

**Knowledge Exchange, Intergroup Relations and ‘Sharing Space’: A Community of Enquiry for the Professional Development of Teachers of Religion and Worldviews**

Janet Orchard (Corresponding Author), School of Education, University of Bristol,

[janet.orchard@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:janet.orchard@bristol.ac.uk)

Amanda Williams, School of Education, University of Bristol, [a.williams@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:a.williams@bristol.ac.uk)

Kate Christopher, Plashet School, [kate@rethink.network](mailto:kate@rethink.network)

Shelley McKeown, School of Education, University of Bristol,

[s.mckeownjones@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:s.mckeownjones@bristol.ac.uk)

Rachael Jackson-Royal, teacher and executive member of NATRE [rachael@natre.org.uk](mailto:rachael@natre.org.uk)

Kathryn Wright, Culham St. Gabriel’s Trust, [ceo@cstg.org.uk](mailto:ceo@cstg.org.uk)

Sally Wai-Yan Wan, Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong,

[sallywywan@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:sallywywan@cuhk.edu.hk)

Nuraan Davids, Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University, [nur@sun.ac.za](mailto:nur@sun.ac.za)

## **Abstract**

We present a distinctive approach to knowledge exchange used in the ‘Shared Space’ project; an inter-disciplinary researcher-teacher partnership using Allport’s (1954) contact theory as a lens to interpret teachers’ self-reported practice in the subject Religion and Worldviews (RWE). By so doing, we created new professional knowledge and understanding of how RWE could be used as a vehicle for promoting community relations. At the project’s heart was a team of six whose collaboration across the theory-practice divide has proved unusually close and successful. Here we reflect as a team on our relationships, with each other and the project, through a ‘Collective Writing’ approach, identifying positive experiences, tensions and disagreements, and strategies used to (partially) resolve these. Issues we faced included potentially irreconcilable differences within and across disciplines related to ontology and epistemology. We identify three particular strategies we have used to address them: reciprocal hospitality and embodying Allport’s contact principles within a ‘community of enquiry’. We conclude that, despite the challenges, we have remained a strong and productive team, literally ‘sharing space’, by affording each team member equal status; collaborating towards common goals and in ways that have been supported by our respective institutions.

193/200

## **Key words**

Religion and Worldviews Education; knowledge exchange; community of enquiry; intergroup relations

## **Knowledge Exchange, Intergroup Relations and ‘Sharing Space’: A Community of Enquiry for the Professional Development of Teachers of Religion and Worldviews**

*Dedicated to Bill Gent, teachers’ friend and mentor; with us in spirit, always*

### **Introduction**

Our starting point is an investigation conducted by educationalists and social psychologists to consider connections between Religion and Worldviews (RWE) and Contact Theory (Allport 1954). Contact Theory posits four conditions under which contact between individuals from different racial/ethnic groups can reduce prejudice. Working as a community of enquiry (see Baumfield 2016 for an extended discussion of this model in professional learning practice in the subject RWE in England) the group explore what Contact Theory can offer to structuring RWE classroom practice. Reflecting both the interdisciplinary nature of the research team and our overarching goal to facilitate students’ understanding of individuals from diverse groups, the project is named ‘Shared Space’.

This project was specifically developed to address the contested role of the subject RWE in England (Orchard 2015). Our general aim has been to use social psychological theory as a lens through which to review and recommend RWE classroom practice that might promote warmer community relations. With support from institutional and charitable funding, academics within the University of Bristol’s School of Education have collaborated with the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) to reflect on existing understandings of the aim and purpose of RWE, potential connections between RWE teaching and intergroup contact theory, and established notions of theory-research engagement by and with teachers. We report formally on the project in an earlier paper (Williams et al. 2019). The present paper focuses on our individual and shared experiences of the underlying approach to knowledge exchange that underpinned ‘Shared Space’.

As a unique component, we conceived the Shared Space approach to knowledge exchange as an in-residence model where teachers, RWE policy makers and academics would spend extended periods of time in each others' professional spaces. For example, teachers came to the University and assisted with data analyses; researchers attended over-night teaching workshops. We reasoned, oscillating between 'host' and 'guest' status would equalize inherent power dynamics across team members (Wright 2017) and facilitate conversations that crossed the potential divide between theory and practice. We deem this project to be successful on multiple fronts: The knowledge generated has been translated into a co-produced [teacher toolkit \(Christopher, n.d.\)](#), and [policy recommendations](#) (McKeown et al. 2018) which have been used to inform NATRE responses to government agendas. In addition, we have developed working relationships where team members are valued (a point returned to in the personal reflections) where collaborations are currently ongoing.

At the heart of the project is a core team of six members. Three are teachers and advisers of RWE in schools in England, and independent researchers with doctorates in areas related to RWE (Christopher, Jackson-Royal, and Wright). Three are university academics. Two specialise in social psychology, specifically intergroup relations (McKeown and Williams). The third academic (Orchard) specialises in philosophy and teacher education, and serves as project leader, bridging understanding from 'inside' both the RWE classroom/community and the academy.

