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# Disciplinary literacy in religious education: the role and relevance of reading

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## ABSTRACT

Although religion has played a key role in reading instruction in many education systems, this position has been challenged by increasing religious diversity and the spread of non-religious worldviews. Simultaneously, there has been growing interest in the role of disciplinary literacy in education (i.e. the ways in which a discipline's knowledge is created, shared and evaluated) as well as the role of the reader. Drawing on classroom observations and interviews in an exploratory study, the article focuses on how adolescents experience reading in religious education (RE). The study shows that students relate meaning-making in RE to developing respect and tolerance, that teachers focus on conceptual understanding while students request a focus on lived religion, and that student meaning-making in RE thrives in a learner-active setting. We discuss the findings in the light of disciplinary reading theory and point towards some disciplinary traditions that should be considered while designing and developing educational practice.

## KEYWORDS

Reading in religious education; meaning-making; religious literacy; disciplinary literacy

## Introduction

In most European countries, Religious Education (RE) has consisted of a denominational or confessional education in Christianity. For example, in Norway, religious education consisted of confessional instruction into the faith of the Norwegian State Church until 1969. From 1969 till 1997, it was a non-confessional, but still denominational, Lutheran Christian education (Bråten 2013, 22–23). With an increasingly non-religious stance among the population, and increasing religious diversity in Europe, the inclusion of religious diversity as well as non-religious worldviews in RE curricula is needed (Bakker and Ter Avest 2014; Jackson 2014). The challenge of moving from a denominational or confessional education in Christianity to coping with diversity in RE has been met in different ways (Bråten 2014; Franken 2017). Moreover, such changes also affect teaching and learning in RE classrooms.

Learning about religions takes place through engaging with academic texts as well as through encounters with religious artefacts, encounters with practitioners, and visits to sites of worship. However, teachers often struggle to strike a balance between engaging students in motivating activities and socialising them into an academic text culture (Greenleaf et al. 2010). Furthermore, different academic disciplines pose different literacy demands on students and teachers. For example, in RE, there is a difference between a confessional education into Christianity and a non-confessional education about religions and worldviews. Therefore, researchers have explored how various disciplines require specialised ways of engaging with academic vocabulary, disciplinary reasoning, the role of the author in creating texts, and how students can successfully negotiate such demands in school, especially for older students (Shanahan and Shanahan 2012).

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This empirical study explores the role of reading in non-confessional, multi-faith RE from a disciplinary literacy perspective. Drawing on interview and observational data involving eight teachers in three Norwegian lower secondary schools, we analyse the role and relevance of reading in non-confessional RE instruction. We find that meaning-making in reading in RE is related to developing respect and tolerance, that there is a discrepancy between teachers' and students' views of the role of reading, and that student meaning-making is negatively influenced by transmission-style pedagogy. Based on these findings, we discuss the role and relevance of reading in developing disciplinary literacy in RE.

## Disciplinary literacy

Academic disciplines are constituted by discourses and demand that readers master complex strategies, such as monitoring their comprehension, engaging in problem-solving, generating questions, and using text structure to understand how information is organised in texts (Alvermann 2002). Academic discourses vary immensely and often require discipline-specific strategies (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008), requiring students to master different epistemologies, strategies of reasoning, overarching concepts, ways of representing information, and specific language structures (Goldman et al. 2016). For example, in history, skilled reading requires that students understand how bias shapes the ways we interpret historical sources (Wineburg 1991). High school and college students progress from memorisation and task completion towards critical thinking when they are given explicit instruction in the strategies historians apply when they read historical texts (Hynd, Holschuh, and Hubbard 2004; Wineburg 1991). This can also be the case for younger students (Shanahan and Shanahan 2014).

Reading in the disciplines requires knowledge of the way information is created, shared, and evaluated for quality within the specific discipline (Shanahan 2017). Reading in a discipline may even require students to master several different disciplinary specific lenses belonging to different sub-fields, such as analysing a literary text through a New Historical lens or a Critical Theory lens (Reynolds and Rush 2017). A disciplinary literacy approach to learning is therefore about understanding how students gain access to these discourses (Moje 2010) and whether they perceive their identities as disciplinary outsiders or insiders (Wickens et al. 2015).

