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Chapter 9

Can 'Skills' Help Religious Education?

William K. Kay

Abstract

This chapter outlines the arrival of skills as a component in educational discourse on the British scene. It examines skills from a psychological perspective and mounts a critique of them that is philosophical as well as psychological. It concludes that skills discourse is often intellectually incoherent or inapplicable to Religious Education (RE).

Introduction

It is not clear when skills became an accepted and defining part of British education. The Education Reform Act 1988 (part 1, 2 (2) (a)) refers to 'the knowledge, skills and understanding which pupils of different abilities and maturities are expected to have by the end of each key stage' and in (b) to 'the matters, skills and processes which are required to be taught'. So it appears that skills were recognised as being fundamental to educational purposes by 1988. However within the same Act in (part 1, 7 (5) (b)) considerations relating to collective worship refer to 'ages and aptitudes' of pupils rather than to their skills. The term 'aptitude' is more general and stands in an uncertain relationship to the term 'skill'. It is not clear why collective worship should be concerned with the aptitudes of pupils while other aspects of school life should be concerned with skills. One explanation is that the 1988 legislators simply took over parts of the phraseology used in the 1944 Education Act (Butler 1971, p. 119).

The Emergence of Skills

Although, as we shall see, psychologists dealing with the workplace had explored skills, the real driving force behind the emergence of skills within the maintained sector of education in England and Wales appears to have been the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). In the 1980s Mrs Thatcher's Conservative government listened to the CBI and accepted their view that the education system needed to prepare young people for commerce and industry. Someone had to prepare young people in this way and employers balked at the need to 'do the work of the schools for them'. So the government began to modify the curriculum in schools to make it more amenable to the requirements of employers.

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According to Wolf (2002, p. 118) core skills were launched on the world in a speech by Kenneth Baker, then Secretary of State for Education, in 1989. He identified these skills as involving communication, numeracy, personal relations, and familiarity with technology, with systems, with changing and social contexts, with language. Very quickly after this the CBI produced a booklet that reflected the examples given by Baker. The next Secretary of State, John MacGregor, asked the National Curriculum Council and the NCVQ (which dealt with vocational qualifications) to incorporate core skills into post-16 course provision. The National Curriculum Council dragged its feet, but the NCVQ moved forward enthusiastically. NCVQ officials argued that by using performance criteria it would be possible to define exactly what was meant by a variety of different levels in the six core skills. Such an argument, in the hard light of subsequent analysis, looks fanciful in the extreme. Wolf suggests that all this happened because educational bureaucracy was keen to justify its existence and simply ignored any criticisms, valid or not, of the agenda of the skills lobby.

In 1992 the new Secretary of State was arguing that it was reasonable to expect people to leave education *at all levels* with core skills. Presumably, therefore, the skills were now to be introduced below the age of 16. And by 1995 the CBI urged that government that 'all learning should develop core skills … a Core Skills Task force [no less!] should be set up to agree and implement a strategy for core skills in all learning' (Wolf 2002, p. 122). The CBI's confidence in core skills was predicated on the view that, once such skills were firmly planted within the curriculum, business would then save money it had invested in training schemes. At the same time, the government assumed that a business-friendly workforce would benefit the national economy and Britain's international competitiveness.

In 1996 core skills received help from an unexpected quarter. Lord Dearing, writing one of his several reports for the government, accepted that such skills were important to the structure of post-16 education. Once he had rebaptised them as 'key skills' they were ready to be brought out of their 'vocational ghetto' and could be backed by a support programme of £17 million. Once financial incentives were offered, colleges and schools entered pupils for the new qualifications despite scepticism from pupils about whether employers thought the awards worth having (Wolf 2002, p. 125).[1] A cynical explanation for the mushrooming of these unpopular and under-used qualifications lies in the simplicity of the process by which information on pupils can be collected. Boxes can be ticked. Discussions in class can be held. Teachers can note whether pupils contribute or not. Naturally the 'skills' so recorded varied widely and naturally, too, according to Tariq and Cochrane (2003) 'several have questioned the concept of key skills and more specifically their place in higher education' (Hyland 1999, Holmes 2000).

