-participant users, but failed. This is a relatively common limitation in research focused on the Internet (James and Busher, 2012) due to the difficulties involved in reaching this large group of silent users that leaves no text to analyse and can rarely be recruited for interviews. It is likely that the findings would have looked very different had I been able to include non-participant users in the fieldwork and the whole thesis would have taken on a different shape. Consequently, all findings of this thesis should be understood as relating to users who actively engaged within the online social spaces. Even when such engagement was extremely infrequent, these users still had become actively involved in the spaces in a way that non-participants had not. Thus the fact that non-participant users were not included in the fieldwork can be seen as an important limitation of this study, but it was one which, to a certain extent, was anticipated.

The act of leaving the field is frequently highlighted as a challenge in all ethnographies. Leaving the field can present particular challenges in the context of ethnographies of online contexts (Hine, 2005) since the researcher and the field are not necessarily separated by physical or geographical boundaries.

Frequently, particularly in ethnographies dominated by online fieldwork, leaving the field can be as simple as logging out of a website. However, re-entering the field can be as simple as logging back in (Miller and Slater, 2000; Hine, 2010). Digital ethnographers, therefore, frequently report difficulties in finally leaving the field due to the ease of staying in contact with it after fieldwork has ended (Horst and Miller, 2012).

To a certain extent I also found it difficult to leave the field once the fieldwork period was over. The ease with which I could log into the TES RE Forum meant that I continued to do so for a year after formal fieldwork had finished. However, Facebook was more intrusive. In order to participate in the online Facebook spaces I felt it would be appropriate, open, and honest to join them using my personal Facebook account. This meant that activity in the spaces was frequently pushed to my news feed. Therefore, after the fieldwork period, I experienced the field reaching out to me and I frequently felt myself pulled back in. Initially, I didn't consider my forays back into the field to be particularly problematic, but eventually I began to feel that I needed analytical clarity and needed to concentrate on the data generated within the fieldwork period without my interpretations being polluted by later interactions. Therefore, I changed my Facebook settings and prevented the Facebook Page and Group featuring on my timeline and consequently separated myself from the field. However, it is important to note that it was a gradual and to a certain extent emotional experience as I had to change my working habits and on occasion actively avoid the temptation to fill screen time with accessing the online social spaces.

## Scope of the Study

This thesis has been explicitly focused on the experiences of RE teachers and to a certain extent the study was necessarily limited by its scope and focus on RE.

Throughout the thesis I have described in detail the very specific issues affecting RE and RE teachers and, in many ways, the way in which users engaged in online social spaces was often related to their subject's unique position within the education system and the distinctive structures that surround it. Therefore, there is a danger that the study has become so embedded in the RE world that the possibility of drawing broader conclusions has been lost. As an ethnographer it is very difficult not to get drawn into the space one studies and throughout the fieldwork period I was very much rooted in the RE world. As such the ability of this study to provide significant insight beyond the controversial and often highly emotive issues relating to RE has perhaps been compromised.

However, in the introduction it was argued that although subject specific studies are of significant value in their own right, the example of RE teachers might provide an extreme case study of the wider phenomenon of teachers' engagement in online social spaces. Therefore, it is important to ask whether it is possible to generalize the findings of this study and whether they offer any insight into online engagement by teachers of other subjects.

Much of the content discussed in this thesis is unique to RE. For example, many of the discourses that dominated the spaces were related to RE subject knowledge, specific RE issues, or the political situation facing the subject. However, the broader ways in which RE teachers interacted across a spectrum of engagement and through a variety of modes of interaction can perhaps be related to teachers from other subject areas. Although it was beyond the scope of this study to undertake any significant comparison between subjects, I was able to look informally at other subject areas (mainly History, Geography and Citizenship) on the TES website. Even through these light and shallow observations it was apparent that politically oriented interactions were not reserved for teachers of RE. Perhaps predictably, teachers in all of these spaces were engaged in practical classroom focused discussions, resource sharing etc., but they were also engaged in relating policy changes to their own subject areas and discussing wider political issues surrounding their subjects. Similar flashpoints and expressions of conflict and hostility were also observed as important modes of interactions for teachers in these other subject areas.