Within the core team, professional identities are opposed along two important dimensions: researcher-teacher identities; disciplinary identities. Two of the academics (McKeown and Williams) have no prior connection with the subject RWE, whereas the other team members are highly vested in the subject. Moreover, despite all team members holding doctoral degrees, there are critical differences in the philosophical positioning underpinning the disciplines with which each identifies. Although the substantive theoretical focus of the

project (social psychology; intergroup relations) was agreed, these alternative academic perspectives create alternative readings of that theory, with some being more critical of the methods. As a by-product of our respective positioning, we struggle to think and write in the same way. Yet, no-one has chosen to pull rank: we have sought consistently to understand each other's particular intellectual contribution, even when this is difficult.

We suggest that successfully managing the eclecticism of our collaboration through sharing space has been at the heart of our established success. We are curious to pin down why the collaboration has worked; how have we have come together as a team to develop and harness a collaborative ethos that ensured that we achieved and exceeded the project objectives of bringing contact theory into RWE classrooms through knowledge exchange activities including workshops, visits to local groups and presentations at conferences. Indeed, we have made more sense than we expected through our joint working, as well as uncovered deep, and fascinating, gulfs in aims and positioning. Thus, from what we have learned, what recommendations might we make for knowledge exchange in teacher education, particularly in RWE where teachers defy easy categorisation as practitioners because of their theoretical expertise? And what advice can we give to practitioners on embracing the insights of those 'outside' the professional subject RWE community?

### ***A Collective Writing Approach to Reflecting on the Shared Space Project***

To evoke the 'dialogue' in which we have engaged, we reflect on our collaboration using a 'collective writing' approach (e.g., Peters et al. 2016, 2020). This is an established practice used in the Philosophy of Education which enables several voices to be heard, rather than one dominant authorial voice. This writing approach mirrors the values that are central to our knowledge exchange. We have spent time dwelling with each other in-residence and have reached a level of conversational intimacy that is distinct from discussion and debate. In this

collective writing, like all of our work together, no consensus needs to be reached; we have worked hard to include with honesty where we disagree. This is also reflected in the voices of the critical friends where they challenged our narrative. In this part of the paper, we address each other, as we would in life, using first names.

The approach agreed upon was simple, collegial and structured thinly so that everyone could contribute, given the wide-ranging epistemological and ontological perspectives represented. Each team member responded to an initial invitation to write 500 words of reflection, steered by pre-prepared questions developed by Amanda. These pieces were shared across the team and lightly edited by moderators (Janet and Kate) who checked the original authors were happy with the revised text. The moderators then collated the text into a proposed sequence and invited each team member to undertake a loose ‘thematic’ analysis by suggesting one or two stand out themes that struck them as they read the assembled pieces (after re-reading the abstract). Suggestions for possible themes were offered, but not imposed. Team members could pass if nothing occurred to them.

Finally, two critical friends (Sally and Nuraan) were invited to provide 500 words reflecting on the community we developed through the project. These experts bring relevant expertise in RWE, professional learning communities and teacher education, alongside an outsider perspective as both are situated in teacher education practices outside England. Of further importance to the topic being addressed by Shared Space -intergroup relations – the religious and cultural identity of our critical friends was significant too, given the ‘whiteness’ of the core team members.

## **Reflections**

*Shelley McKeown*

Shared Space started for me when I joined the School of Education as a lecturer in the Psychology of Education in 2014 and I presented my research on intergroup contact theory in Northern Ireland at an internal School seminar. Janet came up to me at the end and said something like:

“I think your research would be really interesting for the world of Religious Education teaching”.

This direct and unapologetic approach to networking was later coined by Amanda as ‘doing a Janet’.

A social psychologist who, at that time, was very removed from teaching practice, I remember thinking: “Really; are you sure?!” However, this started a collaboration that grew into Shared Space as we see it today. In the months and years that followed, I threw myself into the world of RWE, attending conferences, visiting schools (being ‘in-residence’) and learning all about the heated debates around the subject’s purpose. Sharing my research with teachers and practitioners, engaging in meaningful discussions, shaped not only the project but also me as a researcher.

Before my involvement in Shared Space, I had not considered the application of my research for teaching practice, nor had I engaged with practitioners, beyond seeking their support for collecting data in their schools. Therefore, for me, one big lessons of the project was realising the power of mutual knowledge exchange to promote research impact, something that I have taken forward in a wide range of further, related projects. Working collaboratively with teachers, I have learned to design interventions that are not based solely on theoretical and empirical research but ‘fit for purpose’; these are not just the whim of a social psychologist removed from the realities of school classrooms. I have learned the value and importance of supporting teachers to engage in research-based practice and ways in which, as academics,

we can work with teachers to achieve this through appropriate continuing professional development.

One thing I found particularly special about Shared Space was the ways in which we enacted the principles of intergroup contact theory ourselves. We created a safe and inclusive shared space for encounter, conversation and interaction that was built on equality of positioning amongst researchers and teachers. We worked together towards a common goal of understanding, not only the potential ways in which RWE promotes community relations but also the relevance of contact theory for RWE teacher practice. We co-created shared resources that drew on our experiences as researchers and practitioners. We obtained social and institutional support to carry out this important work from NATRE the University of Bristol and our funders, Westhill Trust and ESRC. Throughout, we sought to share space and truly live up to contact theory. These principles applied to knowledge exchange allowed us to bring in our varying perspectives and provided us with a shared frame of reference we could use practically to resolve conflicts as they arose, or misunderstandings.