At some point in this history, 'basic skills' were identified as 'the ability to read, write and speak English/ Welsh and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general' (Basic Skills Agency website, March

1 According to Hodgson and Spour (2002), 'The Key Skills Qualification is overwhelmingly viewed by students and by practitioners as a "hassle" and without much "currency" with little "use" or "exchange" value.'

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2004). The Agency is funded by the DfES and the Welsh Assembly Government but stands independently of them. Its terminology is also applied in the Probation Service (Hudson 2003), though Hudson herself has reservations about the uncritical adoption by the Service of a strategy to promote 'adult basic skills'. In the contexts of the Probation Service and the Basic Skills Agency, the thrust of public spending is remedial and intended to lift the life chances of those who have failed to benefit from compulsory schooling. Hodgson and Spours (2002) speak about 'the origins of remedialism' as dating back to the Further Education Unit report, *A Basis for Choice* that was published in 1979. More recently a broader philosophy is espoused by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) which, also with public funding, operates at the interface between education and business, or education and employment, but acknowledges that adult learning is desirable for those outside the campuses of institutions of higher education. Meanwhile, for those inside higher education, 'study skills' may be taught as a way of enabling young people to organise their time efficiently though unfortunately, according to Adey *et al.* (1999, p. 3), 'there is no systematic evidence for the effect of study skill programmes'.

Skills in RE

The *Non-Statutory Guidance on RE* (QCA, nd, but probably 1999)[2] aligns the teaching of religion with skills of different kinds. This may seem to be an opportunistic attempt to justify RE by showing that it is able to make a contribution to the curriculum conceptualised in terms of skills. Nevertheless it is a sustained attempt. The key skills identified by Dearing are all present. RE helps children in their encounter with different forms of written and spoken communication, with different uses of language and all this helps children to talk with knowledge and understanding about their own beliefs and those of others. Similarly information technology and social skills are enhanced by RE. Even problem-solving and information technology benefit from RE. Thinking skills, we are optimistically told (p. 19), and financial capability – even enterprise education as well as creative thinking skills – are all within the purview of RE.

Oddly enough, though, none of the skills appear to be present on pages six and seven of the *Non-Statutory Guidance* where national expectations on the two attainment targets are given. Neither is there any reference to skills in the more compressed and concise account of attainment targets on pages eight and nine. Yet, by page 16 skills have found their way back into the discourse. We are informed that 'learning from religion is concerned with developing in pupils the capacity and skill to respond thoughtfully and to evaluate what they learn about religions'. By p. 18 we are told that good practice in RE is 'about developing skills, e.g. the skill of living in a plural society, and attitudes, e.g. empathy'. We may well wonder how 'living in a plural society' can be reduced to a set of skills or whether, if this is really what RE is intended to promote, the curriculum has been properly devised to this end.

2 Downloadable from <http://www.qca.org.uk/6163.html> (accessed 16 June 2006).

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Within RE, skills certainly surface in the major examination syllabuses. For example, the AQA GCSE religious studies syllabuses of 2005 all include reference to key skills and show how there are opportunities to develop these skills within religious studies. So communication at level one is indicated by the ability to take part in discussions, to read and obtain information, and then to write different types of documents. Level two asks for ability to contribute to discussions, to give short talks, to read and summarise information and to write different types of document. Similar reference to key skills is to be found in the Edexcel specifications. There is, also, the general assertion that the Edexcel specification builds upon the 'knowledge, understanding and skills established by the statutory requirements', though without indicating which statute is in mind.

