**What do we really mean by ‘Personal Knowledge’?**

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***Introduction***

As teachers and researchers, we have explored the development of a religion and worldviews approach in theory and in practice. Here we bring together our shared reflections on the idea of ‘personal knowledge’ and its application in the Religion & Worldviews classroom.

We welcome the 2021 [Ofsted subject review](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-religious-education/research-review-series-religious-education) and the renewed impetus it has provided for discussions around the nature and purpose of religion and worldviews education. With the introduction of three ‘types’ of knowledge with which the subject is concerned (substantive, disciplinary and personal), much discussion has focused on the substantive, in terms of content and on the disciplinary, a focus on which is seen as contributing to the academic rigour of the subject, and a way of distancing RE from its confessional beginnings. There seems to be less discussion, and more confusion, around the idea of ‘personal knowledge’ (and how the three might interrelate)[[1]](#endnote-1).

In talking to teachers around the country, we have seen personal knowledge variously interpreted as pupils’ personal opinion, their ‘personal worldview’, or in terms of a revamped ‘learning from’ religion. With the [CORE](https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf) report’s focus on lived experience and pupils’ developing their own worldviews, we have some concern around teachers seeing personal knowledge as a return to a focus on AT1 and AT2 in which ‘learning from religion’ or ‘AT2’, has sometimes been misunderstood and conflated with confessional RE. Let us be clear here that this is not what personal knowledge within R&W lessons should be about. Neither is personal knowledge learning from religion and worldviews as spiritual or moral development, shaped by normative values of ‘respect’ and ‘acceptance’. We feel that such interpretations are limiting in relation to the meaning of personal knowledge’ and its role in the educational experience. We feel that a more nuanced understanding of ‘personal knowledge’ is needed, not least because in a world in which [‘fake news’ and ‘factitis’](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/apr/26/donald-trump-tucker-carlson-relationship) increasingly dominate our media, it is more important than ever that opinion is not given the same credibility as informed, self-aware understanding.

[Ofsted](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-religious-education/research-review-series-religious-education) define personal knowledge as when, “pupils build an awareness of their own presuppositions and values about the religious and non-religious traditions they study”. This suggests an awareness of one’s own worldview - that people have a perspective on life, that they see things through a lens that is coloured by their culture, experiences and beliefs. For pupils of R&W in our schools, we would expect to see them acknowledging and valuing their own worldview and how this influences their study of the subject but also be understanding of other pupils in the class having a different positionality, and beginning to understand why this is and where it has come from. This positionality is exemplified in the Theos video, [Nobody Stands Nowhere](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFRxKF-Jdos).

Such an awareness is certainly valuable, but it doesn’t address the dynamic relationship between people and their worldviews and those of others. This requires going beyond the recognition of difference and where it might come from to exploring the meeting of worldviews.

***How do we understand personal knowledge?***

Personal knowledge is more than understanding that people may see things or act in a certain way because of their personal worldview. It highlights the relationship between one’s own positionality and the ‘other’. Here the ‘other’ may be other people and their positionality, or ‘otherness’ in the sense of new subject content.

Certainly, a first step in this process is exploring and acknowledging one’s own ‘positionality, for example recognising that one’s position is one of suspicion, fear or hostility, superiority or deference to another. So, the [REC draft resource,](https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/REC-Worldviews-Project-double-pages-Revised-cover-v1.2.pdf) designed to support curriculum developers implementing a ‘religion and worldviews approach’ promotes the development of pupils’ self-awareness of their assumptions, so that they are “better able to identify, interpret and understand the worldviews of others”. Drawing, as the REC proposals do, on hermeneutics, this reflects German philosopher, [Georg Gadamer’s](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gadamer/) argument that when encountering religion worldviews as ‘other’, students can understand best when this ‘other’ is explored in relation to their own ‘fore-meanings’.

Hermeneutic traditions see understanding as a dialectical process – an encounter in which there is a ‘fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer, 1975[[2]](#endnote-14743)). In this process, there is a second step beyond recognising how one’s ‘meeting’ with the ‘other’ is shaped by one’s own assumptions - that of acknowledging how one’s own positionality is challenged, or questioned through encounter with the ‘other’. Personal knowledge is then not simply one’s way of understanding the world; it is both understanding where your view comes from with *an awareness of how your view has moved on through encounter with the subject knowledge.*

This requires more than self-reflection – it requires *reflexivity*. Whilst self-reflection involves considering how one feels about knowledge and how it relates to existing knowledge, reflexivity implies both an awareness of self in the act of ‘knowing’ or understanding and how that understanding transforms the self.

