PRS Beyond Boundaries

Author: Andy Cochrane and Clare Saunders

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Introduction

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that a great deal of the learning and teaching of philosophical and religious studies (henceforth 'PRS'?an umbrella term for the cluster of disciplines supported by the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, including philosophy; theology; religious studies; history and philosophy of science, technology and medicine) in higher education takes place outside of 'core' PRS departments?for instance, by means of specialist PRS courses which are an element of other degree programmes (e.g. ethics for medical students) or PRS components in interdisciplinary programmes (e.g. area studies). However, it is often difficult to find out more about such provision?for example, to what extent do such courses draw upon the resources of 'core' departments and programmes (and vice versa)? What (if any) are the distinctive challenges and opportunities of teaching 'PRS beyond boundaries', and how might these be addressed most effectively?

The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies thus decided to undertake an exploratory survey of 'PRS

beyond boundaries' in order to discover more about such provision, and to gain a more complete picture of the true size, nature and diversity of PRS learning and teaching in higher education.

The 'Beyond Boundaries' Project: Design and Methods

The following aims and objectives were established for this project:

- To produce a map of PRS teaching outside core PRS departments;
- To identify key learning and teaching issues for this constituency;
- To explore what support would be useful to this constituency, and how the work of the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies might address these needs and interests.

It was hoped that the project would thereby contribute towards an improved understanding of the extent and nature of PRS learning and teaching in UK higher education; and thus assist the Subject Centre for PRS in developing provision that is tailored to meet the needs of our diverse academic community, including those working 'beyond boundaries' of philosophical and religious studies departments. (See section 5 of this report for further details of the Subject Centre's response to the project findings.)

In order to achieve these objectives, the project began by conducting a survey of the PRS academic community. It was acknowledged that this was unlikely to be a comprehensive study?of its nature, 'PRS beyond boundaries' te aching may often be found in unexpected areas of the academy, may not be well connected with the 'core' PRS community and, thus, may be difficult to reach. However, it was hoped that this preliminary scoping study would give at least a flavour of 'PRS beyond boundaries' provision that could form the basis for further investigation or development if appropriate.

An informal survey was designed, which asked the following questions:

- Do you teach philosophical, theological or religious studies in UK HE, but are not based in a PRS department?
- What are you teaching and in which department are you teaching it?
- Which academic subject(s) do you identify with?

The survey was circulated in October 2008 via discipline-specific email discussion lists, subject association newsletters, the Subject Centre for PRS's own website and journal, and the other Subject Centres in the Higher Education Academy. (See Appendix 1 for further details of the survey design and distribution.) In each case, recipients were encouraged to assist with 'viral marketing' of the survey by circulating further to colleagues to whom it might be of interest?in this way, it was hoped to address the challenge of reaching PRS lecturers based in 'unlikely' de partments.

Survey responses were supplemented by the following means:

- Searches of university websites to identify PRS-related teaching provision in non-PRS departments?to pr ovide a rough-and-ready baseline against which to assess the representativeness of survey responses;
- Follow-up telephone interviews with a sample of survey respondents?to obtain more in-depth information ab out a range of 'PRS beyond boundaries' provision (captured via a series of case studies?see section 5 and Ap pendix 2 of this report for further details);
- Additional background information provided by colleagues in other Subject Centres about the role of PRS

teaching in their disciplines.

The information collated via these methods was used to produce the desired map of PRS provision outside core PRS departments (see section 3 of this report), and as data for analysing any distinctive features and challenges of 'PRS beyond boundaries' (section 4).

Project Findings I: a (Partial) Map of 'Philosophical and Religious Studies Beyond Boundaries'

Survey responses

A total of 27 survey responses were received by the end of January 2009.[1] Responses have come from academics teaching in the following departments:

- Nursing, Midwifery & Physiotherapy (3)
- Psychology (3)
- Lifelong Learning (2)
- Politics & International Relations (2)
- Sport, Health and Social Sciences (2)
- Biology (1)
- Chemistry (1)
- Cognitive Science (1)
- Computer Sciences (1)
- French (1)
- Geography and Anthropology (1)
- Humanities Advanced Technology and Information Institute [HATII] (1)
- Law (1)
- Life Science (1)
- Sociology, Politics and Policy (1)

Of these twenty-two respondents (the remaining five respondents either did not have, or did not specify, a non-PRS department in which they were based), seventeen are involved in teaching philosophy modules (or modules in which philosophical topics are central), and at least eight are involved in the teaching of theology or religious studies (TRS) modules (or modules in which TRS topics are central). At least three respondents were involved in teaching both philosophy and TRS topics.

Out of the full twenty-seven respondents, fifteen also replied to the question 'which academic subject(s) do you identify with?'. Out of these fifteen replies, seven reported that they identified, inter alia, with PRS academic subjects; one identified with no academic subjects (asserting that they were 'optimistic about being trans-disciplinary'); and seven did not report that they primarily identified with PRS academic subjects.