### ***Kathryn Wright***

My interest in Shared Space, and academic knowledge exchange, grew as an outworking of a (Christian) theology of hospitality applied to education. I have developed ‘a pedagogy of embrace’ (Wright, 2017) rooted in hospitality to create space, encounter others and listen for wisdom. Hence, a common interest in space of a particular nature initially attracted me to Shelley and Amanda’s work. However, being positioned within a distinctive and alternative disciplinary perspective, that of hermeneutics, I wanted to explore the concept of ‘space’ through ‘living it out’, allowing understanding to emerge through the engagement process. The systematically cyclical process characteristic of the hermeneutic tradition provided an ongoing rhythm of questions and answers as I engaged with biblical text, conceptual



literature, images and through dialogue. The approach also implies movement, fluidity and an openness to continual modification; the propositional and contestable nature of an original ‘hypothesis’ I held of the potential of contact hypothesis for RWE on entering into the encounter enabled me to approach dialogue with Shared Space colleagues with intellectual openness. I valued the distinctive questions raised from different disciplinary perspectives, whether philosophical, political or psychological. My own hermeneutic positioning also led me to see synergies between my own theological perspective and that of others.

I was aware that I was filtering new knowledge; analysing and evaluating how it related to my own initial thinking on Shared Space concerns. For example, through working with Shelley and Amanda on analysing survey data, I was able to see the benefits and limitations of my own pedagogical principles, as well as the potential of the Contact Theory hypothesis at the centre of the study, for reimagining the contribution of RE to building more positive intergroup relations. The majority (89%) of surveyed teachers reported that they embedded the contact hypothesis in practice; yet, asked to provide examples of how this occurred, the majority given fell into three key areas: Encounter (33%), conversation (25%), Interaction (23%), all of which need to be included, if warmer community relations are to be promoted. The naming of these elements emerged organically through dialogue in which Contact principles were applied. I felt that our equal status was recognised, whether a ‘teacher’ or ‘academic’; we were collaborating towards a common goal; with the institutional support offered by the funding that made our collaboration possible.

I further lived out my developing pedagogical principles, fusing theology, with social psychology theory, through a residential knowledge-exchange weekend for teachers organised as part of the dissemination phase of the project. I applied contact theory to the creation of a hospitable space informed by my own ‘pedagogy of embrace’; while I had been a ‘guest’ as a teacher in residence at Bristol, I took the role of ‘host’ of the residential while

Bristol-based academics (Kate and Janet) were ‘guests’. This continual movement from host to guest and back enabled stories to be told whilst others listened for wisdom. The experience was collaborative, purposeful, intellectually open, inclusive and transformative, creating deep, authentic professional working relationships.

***Rachael Jackson-Royal***

Initially, my focus within Shared Space was to consider its wider application to the RWE classroom; in particular, I wanted to reflect on whether this research could be used by teachers to better enable students to academically engage more meaningfully with religious and non-religious worldviews. Thus, I began to grapple with many different questions such as: how could encounter, interaction and conversation be employed in the classroom when learning about a variety of worldviews? Would such dialogue enable pupils to have a more nuanced understanding of the core ideas of each faith and the diversity within this unity? How might the ideas of sharing space link to wider pedagogies and approaches utilised in teaching RWE? Such questions led to a consideration of whether shared space links to hermeneutics and to whether the principles of interaction, encounter and conversation could be another lens or perhaps even a meta-lens within a disciplinary study of religion. These are questions I continue to return to, as part of my ongoing dialogue with various research and ideas surrounding RWE.

However, very early on in the project my experiences brought me to the realisation that my understanding of sharing space had previously been narrow. I was afforded the opportunity to work with people who inhabited different realities in their engagement with religion and/or the theories behind the project. For example, as part of the research, I spent time in Northern Ireland, directly widening the spaces I was sharing to encountering, conversing and interacting with teachers of RWE who worked in very different contexts to my own. Indeed,

these contexts had different socio-political realities, which in turn influenced their constructs of RWE. We also spent time in the Corrymeela community, learning about the programmes they run based on the principles at the heart of the shared space project. This widened my understanding of the work further, as I could see more practical ways the research could be implemented.

The encounters, conversations and interactions I had during my time in Bristol were different again. Here I spent time sharing space with those working within psychology which enabled me to consider and reflect upon their different constructs of the principles behind the project and how research should be undertaken; something else which added to the rich tapestry of ideas, how the work could be used within RE teaching. Another important encounter was the conversations and interactions I had with a scholar specialising in Catholicism and its engagement with other worldviews. This dialogue, which is still ongoing, adds more thoughts and ideas to how the project could be used in the RE classroom and education more generally. Although I still have more questions than answers, the experience of sharing various spaces with so many different individuals and groups has enriched me as a person but more importantly as a teacher of RWE who also works to support other colleagues engaged in the delivery of the subject.