The upshot of this is that there is a contrast between four things:

- the skills of responding thoughtfully to religion and evaluating what is learnt (which QCA promotes);[3]
- the skills of living in a pluralistic society (which stems from good RE practice according to QCA);
- the skills needed to study religion as an academic subject (which Edexcel promotes);[4]
- and the key skills that come via the CBI, the conservative government and Lord Dearing from the vocational world beyond the school gates.

And all these are *different* from the skills identified by heavyweight examiners. Giles (2002, p. 156), writing as an A-level examiner of long standing and the Chief Examiner for Edexcel, speaks of the need for the development of 'analytical skills' during the post-16 process and of the development of 'evaluative skills' within successful RE.

By the time *Religious Education: The Non-Statutory National Framework* was published in 2004, there was no stopping the language of skills. The document normally uses skills within the formula 'knowledge, skills and understanding' so that it is not always easy to see whether what is being referred to is to do with knowledge, or to do with skills or to do with understanding. From time to time the document does refer to specific skills and its most usual line is to argue that RE contributes to the aims of the national curriculum as a whole. Thus (on p. 8) we are told that RE contributes to 'skills in literacy and information and communication technology (ICT)'. Later we are told that RE helps to develop 'skills of listening' (p. 13) as well as 'key skills' and 'thinking skills' (p. 14). The key skills are to do with communication (p. 15) and the thinking skills are concerned with interpreting and analysing information from religious traditions (p. 16). The main thrust of this argument is to underline the usefulness of RE and its compatibility with the rest of

3 It is not clear whether this skill is the same as making 'informed responses' (AT 2, level 5), even though at the next level (AT2, level 6) pupils only have to 'respond'.

4 So Edexcel (GCSE for 2004) aims to develop in pupils the ability to examine and academically study religion and wants students to do this by learning to recall, select, organise and deploy knowledge as well as describing and analysing religion, giving personal responses to it and evaluating different responses and communicating effectively.

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the skills teaching going on in the classroom. In this way skills discourse, implicitly, makes a case for the inclusion of RE within or alongside the national curriculum, and it is arguable that this is the prime political purpose for such discourse in the document.

Skills in Psychology

The original work done on skills in psychology tended to focus entirely upon physical action (Hockey 1996; Holding 1981). Indeed a *Dictionary of Psychology* defined skill as 'rapidity and precision (usually) of muscular action' (Drever 1964). This is why Michael Argyle (1972, p. 59) says 'by motor skills are meant such things as cycling, skating, driving a car, playing the piano, typing, sending and receiving morse …'. They require physical practice and may be learned – which differentiates them from reflexes – but are subsequently performed, or may be performed, without conscious thought. This means that skills exclude reflexes and, in most cases, the higher mental functions like the interpretation of texts.

Originally psychology began its exploration of the workplace in the days when manual work was far more common than it now is and the concern of psychologists was to find ways to improve production or to compare the efficiency of people of different ages or genders. Nowadays the workplace has become less obviously manual in its main emphasis, the term 'skill' often refers to an organised action sequence rather than to one action on its own. In addition psychologists usually make a distinct between the level of skill that has been acquired (or competence) and the proficiency with which that skill is exercised (performance). So performance may fall below competence because of tiredness or other disabilities.

Analysis of the concept of skill has resulted in a 'skill–rule–knowledge' framework (Rasmussen 1986). Knowledge of a situation evokes a rule and the rule evokes a skill. Mistakes may then be classified as either those that are knowledge-based because of a failure to understand the situation, rule-based because of a failure to apply the correct rule, or lapses and slips where the skill itself is performed ineffectively or not performed at all.

Although skills have been studied within applied psychology in relation to the workplace, there is little or no reference to skills in connection with child psychology and its application to education. Admittedly, simple motor skills relating to walking, jumping or holding a pencil have been described but the basic tradition of developmental psychology has been concerned with the growth of the intellect and the stages through which this goes. There is a strong Piagetian emphasis within child psychology and this has been concerned with the ability of pupils to perform mental operations and the relationship between these operations and physical activities (Plowden 1967; Piaget 1977; Donaldson 1978). None of this literature is concerned with the growth of skills.