There is some ambiguity around the idea of personal knowledge in the REC resource. On the one hand a connection is made between the terminology of ‘personal knowledge’ and ‘personal worldview’, yet a more reflexive process is clearly promoted in helping pupils to examine “how their own worldview shapes their encounters with the world, and how their context, experiences and study [encounter with the other] can shape their worldview”, without explicitly calling this personal knowledge.

The idea of ‘transformation’ might be equated with a formative dimension of personal knowledge. Encounter with difference inevitably involves a shift, or development of one’s position or stance, because in this process, one has become more aware of one’s own assumptions or prejudices, of another’s positionality and of the relationship between the two. This might entail what Gert Biesta calls ‘transcendental violence’ (Biesta, 2006[[3]](#endnote-12770)), in which one’s worldview is fundamentally shifted, but it may not and need not, in order to be a valuable learning experience. Drawing again on Gadamer and hermeneutics, this ‘transformation’ is simply part of the ‘event’ of understanding.

In this sense, personal knowledge is as much about academic as formational development. The result of a dialogue between the pupil and difference, it is an example of “self-critical scholarship” (Goldburg, 2010[[4]](#endnote-17220)). Reflection on one’s positionality in relation to subject content is a key intellectual capability. Furthermore, in the context of increased focus on decolonisation of the curriculum, this capability is related to [critical pedagogy](https://www.dns-tvind.dk/critical-pedagogy/) which seeks to ‘conscientize’ the learner, to challenge and transform injustice. Through challenging their own assumptions or prejudices (and those that frame the way religion and worldviews are represented in curricula and wider society), pupils might question and challenge imbalances of power.

***How do we support children in developing their personal knowledge?***

Reflection on positionality is an important first stage in this process. At Bickleigh Down CofE Primary School, we have supported children in beginning to understand their own worldview by using the Andrew Ricketts Spirituality grids. These grids are formed of a series of progressive questions focusing on ‘the beyond’, ‘world and beauty’, ‘self’ and ‘others’. Children work in their class groups to focus on questions such as ‘what is the most beautiful thing in the world?’ (Year 1) or ‘what makes up my identity?’ (Year 6). As a class, pupils spend time discussing these questions and completing an activity to help them to delve more deeply into considering their own worldview in relation to the big question. Through this work, the children can identify that they all have different opinions, and these opinions make up part of their worldview. They recognise that although they may have different positionality to their friends, they can live well together as community. Pupils also reflect upon why their worldview might be different to their friends and how this has been influenced by family values, background, culture and belief. These sessions are separate to their R&W lessons, and pupils recognise that their worldview can impact upon their thoughts, ideas, and reflections within the R&W learning environment and beyond.

Within the R&W classroom itself, we have worked hard to ensure that pupils are hearing from a range of different voices linked to the religious and non-religious worldviews that they study. As a school, we feel that this supports children to understand that within one worldview, there are people with different positionality. An example of this was a Year Five unit on Creation and Fall within Christianity. The children had found out about diverse ways that believers might interpret the creation story and had studied several different theological theories.

For the final lesson in the unit, we explicitly framed a process of reflexivity that supported the development of pupils’ personal knowledge. We invited a Christian vicar, a Christian who was also a scientist and a Buddhist into school to answer the children’s questions around their interpretation of Genesis. Before the lesson, the pupils prepared a set of questions for the visitors, based on their existing ideas and assumptions about the visitors’ worldviews. The pupils then predicted the visitors’ responses to their questions. Once the questions had been asked, the pupils recorded the responses and then wrote down their reactions to the responses. Some pupils were surprised by the answers to their questions because they had thought that they had applied their knowledge and understanding of that visitor’s worldview, yet the response differed from or challenged their prior understanding. Through this dialogical process, pupils understood how their interpretation of these worldviews changed throughout the lesson and how their own positionality had shifted in light of this understanding (see [here](https://vimeo.com/468905612/2df730a4f3) for a video case study).

**What are the Challenges around personal knowledge?**

There are many challenges that lie in making provision for personal knowledge within the religion and worldviews classroom. These relate to the ‘personal’ nature of personal knowledge, and teachers’ concerns around how best to provide for its development in a measurement focused context.

A concern arising from discussions with teachers was that they felt that all lessons had to feature the three different types of knowledge as laid out in the Ofsted Research review. We feel that personal knowledge should not be seen as a ‘tick box’ exercise but that teachers should ensure that pupils are given time to reflect upon their worldview, how it influences their study of religious and non-religious worldviews and also their reflections on what they have learnt. Whether or not this process is an explicit feature of every lesson, teachers must plan carefully for the development of personal knowledge, with a clear understanding of what it is.