### ***Kate Christopher***

I joined Shared Space towards the end of the main data collection to write up the teacher's toolkit. Although I was completing my PhD (in Philosophy of Education) on a related topic at the time, I was involved initially as a writer. My thesis articulated a single, educational aim for the subject of Religious Education in schools, applying an analysis of curriculum aims drawn from Philosophy of Education. I argue that the subject RWE is overburdened with aims, leading to incoherence and lack of rigour. As an increased societal respect for and

tolerance of diversity is one aim that I critique in my work, it has been interesting to join a team exploring this relationship.

Using Critical Race theory, I argue that the community cohesion agenda in practice cannot achieve its stated goals, inevitably, because it focuses on the need for interpersonal and individual agency for change; while ignoring those structural, economic and political dimensions of exclusion and inequality which are necessary to actual societal reform.

Combining this antiracist analysis of the community cohesion agenda with my philosophical work on educational aims, I conclude that this represents a poorly-conceived aim for the subject which should be dropped, arguing that it has never been properly justified; that it is impossible for the subject to realise and that it rests on thin assumptions. Furthermore, the success of this aim is not in any case measured and how it is to be achieved is left extremely unclear. The only deliberate attempt to address this gap in the literature I have identified to date is a paper by Janet, although interestingly we draw different conclusions.

The work of Shared Space is not slavishly tied to the community cohesion agenda but promotes a wider set of ethical and theoretical commitments, such as a desire for equality in plurality and a fairer society, which I find amenable. I use Contact Theory as an example of rich empirical work which could be of use if a subject of the school curriculum were to set out to achieve extrinsic social aims. The chance to put this to the test is therefore extremely valuable for my own understanding. That said, my own position is that the subject RWE should not accept extrinsic social aims at all.

These outcomes might be a positive side-effect of learning, but to expect a certain attitude in pupils undermines their autonomy and is therefore not educational. I feel confident in my analysis; my understandings are hard-won. This is the power of research. This is also why it is crucial for me as a practitioner to engage with different outlooks and lines of enquiry so

that post-PhD my understanding remains fluid and continues to grow. Rather than closing the book, I am moving into a shared phase, after the lonely years of PhD research, in which these intelligent, warm women, who I greatly admire, take various positions. They occupy their own spaces. I am experiencing the fluidity of ideas and worldviews. I am truly in a shared space.

### *Amanda Williams*

One motivation for joining the School of Education was to bridge (jump?) the theory-practice divide. I was thrilled to be invited to collaborate on Shared Space. Through my involvement I have learned that teachers' needs are central to the process of applying research to practice. This re-prioritization may require some sacrifice of the principles core to my discipline/professional identity. Coming from an experimental social psychology background, I am used to placing priority on objective measurement and nuanced accuracy when communicating research findings. Through Shared Space I'm learning that teachers attend to this precision far less, and the goal should be useable content. For example, some information included in the project's dissemination materials, technically-speaking, isn't correct. "Encountering" is not a good stand-alone point. Nonetheless, it offers a positive first step for teachers who might be motivated to move to interaction where the principles of contact theory are accurately reflected. As contact theory is robust, I've judged this compromise as acceptable.

Ultimately, impact work like this may lend itself best to "generous" theories, namely those that are stable, consistently replicated, and robust. Social psychological research on bias reduction often comes in the form of studies that have been conducted by a single lab; few interventions have been replicated across many contexts. Yet this latter approach to research lends itself more to applied settings. The move towards open science – with diverse labs collaborating to understand the boundary conditions of a theory – will have important

consequences for applied work. If we want research we can apply to the real world, psychologists need to ensure the effects can be observed consistently.

Initially, not presenting the whole “truth” was hard. Filtering out core demands of my discipline through a personal (more educational?) lens was something new; I felt researchers like me aren’t meant to have a voice, given our ontology. Joking with Janet, my solution was to focus on the purpose of Shared Space and “Let it go!” on small details to communicate the overall message, being careful about the limit and extent of compromise.

Creating resources others can use takes SO MUCH work. Here, I cannot overstate the importance of our teacher collaborators who know how to situate research into practice. One reason the project has been successful is because they distil knowledge expertly in a way that encourages teacher engagement. Note too that our teacher colleagues have earned doctorates, perhaps one contributory factor to the project’s success to date. Also, Janet, as a university-based subject specialist teacher educator, can navigate the theory as well as the practice.

### ***Janet Orchard***

Knowledge exchange requires performance. If the world is a stage, Shared Space is a company of travelling players and I am company manager, working closely at all levels of cast and production; tending to logistics: lodgings, cake, transportation; writing contracts, dealing with emails and memos. Our ‘troop’ first assembled when Shelley played to a packed seminar audience to find collaborators, and she ended up with me! Amanda signed up next. Their ideas spoke directly to my former teacher self, making sense in unfamiliar theoretical terms of long held concerns (Orchard 2015) with the unqualified claim that RE/RWE promotes positive community relations. I welcome critical reflection on Allport’s contact hypothesis by RWE teachers because, I argue, teachers need theory as a conceptual map to navigate practice (Orchard et al. 2020).