One searches in vain within the mainstream of psychological literature on child development to discover any major discussion of the progress of children's learning in terms of the acquisition of more and better skills. The main tradition of child psychology has always seen education as being concerned with other mental

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attributes like the increasing power of the mind to manipulate symbols to represent abstractions or the growth of understanding through the acquisition of concepts (Lovell 1968; Brunner 1974; Bryant 1974; Gross 1992; Lee and Gupta 1995; Malim and Birch 1998). Thus, as we shall see, one of the main critiques that may be levelled against the representation of educational development in terms of skills is that the skills are not located within any larger developmental picture. They simply exist as freestanding units of behaviour outside a theoretical account of the mind or of social intercourse. Nor are they related to each other in any meaningful way although, for instance, skills involved fingering musical instruments may well be linked by neural pathways with skills involved in typing, and one would expect similar synergies between other sets of skills.

Application and Critique of Skills

Within the classroom and within RE the skill–rule–knowledge model is more promising than the model of skill as a simple repeated activity or an organised action sequence. Yet, even if we consider that the skills exercised by pupils learning about or learning from religion make use of the skill–rule–knowledge framework, there are numerous processes and concepts that need unpacking if this framework is to be properly understood and applied. We need to understand exactly how these rules are formed that link skills and knowledge, how complex these rules might be and exactly what the relationship between different and competing domains of knowledge might be in the enactment of particular skills.

For instance we can imagine the quite simple skill based upon the spelling rule that the letter 'i' comes before 'e' except after letter 'c' where there is a long 'ee' sound. We might then imagine that the skill of writing correctly follows the application of this rule in the context of knowledge about writing sentences. Yet we can also imagine a much more complicated skill evoked by the rule that 'you should never lose hope' in the context of personal disasters. There is an enormous gap between writing sentences and personal disasters in terms of the complicated connections each has with the mental, social and emotional aspects of an individual's life. So, because the contexts differ, everything else changes; the skills are incommensurable.

The thing to notice is that the skills stand in quite different relationships both to religion itself and to classroom practice. Some skills are as a *consequence of* engagement with religion rather than a *precondition for* engagement with religion. The skills needed to study religion either arise out of classroom practice or are acquired elsewhere. But the point is the skills are then applied to the subject matter of religion. On the other hand, the key skills within the different GCSE syllabuses are intended to be strengthened by, or to arise from, a study of religion. Here religion facilitates pre-existing skills. Similarly, the skills of living in a pluralistic society are intended to arise out of classroom practice where religion is well taught.

Moreover, it can easily be seen that the skills might be applied in very different ways and areas. The skills needed to study religion are, presumably, specifically academic skills and similar to the other skills that might be required for studying any other subject (say, history) although they may be adapted to cope with the uniqueness

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of religion as a field of discourse and as a way of life. They would comprise the skills needed to 'recall, select, organise and deploy knowledge of the specified content' (Edexcel, GCSE, 2004, p. 6). The key skills, however, are intended to be a general product of education. They stand ready for use outside classroom in the workplace or in society at large. Yet these skills are different from 'the skills of living in a pluralistic society'. Such skills are likely to be related to social behaviour and tact, to an understanding of religious taboos and customs, and, one would have thought, be best manifested when informed by attitudes of respect and consideration for other people. In other words, living peacefully in a pluralistic society surely depends more upon attitudes than the technicalities of particular skills.

Then again, consider the rules that governed the utilisation of particular skills. It is hard to imagine simple rules that might inform the general skill of responding thoughtfully to religion and evaluating what is learnt from it. Which aspects of religion? How thoughtfully? What type of learning? Even the rules relating to the study of religion must vary depending upon which aspects of religion are under consideration or whether several religions at once are being contrasted. Are the rules governing the skills needed to study religious ethics identical with the rules governing the skills needed to study religious worship? Probably not, since worship is an activity much less subject to rational investigation than ethics. Ethics concerns the deduction of correct courses of action from general principles (in deontology) or with consequences (in utilitarianism). Worship reflects an emotional understanding of the deity who transcends reason.

