Some thinking behind this project: what was learned from Charis

Parts of the approach taken to teaching and learning in this site have a longer history in previous projects. This page explains, for those who would like to know more of the background, how some of the ideas here originated in earlier work on Christian curriculum.

Several of the teaching and learning examples on this site are adapted from a collection of curriculum materials first published in the 1990s as part of the Charis Project, developed at the Stapleford Centre in Nottingham, UK.[1] Responding to emphases in British educational legislation at the time, these resources aimed to promote moral and spiritual development across the curriculum by highlighting the moral and spiritual dimensions of subject teaching in secondary schools in various subject areas. The project produced teaching resources in English, French, German, mathematics, and science.

In the context of a growing emphasis in national educational discussions on spiritual and moral development as whole-school responsibilities, the Charis project sought to develop resources that were identifiably Christian in character but usable by teachers in a wide range of types of school. The goals of the materials were to:

- enable teachers to respond to the challenge of educating the whole person;
- help teachers to focus on the spiritual and moral dimensions inherent in their subject;
- encourage pupils towards a clearer understanding of Christian perspectives on the fundamental questions that arise in all areas of knowledge; and
- contribute to the breadth, balance and harmony of pupils' knowledge and understanding.[2]

Seeking to bring these concerns to a variety of school contexts raised a number of practical issues for the writers of the Charis materials. Four of them are described briefly here.[3]

1. "Is this really my job?"

One basic question concerned whether teachers were being asked to take on tasks that were not part of their responsibility – were we, for instance, expecting mathematics teachers to take time out for a religious education session before going back to their mathematics? The answer to this was no. We were looking for connections, for places where spiritual and moral questions arose from within each subject area and the relevance of faith to learning and learning to faith became visible. Where, for instance, had beliefs and commitments significantly shaped a certain work of literature, mathematical development, or historical event? How does faith shape the ways in which knowledge is pursued and applied? These are legitimate questions across the curriculum, and cannot be dealt

with adequately within the confines of religious education. In mathematics (which is, of course, but one example) this explored questions such as how the use and abuse of averages relate to how we decide what is 'normal' and to pressure to conform, or how the idea of infinity can provoke spiritual reflection.

2. "Is the Bible relevant?"

A similar question arose with regard to how the Bible might be relevant outside religion courses. The Charis materials sought to avoid presenting the Bible as a collection of sayings to be appropriated at random in order to Christianize teaching materials. Instead an effort was made to show how scripture can be at work in different areas of learning. One German unit,[4] for example, told the story of the White Rose, a student resistance group in Hitler's Germany. At Munich University in 1942, a small group of students began to write and duplicate tracts expressing opposition to Hitler's regime. These were then distributed in various German cities by mail or by being left in public places. After a short period, the group were caught by the Gestapo and its core members were immediately put on trial and executed. Various motives led to the move to resist Hitler; one of them was the discovery in the epistle of James of the admonition to be doers of the word and not hearers only (James 1:22). In part through this text the group were provoked to act on their convictions. If one seeks to understand these events, it is relevant to explore the role of scripture. The Bible has profoundly influenced historical events, social movements, views of science, literature, art, politics, and so on, all of which provides rich material to explore.

3. "Is this relevant to all students?"

During development of the Charis materials, the writers became aware of the danger that the desire to focus on big questions might lead, especially at the secondary level, to designing activities in a way that implied that those most capable of intellectually sophisticated reflection were the most capable of spiritual development. Reading and reflecting on poems and stories that presented spiritual themes in a second language, for instance, seemed a more realistic goal for more able students. We did not believe, however, that intellectual growth and spiritual growth were the same thing or necessarily correlated. The most sophisticated are not always those most capable of, say, love or wonder. We therefore actively looked for ways of designing teaching and learning activities that allowed students to respond meaningfully to spiritual and moral questions at varying levels of sophistication.

4. "Will I need to teach differently?"

Finally, it became clear to us that targeting the spiritual and moral dimensions of learning did not just mean introducing the right topics. There were implications for the 'how' of teaching as well as the 'what'. For instance, making room for moral and spiritual growth did not seem to fit well with aiming for maximum control over the student's responses. A spiritual response to a particular learning activity cannot be forced or guaranteed. It is always open to the pupil to complete the

activity in an unreflective, mechanical way, with minimum personal involvement. If a response is a determined outcome of a mechanistic process, it is doubtful to what degree it can still be described as moral. We needed ways of giving space for students to respond and guiding them towards informed spiritual and moral reflection while allowing for a variety of possible outcomes. Key questions posed to students were therefore often open-ended: how do you judge the value of a gift? Can you trust your conscience? Is there any way in which Macbeth is a great man? Devise a role play in which you reunite two friends who quarreled. As teaching topics and materials were developed, the question was not only whether this was a good topic, but also how students could be helped to engage with it in authentic ways.

Working with the ideas of spiritual and moral development is not the only way to approach the development of Christian pedagogy across the curriculum, and these are only some of the issues discussed during the development of the Charis materials. It was never the intention of the Charis project to provide a final model of Christian curriculum. The hope of assisting teachers in discovering and developing their own approaches to nurturing the spiritual and moral lives of their students across the curriculum has continued into the present project.

The Charis materials can be viewed here:http://www.johnshortt.org/Pages/Charis.aspx

Footnotes

1. For more on spiritual and moral development with examples from the Charis project, see the following: at the primary level, Alison Farnell, Opening Windows: Spiritual Development in the Primary School. Nottingham: The Stapleford Centre (2002). At the secondary level, David I. Smith, Making Sense of Spiritual Development. Nottingham: The Stapleford Centre (1999). For Scotland, Alison Farnell, Opening Windows: Spiritual Development in the Primary School through Religious Observance and the Wider Curriculum Nottingham: The Stapleford Centre (2007), and Alison Farnell & David I. Smith, Making Sense of Spiritual Development in Religious Observance and the Wider Curriculum. Nottingham: The Stapleford Centre (2007).

2. Quoted from the introduction to each volume of the published Charis materials. See also John Shortt, "The Rationale of the Charis Project" in Spiritual and Religious Education, ed. Mal Leicester, Celia Modgill and Sohan Modgill, London: Falmer Press, 1999.

3. This is based on David Smith, 'Personal Reflections on the Charis Project,' Journal of Christian Education, 42:2, 1999, 27-34.

4. See David I. Smith, 'Teaching (and Learning from) the White Rose' in David M. Moss & Terry A. Osborn, Critical Essays on Resistance in Education (Counterpoints: Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education) New York: Peter Lang, 2010, 67-82.