Kate, Rachael and Kathryn are inspiring leaders of the subject RWE in England who I have known for years, through the work of the RE Review for England (REC 2013) and NATRE. Like other university-based teacher educators, I am a gatekeeper on the threshold of practice and the academy, formerly a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) subject tutor in RWE, and a co-opted member of the NATRE Executive. I see Shared Space as one way to promote engagement with theory and research by RWE teachers, recognising this is only one possible example. In a reciprocal arrangement, Rachael is co-opted onto the executive of the Association of University Lecturers of Religion and Education (AULRE).

I have found considerable value in belonging to ‘communities of enquiry’, including but not confined to Shared Space. Participating in this project, and others being developed in parallel (Orchard 2020), has been immensely rewarding, both personally and professionally. Our jointly-researched and co-written articles and toolkit may not attract the academic status of other work in the field, yet are vital if ‘practical theorising’ (MacIntyre 1995) in pre- and in-service RE teaching in England is to become more commonplace.

My commitment to interdisciplinarity of the kind that Shared Space embodies began as an undergraduate in the 1980s exposed to a debate in Theology/ Religious Studies as a field of study or discipline. The human experience I seek to make sense of as an educationalist does not fall neatly into disciplinary-shaped packages. Like Rachael, I appreciate disciplines, in my case focused on characteristically philosophical reflection and biased heavily towards the Arts and Humanities. Entertainingly, both Kate and I self-identify as philosophers of education but disagree profoundly over her (well-developed) argument about the aims of RWE, arguing about it fiercely as equals, working towards a common concern for social justice. However, practice-orientated, sympathetic to philosophical pragmatism, I am open to action-orientated insights from good and rigorous social scientific research outside my intellectual comfort zone. As ‘academics’, Shelley and Amanda and I understand the world

very differently at an ontological level. Nevertheless, in believing in the possibility of making the world a better place through careful academic enquiry focused on action, we share far more than that which divides us.

***Sally Wai-Yan Wan***

From the perspective of teacher education, the formation of professional learning communities is fundamental to teacher development. Professional learning communities enable the creation of a co-constructive learning environment amongst teacher educators and pre-/in-service teachers to facilitate teacher (leadership) development. In this process of co-construction, it is crucial to position oneself as a ‘co-learner’ in teaching and doing research on giving ‘double-loop’ feedback to teacher development and school capacity building, where everyone can learn from each other and share an ‘equal’ status in professional collaboration and exchanging ideas for student learning and growth. Based on empirical evidence and my ‘first-hand’ experience, there are two important elements in supporting and mediating teacher development, namely *learning by doing* (theory into practice) and *critical reflection*.

In teacher education, *learning by doing* is important; however, this ‘doing’ does require ‘thinking’. There are always calls for putting theory (thinking) into practice (doing) (Korthagen 2010). However, this ‘practice’ is not only about action but also *critical reflection*. Critical reflection refers to ‘the question of the justification for the very premises on which problems are posed or defined in the first place’ (Mezirow 1990, 12) so as to help oneself make professional judgements upon actions and behaviours, and create new ideas through reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action (Schön 1983; Moghaddam et al. 2019), and thus deep understandings and improvement of one’s practice occur (Smyth 1989; Liu 2015).



As a form of professional learning community, Shared Space is composed of these two vital components (learning by doing and critical reflection), where teacher educators, researchers and teachers are empowered to work together with a sharp, vivid focus on developing teachers in a careful and planful way. Reflecting upon the ‘effectiveness’ of the Shared Space Project as an external agent (i.e., a teacher educator from the Asian-Pacific region), I judge the most critical success factor to be its clear goal and direction in building capacity for developing teachers as leaders, through the facilitation of *dialogue* amongst the members.

Dialogue in this regard plays an influential role in making this *collective thinking* happen by recalling memories and reflecting upon behaviour and actions. The backbone of *actions (practice)* in schools is teachers’ *collective thinking (theory)*. This *collective thinking* should not be bounded to personal (individual) level, rather, it should be well-connected with pre/in-service teachers. This is a process of creating and expanding ‘collective wisdom’ amongst group members as a professional learning community, where dialogues connect teachers in cognitive engagement in meaningful negotiation of shared meanings, exchanging ideas, generating new knowledge and solving problems in a deliberative, collective, interactive way. I think Shared Space does provide precious potential for teachers to get together to open their horizons to explore and review real-life educational issues around the world and be challenged. In this way, they might ‘unlearn’ their original inner thinking and ‘relearn’ and rebuild their beliefs and faith in education itself, through dialogue.

***Nuraan Davids***

The imperative implicit to meaning sought through a philosophical lens, paradoxically, implies not arriving at an agreed meaning. Seemingly, the more you gaze, ponder and probe, the greater the blur; so to speak, a dispersal of meaning. Thus, with ideas of a ‘shared space’,

and with RWE. What do these concepts mean? What do they hold? What do they let go, perhaps, even unintentionally push aside?

I enter this ‘shared space’ as an invited ‘critical friend’ to ‘join our conversation’, bringing an ‘outsider perspective’. I am neither unfamiliar with ideas of a ‘shared space’ nor with what a conversation implies. Yet words, as we know, assign meaning to how we receive and include ourselves. I am grateful for the wording of my particular invitation – consciously or not, the acknowledgement of an ‘outsider perspective’ confirms one of the blind-spots of a ‘shared space’. Who am I sharing with? Presumably the authors. What am I expected to share?