Moje (2008) notes that educators must recognise three central aspects of disciplinary learning. The first is to enable students to understand, over time, how academic discourses are created as a result of human interaction, and what norms for production and communication of knowledge are valued within the different discourses. The second involves showing students that academic learning is, to a certain extent, about identifying with academic discourses. Finally, Moje points out that the ability to identify with an academic discourse requires advanced knowledge of its academic domain as well as some background knowledge. Thus, academic learning processes are not only about obtaining information through reading, but 'understanding how texts represent both the knowledge and the ways of knowing, doing and believing in different discourse communities' (Moje 2008, 103).

## Disciplinary literacy in RE

Several attempts have been made at conceptualising RE through the notion of religious literacy. According to Carr (2007), the tendency in both confessional and non-confessional schools to conceive religious knowledge as a separate discipline in the curriculum may have undermined its value for, or relevance to, students. Carr (2007) suggest that religious literacy (i.e. understanding religions and religious narratives through historical, geographical, and aesthetic lenses) and cross-disciplinary dialogue is a meaningful way of developing RE. However, the concept remains contested and diffuse, in part due to its origins in four different fields: philosophical scholarship stressing the benefits of exposure to information about a variety of worldviews; confessional education oriented towards the formation of religious character and identity; policies emphasising the role of religious

literacy in social cohesion across communities; and sociocultural perspectives of religious literacy as embedded in situated practices and experiences (Lövheim 2012).

In discussing influential theoretical works on religious literacy in the context of RE (Dinham and Francis 2016; Moore 2007; Prothero 2007; Wright 1993), Biesta et al. (2019) acknowledge the importance of the theoretical works, both for contributing to the aims and content of RE, and for justifying the place of the subject in the curriculum by focusing on society (Dinham), culture (Moore, Prothero) and religious education (Wright). They also point to difficulties that the use of the concept religious literacy might lead to. These include: 1) characterising the 'religious' other as a potential problem to be managed; 2) the assumption that being religious is always manifested either as a set of shared propositional beliefs or as adherence to a set of practices or religions. In other words, the concept of religious literacy runs the risk of objectifying religion at the expense of what Vestøl (2016a) terms the 'unsayable' existential dimension of living a religious life. This is especially important if one wants to avoid favouring transmission pedagogy and the question how much knowledge one needs to be religiously literate.

One way of facing these difficulties might be to use religious literacies in the plural sense to signify diversity between as well as within religions. For example, Skerrett (2013) explores how teachers can draw on students' existing multiliteracies to navigate tensions in diverse secular classrooms. However, non-confessional RE builds on several disciplinary traditions from the outsider stance of the study of religion (e.g. sociology and history of religion) (McCutcheon 1999) as well as on traditions from within religions (e.g. theology) and integrates aspects from both 'textbook religion' and 'lived religion' (Vestøl 2016b; Ammerman 2016). Moreover, the question of integrating non-religious worldviews into RE (Bråten and Everington 2019) brings further disciplinary traditions into the subject. Consequently, teachers and students in non-confessional RE must engage with text from various disciplines, examining religious phenomena and non-religious worldviews from a variety of perspectives and using quite different sets of discursive conventions.

Although the role of disciplinary reading is thoroughly documented in subject areas such as science, mathematics, English language arts, and history (Ford and Forman 2006; Rainey and Moje 2012; Spitzer 2011; Wineburg and Reisman 2015), disciplinary reading in RE, and in particular the role of the reader in meaning-making processes, is in need of further exploration. We use a disciplinary literacy perspective to explore how teachers and students make sense of reading in non-confessional RE. The research question guiding this study is: *What meaning-making aspects are important for teachers and students related to reading in RE?* We discuss how the findings point towards some disciplinary traditions of the subject that can make teachers and students aware of disciplinary approaches to reading in RE classrooms.

## Materials and methods

Qualitative research focuses on 'the interpretation and negotiation of the meanings of the social world' (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015, 61). Therefore, we use qualitative empirical research methods in this exploratory study to get access to the experiences and reflections of teachers and students on reading in RE. The study was approved by the Norwegian national review board. Data were collected in three lower secondary schools in Norway. We observed 26 RE lessons in four classes from January–May and August–September 2017. The focus was on reading in the RE classroom. Field notes recorded researchers' observations of, and comments on, events and practices during the lessons. We also conducted semi-structured group interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015) with 22 students in eight groups selected by the teachers. The selection criterion was that the students chosen to participate in a group could cooperate well in an interview situation. The interviews started with open questions asking what the students thought of RE and whether they thought RE was important, then focused on how they worked with RE, how they worked with reading in RE, and what they learnt in the subject. The teachers were interviewed alone. Due to sick leave and organisational changes, eight teachers were involved with RE this period; however, we were able to interview only six of

them. After describing their professional background, they gave their opinion on reading in general and, more specifically, on reading in RE. We then asked for their opinions on the knowledge and competencies that reading in RE would lead to, and what knowledge and competencies they as teachers needed to teach RE.