Thus, broadly speaking, teachers of other subjects appeared to engage in online social spaces in a fairly similar way to RE teachers, although the specific content clearly differed. Therefore, it is arguable that the key findings of this thesis are likely to be consistent with the experiences of teachers of other subjects. As such the following generalized statements may be made about the wider phenomenon of teacher engagement in online social spaces and the affordances such engagement offers:

- Teachers can engage in online social spaces as a way of overcoming feelings of isolation, networking with a wider body of professional peers, forging links with potential employment implications, improving their teaching practice through the sharing of knowledge, advice, experiences and expertise, and participating in a professional community at a national level.
- Engagement in online social spaces can involve both the performance and construction of professional identity, as well as a form of professional learning that takes place through interpersonal meaning making, the development of group identity, and the collaborative forging of understandings related to teachers' subjects, themselves as professionals and the wider educational contexts in which they work (both in national and local school based terms).
- Teachers engage online across a range of topics that, although linked to their professions, go beyond interaction merely rooted in the classroom. As such, engagement in online social spaces encourages a broad understanding of professional practice, affording teachers the opportunity to become actively involved in political issues surrounding their subjects, political discourses, and campaigns at both national and local levels. This can lead to an empowered sense of subject ownership and a broad understanding of professional identity and what it means to be a teacher.
- Teachers' engagement in online social spaces are likely to be limited or bounded by embedded structures within the spaces, often related to the parent organizations of the spaces or associated interest groups. These

embedded structures can exert influence on the ways in which teachers engage online and on the ways they think about themselves and their profession. As such, teachers' engagement in online social spaces should be conceptualized as a balance between agency and structure, with internal and external structures limiting and influencing the ways in which teachers can engage online and their interactional freedom.

- Teachers' engagement in online social spaces can be conceptualized as the projection, performance and construction of a series of interrelated ideal identities, linking the structures embedded within the spaces that project ideal identities and the agency of individual teachers as they negotiate and modify these ideals.

## **Future Work**

When the fieldwork began the main online social spaces used by RE teachers were those selected for this study and this continued during my time in the field. Since I finished data collection, these spaces have continued to thrive but one other forum based online social space has also emerged as an important site for RE teachers to interact with subject specific peers. It has also been noticeable that the initially separate and insular communities appear now to be overlapping and developing something of a shared membership, as initially envisaged at the start of the research project. However, most significantly, there has been a huge surge in Twitter use by RE teachers and by RE related organizations and charitable trusts. This has led to an expanded network of RE professionals that,

arguably, mirrors the disparate organizations working in the RE world, but brings them together within this online context.

In many ways RE teachers appear to use Twitter in much the same way that I observed participants using the online social spaces studied in this thesis. Users share resources, comment on news stories, ask for and receive advice etc. However, these uses appear to have been expanded within Twitter and in addition to informal networking that naturally took place through such interactions in this study, forms of formal online meaning making and social networking are becoming established through monthly discussions. These discussions are at an allocated time, last an hour, and, linked through the hashtag #rechatuk, are on designated subjects.

Such chats are also linked to the semi-formalised conjunction of online and offline spaces in the form of TeachMeets. Here offline practice-sharing meetings are frequently arranged on Twitter using a variety of hashtags then undertaken in a variety of schools and pubs, often supplemented by participants tweeting throughout the meeting. The merging of online and offline CPD spaces appears to be taking place, with the two simultaneously enhancing users' professional learning experiences. Twitter currently appears to be at the heart of this process. I have argued that this study provides a valuable contribution to academic understanding of how online social spaces can contribute to professional learning and identity performance and construction. However, as online and offline boundaries appear to weaken in relation to teachers CPD activities, research, building on the findings of this study, would be valuable. This should

focus on the ways in which digital technologies are appropriated to widen teachers' grassroots interaction in online and offline contexts in order to deepen understanding of a quickly evolving situation in which teachers appear to be taking more and more control of their professional development.

## **Final Reflections**

This thesis set out to investigate teachers' engagement in online social spaces and the affordances such engagement might offer teachers as part of their professional lives. In doing so the concept of professional identity has been highlighted as a key part of teachers' online engagement. However, while investigating teachers' identities, the process of preparing for the study, undertaking the fieldwork, and writing the thesis itself all also involved the development of my own identity as a researcher. Through undertaking this study I have become a member of a number of academic communities related to it, particularly the Association of Internet Researchers, and groups relating to Ethnography in Education and Digital Ethnography, as well as wider communities of educational researchers. These have all afforded me with opportunities to both perform and construct identities rooted in educational research, ethnography, and the study of the Internet. Therefore, ironically, while studying other people's identities, this thesis has also been a study of my own identity as I have performed and constructed it in the variety of new contexts that the study has helped me enter.

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