As with any aspect of education that is not easily measured, the assessment of personal knowledge poses a challenge. When understood as developing through the ‘event’ of understanding, personal knowledge is something that features (or should feature) in all school subjects and is not specific to Religion & Worldviews. This raises the question of whether we should be looking to assess personal knowledge in R&W, or indeed at all. We have previously argued that the reflexive element in worldviews education should be made explicit, as exemplified in the example above. Yet drawing the pupils’ attention to this process may be enough, without the need for extrinsic evaluation. Teachers therefore will have to ensure that they make provision for personal knowledge within their lessons and evidence this within their ways of working rather than assessing it. Furthermore, if this process involves a transformation of the self, however big or small, are we ethically justified to ask pupils to share this experience, or indeed make them obliged to share?

Asking pupils to understand their positionality in relation to others who may share the same organised worldview can be particularly problematic. However, by sharing a variety of worldviews and the diversity within them, pupils understand that people ‘live’ their worldviews in a multitude of ways and that worldviews are inherently ‘interpretable’. By supporting children to understand the diversity within and ‘interpretability’ of worldviews, children can begin to make sense of their own positionality.

**The importance of lived experience.**

A key part of personal knowledge is pupils’ ‘everyday knowledge’. As teachers, we must acknowledge the experience of their own worldviews that pupils bring to the RE classroom. If we do not offer a curriculum that deals with lived experience, pupils will struggle to see themselves in the worldviews that we study and therefore struggle to reflect upon their own personal knowledge. The following example of this is taken from a lesson on prayer in Islam: After starting a new job teaching R&W in a primary school, I (Katie) talked to pupils about prayer and as part of the lesson, I talked about how some Muslim people pray at the set times of the day whilst others may do two prayers in the morning and three in the evening. A child in my class put her hand up and said ‘Miss Freeman, that is the first time someone has ever said what happens in my house, my parents do the set times and I pray before and after school’. In comparing their own lived experience of prayer with that of other Muslims, the child gained a more nuanced understanding of their own worldview and felt that their knowledge was validated. This validation is key if we expect pupils to express and reflect upon their own positionality.

The above concerns highlight the need for increased support for teachers navigating a religion and worldviews approach in the classroom. Addressing the above concerns of course require secure subject knowledge, but also important is an understanding of what is meant by personal knowledge and how to provide for its development. Teachers’ reflexivity in relation to their own positionality and their own worldview is a central part of this process. For teachers to feel confident in their subject knowledge around the diversity of worldviews and confident in scaffolding the development of personal knowledge, we need to ensure high quality training in this area.

**Conclusion/final reflection**

As a religion and worldviews approach is becoming more widely recognised, what it means in theory and practice need further clarification. There is a lot of work being undertaken in this regard which will support practice and feed ongoing discussions within the subject community. Building on my recent work on worldview literacy, I (Martha) have suggested that a religion and worldviews approach can be understood as having three interrelated and interdependent features: *interpretability* (of worldviews and knowledge about them), *reflexivity*, and *transformational encounter*. Taken together, these foci highlight the dialectic relationship between student and subject matter and provide a framework for a ‘fusion of horizons’. In Ofsted's terms, these three foci bring together ‘substantive’, disciplinary and ‘personal’ knowledge and emphasise how they are inseparable elements of the process of understanding. Going forward, we hope that further collaboration between academics and teachers and more practice focused research will support shared understanding of the aims and contribution of Religion & Worldviews education and the value and role of personal knowledge.

1. For a discussion of the relationship between substantive, disciplinary and personal knowledge, see Shaw, M (2020) [Worldview Literacy as Transformative Knowledge](https://openresearch.lsbu.ac.uk/item/932q0) in Franck, O. & Thalen, P. eds. (2023) Powerful knowledge in Religious Education. Exploring Paths to A Knowledge-Based Education on Religions, Palgrave:Macmillan. pp195-216. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gadamer HG (1975) *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed. Trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall. London / New York: Bloomsbury. [↑](#endnote-ref-14743)
3. Biesta GJJ (2006) *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future*. London: Paradigm Publishers. [↑](#endnote-ref-12770)
4. Goldburg P (2010) Developing Pedagogies for Inter-religious Teaching and Learning. In Engebretson K, de Souza M, Durka G and Gearon L, *International Handbook of Inter-religious Education*. pp341-359. [↑](#endnote-ref-17220)