Interviews were transcribed and interview transcripts and field notes were then coded. A process of analytic memo-writing started during the first observations and interviews and continued throughout the period of data gathering and the coding processes. We chose a thematic approach to analysis, using holistic, initial, in vivo, and focused approaches to coding (Saldaña 2016). Holistic coding was initially used to get an overview of the basic topics of the observations and interviews. Two findings emerged from this first holistic coding process: the teachers' focus on conceptual learning, and the distinction between insider and outsider perspectives on religion. Initial coding and in vivo coding were used to delve deeper into the material, reflect on the contents and nuances of the data, and emphasise the students' voices (Saldaña 2016, 105, 115). The initial codes were transformed from first to second cycles of coding through a focused coding process (Saldaña 2016, 239), giving some initial categories that were condensed to two main categories, 'Students' view of the subject' and 'Students' experiences of the subject'. Coding and analytic memo-writing revealed the teachers' view on reading in RE, as well as how the students viewed the subject, the importance of the subject, and challenges in the subject. In this way, based on observations and interviews, the teachers' and students' attitudes to reading in RE emerged.

## Results

The study resulted in three main findings. Firstly, for the students, meaning-making in reading in RE is closely related to the purpose of developing respect and tolerance. Secondly, there was a discrepancy in the view of reading to learn in RE. While the teachers understood learning in RE as developing conceptual understanding based on representations of religion in textbooks, the students underlined the role of lived experience, and encounters with sites of worship and representatives from various religions, to build background knowledge. Thirdly, students reported that meaning-making in RE was negatively influenced by a transmission-style pedagogy and suggested that exploratory and inquiry-oriented styles of teaching would be more productive.

### *Meaning-making through developing respect and tolerance for 'the other'*

The importance of RE was one of the themes of the interview, and most students related subject importance to relevance. For example, one of the interviews was conducted during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, and relevance was reflected in this student's reply while considering the importance of RE:

It is important that we can understand each other. If someone ... like now, there are some who are fasting, and since we have RE, we know why they are fasting, so ... And otherwise we wouldn't have understood ... if we had not learned about it.

By relating RE knowledge about Ramadan and fasting to the practice of some of his fellow students, he was able to see that the knowledge of RE was important for the understanding of an everyday situation at school. However, acknowledging the importance did not necessarily involve experiencing relevance. One student interrupted the interviewer while being asked if the subject matter was important to him, and said, 'I realise it's important to learn about the different [religions] ... But I do not feel that it's important to me, in a way, to learn it.' In this way, he indicated that for him there was a disjunction between the subject's importance in general and the subject's relevance to him.

The students who stated that RE was important also emphasised respect and tolerance as a learning outcome. For instance, when being asked if the subject was important, one student answered 'absolutely' and elaborated by talking about the importance of respect for different religions. Another student stressed respect and tolerance as important outcomes of RE knowledge

by saying: 'I think it is very important, because when we learn about ... respect and tolerance, those are two very important things that we need to bring with us in everyday life all the time'. The students also expressed the belief that knowledge of other cultures and other religions made the subject important, as this knowledge led to greater understanding and respect. The focus on wanting to learn about 'the others' was prominent in the student interviews. One of the students commented that 'I'd like to have given priority to the other religions that I do not know so much about.' It seemed like learning about their own religious tradition, mainly Christianity, did not appeal as much as did learning about other religions or beliefs.

### *Meaning-making through conceptual understanding and lived religion*

All teachers said that conceptual understanding was the main challenge the students faced in RE. They pointed out that, in such a complex subject, it was important to get an understanding of words and expressions and their conceptual content and meaning. As one of the teachers stated, 'work with concepts first, then work with the context of the chapter or the text.' Observations in the classes confirmed that working with words and concepts was central to many of the lessons, especially at the beginning of a new theme. This was demonstrated when one teacher challenged the class to find difficult words in a text they read. After a while, the teacher invited students to step forward and write the words on the blackboard so the whole class could participate in defining the meaning. In the interviews, the teachers emphasised that it was important for students to have a good understanding of concepts because it helped them to gain an overview of the subject.