Of greater concern than all this is the imprecision of the vocabulary applied to skills. Almost any activity from thinking to mountain climbing could be put into the discourse of skills. We might talk about thinking skills, mountain-climbing skills, swimming skills, novel-writing skills, theatre-directing skills, marriage skills, child-rearing skills and so on. Almost any human endeavour can be fastened onto the word 'skills' as if this explains what is needed. Do marriages fail? Then more marriage skills are needed. Is your novel badly received? Then you need more novel-writing skills. The process of adding the word 'skills' to any activity is such as to remove thought and analysis from it (cf. Barrow 1999).[5] A simple idea is behind this: skills are like a magic substance that we have to add to human activities of any kind, and the more of this magic substance the better. All we have to do is to look at 'good practice' (whatever that is – and that is another question), and then acquire the skills to emulate the good practice. Apart from in some specific areas (like the reading abilities; Nation, Clark and Snowling 2002) there is little or no analysis of why it is that some people are more skilful others. I have heard teachers talk as if, with practice, everybody can acquire all the skills they need to achieve all the purposes they desire.

5 To quote Barrow (1999, p. 133): 'The serious consequence of everybody calling everything indiscriminately a "skill" is that they are losing the ability to note the differences. Whether their casual use of language led them to fail to discriminate, or a failure to discriminate led them to abandon specific terminology, is a question I will not pursue. What seems plain is that there is a widespread tendency both to call everything a "skill" *and*, an appalling error, to see everything on the model of a specific, discrete, physical, trainable behaviour.'

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In addition there is no obvious sequence by which the skills may be acquired in this simplistic model. Each skill can be acquired in any order, at any time and by anybody. There seems to be little recognition that one set of skills, for example, knowing how to hold a pencil must precede another set of skills, for example, writing sentences. Nor is there any obvious theory that links together motor skills and what might be called thinking skills. We do not know whether thinking skills are intended to direct motor skills or whether thinking skills are simply in a domain of their own. Nor do we know, in the skill–rule–knowledge framework, whether we need thinking skills to acquire knowledge or whether we need thinking skills to acquire the rules that might then help us to apply the other skills called for by particular situations. And, if we do not need thinking skills to help us gain knowledge and apply rules correctly, what do we need – knowledge, other rules, other kinds of skill?

If we try to construct an answer to these questions, we shall have to put skills into a developmental sequence that rests on theoretical assumptions. In effect, we return to the mainstream of educational psychology, and this will immediately challenge the slipshod use of language the skills lobby has fostered.

Conclusion

From this discussion of the emergence of skills and application within RE, I wish to draw these conclusions.

First, the emergence of skills into educational discourse probably comes from the language of motor skills and occupational skills as it was mediated through the concerns of the business community. This is to be contrasted with a philosophical understanding of the curriculum based upon knowledge. Skills are knowledge-free.[6] In this respect they are particularly well adapted to the postmodern climate that denies any overarching narrative or absolute knowledge.

Second, skills are egalitarian because they are predicated on the assumption that everybody can acquire them with sufficient effort. Skills are fundamentally seen as being generated by practice and, since they are largely assumed to be disconnected from each other and from any theory of cognitive development, they do not carry the unwelcome weight that a knowledge-based curriculum bears. If you lack knowledge, you are stupid or lazy but if you lack skills, a little training will put this right.

Third, discourse about skills is incoherent. There is no agreed definition of skills, of their breadth, of their relationship to one another, of whether they may be arranged in a hierarchy or are acquired in a set sequence. We do not know whether some skills contain other skills or whether all skills are of the same basic type, that is, there is something they have in common which is why they are called 'skills' in the first place.