Presumably my ‘outsider perspective’? But can I claim to share this space? Perhaps, only insofar as someone with ‘expertise and interest in religious education’.

The challenge of creating and sustaining a ‘shared space’ is that it immediately brings to fore that which is not shared. Inevitably, any sort of cross-national, cross-racial, cross-ethnic, cross-cultural, or cross-religious engagement – as I suspect, are implicit in this ‘shared space’ - are tension-ridden with perceptions and misperceptions. These are shaped and influenced about the ideas that we have of each other, the way we tend to speak *about* each other, rather than *with* each other. It’s a similar concern, posed in a dialogue between María Lugones (an Argentine feminist philosopher) and Elizabeth Spelman (an American philosopher) (1983, 579), when they ask the following:

‘What are the things we need to know about others, and about ourselves, in order to speak intelligently, intelligibly, sensitively, and helpfully about their [our] lives? ... When we speak, write, and publish our theories, to whom do we think we are accountable?’

Reflecting on this ‘shared space’ which seeks to theorise on ‘a community of enquiry for the professional development of teachers of Religion and Worldviews’, I am left with a series of

questions. What are our individual understandings of religion, and by implication, religious education? Do we recognise that our understandings of these concepts, while ‘shared’ in a writing space, might be more in response to our expertise as philosophers of education, RWE teachers, and social psychologists, than to those about whom we theorise?

Inevitably (unavoidably?), there are missing elements to how we enter, and how we share this space. From my ‘outsider’ perspective I am hesitant to presume that RWE includes my own religious identity – partly because it is unapparent from the descriptor ‘religion’, and partly because my historical lived experiences of ‘religion’ has been to understand RWE simply in terms of a western, Christian hegemony. This leaves me somewhat (familiarily) uneasy, but it also allows me to critically reflect on my own socially-constructed reality, and the way in which I too (as I have done here), hold onto presuppositions without considering the purposes of my own theorising.

### **After Thoughts and Recommendations**

Thinking and writing together collectively, and with the benefit of outsider perspectives, has helped us take stock. There are myriad ways in which to comment on these individual contributions and re-reading them together has stimulated invaluable reflections as we consider next steps for the project. However, here we conclude briefly by revisiting three questions posed at the outset: why do we perceive the collaboration to have ‘worked’? What have we learned? What recommendations might we make for knowledge exchange in teacher education in RWE, based on our experiences?

One reason we consider the Shared Space Project a success, in terms of coming together to achieve and exceed our project objectives in time and on budget, is because our activities mirror features of various established (and inter-related) models of collaborative teacher education, including ‘communities of enquiry’ and ‘professional learning communities’.

Zeichner (2003) notes that these may be used in ways that are confused or imprecise.

Arguably, our project has been guilty of that confusion, and we were surprised at first when one critical friend (Wan) described us as a ‘professional learning community’, having self-identified as a ‘community of enquiry’. Going forwards, we will explore those established theoretical understandings in more depth and the insights greater conceptual depth and clarity might offer.

That said, we have achieved project goals of applying social psychological theory to RWE teaching practice without being tied specifically to one model of being in community but committed uncompromisingly instead to our underlying principles of inter-group relations. Contact Theory is robust, as Williams has pointed out, and our commitment to equality, shared goals, collaboration, combined with institutional support, informed what we did, as McKeown confirms. As Christopher notes, there may be limitations to the impact of this project, given wider societal issues. This is echoed in Davids’ sense of the powerful hegemony still reflected in its practices as an ‘outsider’. But within these constraints, nevertheless we see this project has been useful for promoting dialogue both within the group and to a wider audience.

Hence, when we joined local NATRE groups of teachers and other stakeholders, group settings in which ‘individuals develop and share the capacity to create and use knowledge’ (Wenger 1998, 1) we were enacting a feature of a community of enquiry but motivated by contact principles interwoven with Wright’s understanding of hospitality (2017). We attended residential RWE conferences, reflecting the insight that ‘communities of practice’ typically arise informally, out of the activities which bring people in social groupings together (Sim, 2006, 78). Such opportunities were invaluable, given the limitations occasions whereby academics and practitioners can come together to share ‘similar needs and experiences’. Yet

again, the synergy between our principles and understanding of effective professional learning practices in the literature was unplanned.

Wan has identified critical reflection operating effectively in Shared Space; we do attribute this to being more self-consciously committed to being a community of enquiry, in the Deweyan tradition developed in the first half of the twentieth century. Dewey identified the roots of critical reflection done well as arising in a problematic situation: ‘a felt difficulty’ (1910, 72). Some ‘felt difficulties’ can be settled by observation and reasoning he maintained, but others cannot and enquiry leading to further action is necessary (see Baumfield [2016] for an extended discussion).