The students, on the other hand, said they did not experience conceptual learning as a major challenge. As one student said, 'It is normally explained in the margin of the textbook what the difficult words mean. So, you just look in the book and you will usually find it'. If there were words that they did not understand, and which were not explained in the textbook, they said that they just 'ask the teacher'. However, it was not only subject-specific words and phrases that were difficult for students to understand. Observations revealed that, just as often, non-academic abstract words challenged the students' understanding. For example, a couple of students did not understand the phrase *facing* in a sentence about missionaries facing non-Christian nations in the nineteenth century. Therefore, it seemed important to let the students themselves define what words they needed to have explained in order to get a fuller understanding of a text. For example, one student said of their teacher, 'He normally asks us what we think is difficult, and then we tell him which words, and so we take it together, really. Those who know it say what it means, and so on.' In this way, this teacher involved the students in both defining and explaining the difficult words in the text.

The disciplinary aspect of RE highlighted by the students most notably appeared when they talked about encountering the religions, including Christianity, from an insider's perspective, not in a persuasive, but in an informative way. However, this rarely happened in the classroom; it mainly occurred while visiting holy places and buildings on planned excursions to such places. Three of the four classes had visited a synagogue and the students in these classes mentioned this visit as an example of learning that had made an impact. To see that belonging to a particular religion and professing a certain faith could lead to implications for how people lived their daily life had clearly made an impression. As one girl said: 'To see what their kitchen is like, that they have two dishwashers, how they have ... wow ... how they ... yes, all the things they had there. All the information.' This glimpse of lived religion had added a new dimension to her reading and to her knowledge, both disclosing limitations in the ways reading had been performed in the actual class and revealing possible ways of extending and strengthening reading in RE. Thus, the concept of lived religion stood out as an important disciplinary aspect of reading in RE for the students.

### *Meaning-making in a learner-active setting*

When being asked what they did most in RE, the students answered unanimously that they read a lot, and that the teacher explained, often using PowerPoint presentations. Although most students

found RE important, the ways teachers taught the subject made the importance not always evident to them. Compared with other subjects, they found the teaching in RE rather unengaging and slightly demotivating. 'It's mainly the same things. PowerPoint, read, write', as one student summarised the RE lessons.

Observations and interviews show that the textbook was the main source for reading in the RE classroom. However, most students said they would like to do things in RE that were more practical. By practical, the students meant more student-engaged, more creative, and involving more hands-on learning. As one of them said, 'we do not visit the religions.' Moreover, they did not always see the necessity of learning the content in the way the textbook presented it. They thought too much of it related to history, and even though some thought history was fun, others had different opinions:

Occasionally, it can be quite tedious and boring if we just sit and read about the story, or history, in religion and about religions and such. However, when we are more active, and it is a bit more about cultures and religions, then it is more fun.

In this way, the student expressed that the subject concerned him more when he took an active attitude to learning in order to experience the content as being in some way relevant to him.

One girl requested more texts from different religions so that the students could read and interpret them in order to form their own opinions. Furthermore, she suggested that they could compare their own interpretations with those of people belonging to the religions: 'And so, in a way, a bit more like ... their way versus our way of interpreting a particular religion, then, somehow', she said, laughing a bit, as if the suggestion was unthinkable. However, it fully corresponds with the competence aims of the Norwegian RE curriculum after Year 10, which state that the student should be enabled to 'discuss and elaborate on selected texts' from different religions and worldviews (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2015). The students said that the only religious text they had encountered in full in the classroom was the Bible; they had only read excerpts from other religious texts in the textbook. However, the interviews revealed that they did not actually read the Bible, saying that 'it was mostly about how to search and find'. The task that all the classes had been given was to search for certain scriptures. When they had found the right book, chapter and verse in the Bible, the content seemed to be of less relevance. The important thing was to be able to search for and find scripture passages in the Bible. In some of the classes, they did not even read the texts they looked up. In this way, they learnt the technical side of exploring a religious text, but they were not enabled to discuss and elaborate on the texts.