Fourth, the assessment of skills is no easier than the assessment of knowledge. Indeed, it may be more difficult to assess skills since it is not clear how they are linked with intellectual output. It is because people possess certain skills they may perform certain actions. But which skills lead to which actions? Hodgson and Spour

6 Even if they may be applied in a skill–rule–knowledge framework.

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(2002) make the point this way, 'early concerns about the practicalities of introducing and assessing core/key skills within all post-16 programmes were borne out by the experience of GNVQ programmes, as several school and college inspection reports testify (e.g. FEFC 1994, HMI 1996)'. In the case of intellectual skills it is not clear which set of skills leads to which sort of intellectual output. There is no direct and observable line joining the invisible skill and the presumed product of that skill in the form of a tangible piece of work.

So, six conclusions relevant to RE can be drawn:

1. It is necessary to distinguish (a) the skills needed to study religion and (b) skills arising from a study of religion. Moreover, if religion is a unique field of discourse, then the study skills required to address it will be, at least partially, different from the skills needed to address other fields of study. So, just as we would expect subject-specific skills to be used for the study of mathematics or French, we would expect subject-specific skills to be used for the study of religion. No one seems to know what these subject-specific skills might be (Schools' Council 1977, p. 17), and this is partly because of disagreement about the nature of religion (cf. Fitzgerald 2000; Milbank 1990).
2. The inclusion of key skills within syllabuses appears to be adding confusion about how teaching should occur and how religion should be studied. If Wolfe's historical analysis is correct, key skills were probably included as part of a drive to ensure that all education provides a useful spin-off for business or the vocations. In this sense, key skills are included within a RE syllabus as a means of further justifying the presence of RE within the curriculum and as a way of attempting to provide unifying threads across a wide variety of disciplines.
3. There appears to be confusion between attitudes (or moral qualities like empathy or tolerance) and skills. To apply the term 'skill' to what is entirely an emotional quality (empathy) appears to be entirely misplaced, a category mistake. Emotion does not belong either to the field of cognition or to the field of motor activity. This, of course, does not mean that there may not be appropriate expression and management of emotion, 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman 1996), but this is a quite different matter. Moreover there is also confusion between the skills and knowledge/concepts so that a failure to distinguish between each leads to curricular incoherence.
4. The realistic assessment of skills appears to be as complicated as the assessment of knowledge. Indeed whereas a traditional understanding of examinations has recognised that knowledge can be directly tapped, skills are much more difficult to unearth since different mental processes may result in similar intellectual outcomes. This is a logical point: unobservable mental processes can only be detected by their consequences. Since the relationship between putative skills and their consequences is uncertain, we do not know if several consequences are the result of one skill or whether one consequence is the result of several skills.
5. The skills identified as relating to RE do not map on to religion as a multidimensional topic of study. The famous six dimensions of religion

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identified by Ninian Smart (1968) do not have any obvious relationship with the skills base that has been identified as being relevant religion. So the skills that are said to be necessary for the study of religion or to be a consequence of studying religion appear to be disconnected from the concept of religion in all its multidimensional glory. And, if religion is viewed in a different way from that advanced by Smart, then how should skills be related to this undefined other model?

6. Such work as has been carried out on the religious element of young people has been in terms of concept and attitudes and not in terms of skills. The work of Goldman (1964) on concepts or Francis on attitudes (Kay and Francis 1996) has ignored a conceptualisation of religion in terms of skills. There is no long-standing literature on the development of religion conceived in terms of skills. We do not know, for instance, whether some religions promote some skills and others promote others. We do not know at which ages certain skills might appear — if indeed age is relevant. The entire study of religion and childhood has been carried out on a different basis from that presumed by skills. Naturally, the study of religion could be restarted but, at the moment, the use of skills within syllabuses or within classrooms and the connection between those skills and religious development is a black hole of ignorance.

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