We had prior knowledge and peripheral experience of initiatives in RWE influenced by the community of enquiry approach. However, informed by Orchard’s work on two parallel teacher education initiatives: ‘Philosophy for Teachers’ or (P4T) and Going Global (2020) and Wright’s theology of hospitality we also focused on Dewey’s concern for learning as education for ‘democracy’ through a form of ‘associated living’. In our knowledge exchange activities, we have literally ‘shared space’ together, with: teacher researchers ‘in residence’ on the university campus, and hospitality reciprocated by teachers hosting researchers in NATRE local branch meetings; a memorable road trip to the Corrymeela community led by the university and enjoyed by students, teachers, advisors and researchers; a residential organised by teachers using Wright’s insights as integral to the planning process, alongside the contact principles, so these two sets of ideas became interwoven in the framework.

This last point also re-enforces the unusual composition of our team, thus the power-relations. Our collaboration was successful because NATRE, and RWE teachers were equal partners in the project. NATRE brought gifts in kind and institutional support, including space on executive meeting agendas, shared bids to charitable foundations to further develop

the work and its scope. The practitioners on the core team, being both post-doctoral researchers and recognised subject leaders, were both generators of theory as well as its receivers and co-constructors. This disrupted more conventional theory-practice relationships, placing team members on an equal footing, which facilitated engagement in and sharing of knowledge (Fazey et al. 2014; Phillipson et al. 2012). Christopher refers explicitly to the gender of the team (all identify as women) and as Davids' alludes, our shared working reflects assumptions that feminists have advocated for decades. Being attuned to potential issues of power, we make a deliberate effort to listen and hear, display respect and humility towards the expertise of others. This may align our method of working with feminist praxis; however, we did not set out with an explicitly feminist agenda in this case.

At the heart of Shared Space, then, has been collaborative enquiry into the possibilities for social psychology applied to RWE teaching, understood as a relational practice, which we have come to realise may helpfully be applied to our own relationships as practitioners and theorists/researchers. The work of John Dewey has much to teach the development of knowledge exchange activity in education and there is a rich and valuable discussion of that tradition in teacher education literature, with insights that are relatively underdeveloped in England. At the same time, there are other valuable theoretical frameworks worth engaging with too, particularly, though not exclusively, where managing inter-group relations in the classroom are concerned. Contact theory offers one example but there are others including, for example, Critical Race Theory.

None of this can happen without wider institutional support from Universities and organisations to enable and facilitate the co-production and co-creation of knowledge between researchers and practitioners. Indeed, the pursuit of knowledge exchange with the hope of promoting research impact is on the agenda of many universities who are driven by

external metrics of esteem associated with funding such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The Shared Space project sits primarily within an academic institution and whilst it was not developed within the confines of what the REF defines as impact, if we use these metrics we can support that our project findings have had demonstrable impact in three main ways. First, our findings have contributed to the re-framing of conceptual debates on the need for more than physical co-existence in shared space and the role of RE in promoting community relations. Secondly, our findings have informed the Commission on RE's report and recommendations for a National Plan for RE as well as NATRE strategies. Thirdly, our findings have been developed into a capacity building and the production of a well-received toolkit for teachers in the UK and Hong Kong, with activities to support use of these resources in the classroom. Whilst these contributions demonstrate the success of our project within these frameworks, the argument in the present paper is that this success comes down to our approach to co-creating knowledge and truly living as communities of practice. We caution, however, that although the shift to supporting research impact in HE institutions is a positive start, further work is needed to promote wider and more realistic understanding of the time and energy required to knowledge exchange partnerships more effective, and the opportunity cost to individual researchers in terms of more conventionally prestigious research outputs- which are often rated more highly in internal and external metrics.

Here, collective writing of the kind employed here to give voice to teachers as well as researchers in a recognised international journal may be part of the answer to that problem. However, in the end, as academics and teachers, we believe that dialogue can begin when people can meet each other in spaces where they feel they are treated as equals and identify shared goals with others. This is what ultimately motivates us.

## **Acknowledgements**

This work was funded by the University of Bristol's ESRC Impact Acceleration Account and a Westhill Trust Standard Grant. We would like to thank the National Association for Teachers of Religious Education for supporting our research ideas.

**Declaration of Interest**

In accordance with Taylor & Francis policy and our ethical obligations as researchers, we are reporting that Rachael Jackson Royal serves as a Trustee of the Westhill Trust and Kate Christopher worked for NATRE as a consultant at the time when the project was undertaken. As advocacy groups, both NATRE and Westhill may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed paper. We have disclosed those interests fully to Taylor & Francis, and have an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from our consultancy activities.