Observations and interviews exposed a key challenge for the students; they wanted the subject to concern them. This was mainly expressed when the students talked about the purpose of the subject as developing respect and tolerance, the content of the subject as more than mere conceptual understanding, and the teaching of the subject as more than transmission of knowledge. They preferred a learner-active setting rather than a teacher-directed RE classroom.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of reading in non-confessional, multi-faith RE from a disciplinary literacy perspective. A disciplinary approach to reading, with its focus on specialised knowledge and skills (Greenleaf et al. 2010), emphasises both what kind of knowledge is important and in what ways reading should be done to gain access to this particular knowledge (Shanahan, Shanahan, and Misischia 2011). Furthermore, a disciplinary literacy perspective involves showing students that academic learning is about identifying with academic discourses and understanding what norms for the production and communication of knowledge are valued within these discourses (Moje 2008). Given the many sub-fields involved in RE, adopting this perspective is likely to be both valuable and challenging for teachers in the transition from confessional traditions to a diverse and multi-faith classroom.

Non-confessional, multi-faith RE has been criticised for ignoring the existential dimension of living a religious life (Moulin 2011; Vestøl 2016b). The concept of religious literacy has been met with the same criticism (Biesta et al. 2019). Also, a narrow conceptualisation of religious literacy focusing mainly on the transmission of information is not likely to foster student curiosity. By contrast, disciplinary literacy requires students to familiarise themselves with the subject content (e.g. specialised concepts or the grand narratives of religions (Carr 2007)) as well as with the various disciplines contributing to reasoning about religious phenomena (Vermeer 2012). Furthermore, there is an extensive body of empirical literature on disciplinary literacy from various contexts showing the benefits of integrating active meaning-making (Shanahan and Shanahan 2012).

A learner-active approach to reading in multi-faith RE requires teachers to frame texts as open to interpretation. This in turn means that teachers must introduce students to different interpretive traditions. For example, Vestøl (2016a) suggests applying perspectives from disciplines such as theology and philosophy as well as using analogies from music or empirical material on religious experience. This indicates that a descriptive outsider stance towards religions and worldviews, prominent in both religious literacy and lived religion discourses, is not always sufficient when dealing with existential questions in RE. Additionally, hermeneutics as a happening of education (Aldridge 2018), as a way of approaching religions interpretively (Panjwani and Revell 2018; Pett and Cooling 2018), and as an interpretive approach to texts (Bowie 2018) might facilitate knowledge about the existential dimension of religions in a learner-active way. We therefore believe that disciplinary literacy in RE should be developed by combining outsider perspectives from academic disciplines with insider perspectives on religious phenomena.

A disciplinary literacy perspective does not give primacy to cognitive learning theories in RE (Afdal 2015). Rather, disciplinary literacy theory is rooted in sociolinguistics and its emphasis on discourse communities (Gee 2015). We therefore suggest that meaning-making in RE requires attention to 1) differences between insider and outsider perspectives and 2) contextual (Leganger-Krogstad 2013) and interpretive (Jackson 2016, 1997) approaches, particularly when facilitating an impartial, objective, critical, and pluralistic RE.

A lived religion perspective focusing on embodiment, discourse, and materiality could diminish the objectification of religious phenomena by shifting the focus from religious communities and traditions to individual agency and autonomy (Ammerman 2016). Encountering lived religion in a learner-active way (e.g. by exploring buildings, artefacts, art, texts, and practices) introduces students to diversity across and within religions, whether in face-to-face interaction or by virtual means. Encountering the insider view, as described by students in our study, enhances and expands knowledge about (and possibly understanding of) the particular religion. This approach would familiarise students with the different epistemologies, overarching concepts, and ways of representing information associated with RE. Therefore, we propose that greater awareness of the many academic traditions that inform RE could provide the students with disciplinary relevant strategies.

This study shows that students are able to value knowledge in RE as useful for the development of practical respect and tolerance (Anker and Afdal 2018). Although 'the other' is sometimes framed as a problematic issue, one can also interpret the focus on 'the other' as an expression of positioning of the self and the other (Van Langenhove and Harré 1999) and as curiosity towards the unknown. For example, working with the insider/outsider problem (McCutcheon 1999) could provide students with disciplinary tools for reasoning about otherness. Similarly, developing awareness of how we position ourselves and others in social discourses (Harré and Van Langenhove 1999) could nurture student curiosity. Given the new role of religious diversity and non-religious worldviews in RE curricula, the approaches suggested here could therefore contribute to a greater understanding of disciplinary literacy in RE.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.



## Notes on contributors

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