## References

- Allport, G.W. 1954. *The Nature of Prejudice*. New York, NY: Addison-Wesley.
- Baumfield, V. 2016. "Making a Difference in the Religious Education Classroom: Integrating Theory and Practice in Teachers' Professional Learning." *British Journal of Religious Education* 38 (2): 141-151. doi: [10.1080/01416200.2016.1139889](https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2016.1139889)
- Christopher, K., J. Orchard, S. McKeown, A. Williams, and K. Wright (no date). RE and good community relations: What can RE learn from social psychology. Teacher toolkit. <https://www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Additional%20Documents/Teachers%20toolkit%20FINAL.pdf>
- Dewey, J. (1910) 2008 "How we think. The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924". Vol 6. In *The collected works of John Dewey*, edited by J.A. Boydston. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University.
- Fazey, I., L. Bunse, J. Msika, M. Pinke, K. Preedy, A.C. Evely, E. Lambert, E. Hastings, and M.S. Reed. 2014. "Evaluating Knowledge Exchange in Interdisciplinary and Multi-Stakeholder Research." *Global Environmental Change* 25: 204-220. doi: [10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2013.12.012](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2013.12.012)
- Fitzgerald, S., S. McGrath-Champ, M. Stacey, R. Wilson, and M. Gavin. 2019. "Intensification of Teachers' Work Under Devolution: A 'Tsunami' of Paperwork." *Journal of Industrial Relations* 61 (5): 613-636. doi: [10.1177/0022185618801396](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185618801396)
- Korthagen, F. A. 2010. "How Teacher Education can make a Difference." *Journal of Education for Teaching* 36 (4): 407-423. doi: [10.1080/02607476.2010.513854](https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2010.513854)
- Liu, K. 2015. "Critical Reflection as a Framework for Transformative Learning in Teacher Education." *Educational Review* 67 (2): 135-157. doi: [10.1080/00131911.2013.839546](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2013.839546)

Lugones, M., and E.V. Spelman. 1983. "Have we got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'the Woman's Voice'." *Women's Studies International Forum* 6 (6): 573-581. doi: [10.1016/0277-5395\(83\)90019-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(83)90019-5)

McIntyre, D. 1995. "Initial Teacher Education as Practical Theorising: A Response to Paul Hirst." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 43 (4): 365-383. doi: 10.1080/00071005.1995.9974045

McKeown, S., J. Orchard, A. Williams, K. Wright, K. Christopher, and R. Jackson-Royal. 2018. Encounter, conversation, and interaction: Improving community relations. Policy Brief. <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/policybristol/policy-briefings/improving-community-relations-through-religious-ed>

Mezirow, J. 1990. *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Moghaddam, R. G., M. Davoudi, S.M.R. Adel, and S.M.R. Amirian. 2019. "Reflective Teaching Through Journal Writing: a Study on EFL Teachers' Reflection-for-Action, Reflection-in-Action, and Reflection-on-Action." *English Teaching & Learning* 44: 1-20. doi: [10.1007/s42321-019-00041-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s42321-019-00041-2)

Orchard, J. 2015. "Does Religious Education Promote Good Community Relations?" *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 36: 40-53. doi: 10.1080/13617662.2015.1021125

Orchard, J. 2020. "Moral Education and the Challenge of Pre-Service Professional Formation for Teachers." *Journal of Moral Education* 50 (1): 104-113. doi: 10.1080/03057240.2020.1763932

Orchard, J., L. Kelly, and C. Winstanley. 2020. “‘Head’ and ‘Heart’ Work: Re-Appraising the Place of Theory in the ‘Academic Dimension’ of Pre-Service Teacher Education in England.” *Studia paedagogica* 25(2): 139 doi: 10.5817/SP2020-2-7

Phillipson, J., P. Lowe, A. Proctor, and E. Ruto. 2012. “Stakeholder Engagement and Knowledge Exchange in Environmental Research.” *Journal of Environmental Management* 95 (1): 56-65. doi: [10.1016/j.jenvman.2011.10.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2011.10.005)

Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC). 2013. REC subject review of RE in England.

<https://www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Free%20Resources/2013%20Review%20of%20Religious%20Education%20in%20England.pdf>

Reid, A. 2003. “Understanding Teachers' Work: Is there Still a Place for Labour Process Theory?” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 24 (5): 559-573. doi: [10.1080/0142569032000127134](https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569032000127134)

Schön, D. A. 1983. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Sim, C. 2006. “Preparing for Professional Experiences: Incorporating Pre-Service Teachers as Communities of Practice.” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 22 (1): 76-83. doi: [10.1016/j.tate.2005.07.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.07.006)

Smyth, J. 1989. “Developing and Sustaining Critical Reflection in Teacher Education.” *Journal of Teacher Education* 40 (2): 2-9. doi: [10.1177/002248718904000202](https://doi.org/10.1177/002248718904000202)

Wenger, E. 1998. “Communities of Practice: Learning as a Social System”, *Systems Thinker*, June. Accessed April 4 2018.

[https://moo27pilot.eduhk.hk/pluginfile.php/415222/mod\\_resource/content/3/Learningasocialsystem.pdf](https://moo27pilot.eduhk.hk/pluginfile.php/415222/mod_resource/content/3/Learningasocialsystem.pdf)

Williams, A., S. McKeown, J. Orchard, and K. Wright. 2019. "Promoting Positive Community Relations: What can RE Learn from Social Psychology and the Shared Space Project?" *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 40 (2): 215-227. doi: 10.1080/13617672.2019.1596582

Wright, K. 2017. "A Pedagogy of Embrace: A Theology of Hospitality as a Pedagogical Framework for Religious Education in Church of England Schools." PhD diss., University of East Anglia.

Zeichner, K. 2003. "Teacher Research as Professional Development P-12 Educators in the USA." *Educational Action Research* 11 (2): 301–326. doi: [10.1080/09650790300200211](https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790300200211)