Two respondents reported certain PRS topics and issues are quite commonplace in (a) the teaching of research methodology, and (b) the teaching of biology.

Supplementary desk research

Following up on the survey responses, it was initially intended that a random sample of university websites would be searched, in order to identify how widespread PRS-relevant teaching is in non-PRS departments, in the areas identified by survey respondents. However, this attempt to get a snapshot of the breadth of teaching by taking a sample of universities was abandoned due to the fact that different departments within different universities often provide very different degrees of information regarding their modules, and some universities offer much clearer module lists and information than others. It was therefore decided that a simple accumulative acquisition of data on PRS teaching in non-PRS departments would be preferable.

The web-searches did not try to locate ethics teaching in non- PRS departments, since this is already well-documented, and would have needlessly swamped the mapping of non-ethics PRS teaching provision. [2]

The early results of these searches indicate that there is widespread teaching of PRS in the following non-PRS departments:

- French?French philosophical thought (e.g. London, Leeds, Exeter, Sheffield, Bristol)
- Classics?ancient philosophy (e.g. Leeds, Exeter, Durham, Newcastle)
- Psychology?psychology of religion (Newcastle, Ulster, Cambridge, Heythrop); transpersonal psychology (e.g. Northampton, Liverpool John Moore's, University of Wales); and experiential modules in religion (Northampton)
- Nursing and Midwifery?spirituality and health (e.g. Nottingham, Aberdeen, Staffordshire)

Also, and less surprisingly, modules engaging with PRS issues/topics are commonly taught in Law, History and Politics departments.

This additional research has thus identified some disparities with the results of the survey?viz., no survey responses came from staff in Classics departments, and only one response came from staff in French departments. Follow-up work may therefore be useful to explore further the nature of PRS provision in these fields.

Web-based searches have also found PRS teaching within the following additional departments:

- Russian (Philosophy and Religious Studies: Literature, Religion and Value)
- German (Philosophy and Religious Studies)
- History of Art (Philosophy: Aesthetics)
- School of the Built Environment (Philosophy: Philosophy of Design)
- Archaeology (Religious Studies: Ancient Religion)
- Business School (Philosophy)
- Computer Sciences/Cognitive Science (Philosophy: Philosophy of Cognitive Science, Philosophy of Mind, Logic)
- English (Philosophy and Religious Studies: e.g., 'Metaphysics and Melancholy', 'The Bible and Literature')
- Sociology (Religion: e.g. Religion and Social Thought)

Additionally, colleagues in other Subject Centres provided further general information about the role of PRS in the teaching of their disciplines:

- Architecture?philosophy is often taught, but generally not by philosophers;
- Geography?most undergraduates do some philosophy when they study the history of their discipline.

Summary of findings

As anticipated, the project findings do not yet constitute a comprehensive map of the field, but rather a sample of PRS provision outside core PRS departments. However, although a project of this small scale is not alone sufficient to furnish definitive data on the extent of PRS 'beyond boundaries' in a quantitative sense (how many courses, students etc.), it does perhaps already suffice to illustrate its scope in a qualitative sense?that is, the range and diversity of su ch provision. Even this brief informal survey has identified examples of PRS teaching in all major 'faculty level' subject groups?physical and life sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities, as well as vocational degree programmes.3

It should be noted that the current survey has identified more 'philosophical' provision than that relating to theology and religious studies, or to history and philosophy of science, technology and medicine. Without further research it is difficult to be clear whether this is a true reflection of the state of 'PRS beyond boundaries', or merely an artefact of the current project's methods?given our reliance on 'viral' distribution, this result may simply be a product of the fact th at there exists a well-established email discussion list for philosophy, with well over 4,000 subscribers.4

Project Findings II: Key Features and Challenges of 'Beyond Boundaries' Provision

The range of PRS provision identified by this survey does, however, present a challenge when it comes to answering our additional research questions?namely: what are the key learning and teaching issues for this constituency, and wh at support would be useful??insofar as the diversity of the field makes it difficult to furnish any meaningful ge neralisations about distinctive features, needs and interests of 'the PRS beyond boundaries constituency'.

One common theme, explicitly identified by three survey respondents (and perhaps tacit in others), is the challenge of developing PRS provision beyond 'core' departments?particularly if there is no such core PRS department at the hi gher education institution in question. Comments included 'it can be a lonely task', and 'so I'm very keen to... find how best to support [philosophy] in this kind of way'.

Beyond this, it is difficult to discern many distinct patterns or commonalities across PRS 'beyond boundaries' provision?excepting, perhaps, the widespread practice of teaching applied ethics (which is already relatively well es tablished),5 PRS teaching outside core departments is fairly eclectic. Other trends in curriculum content arguably include the teaching of spirituality and faith; and PRS dimensions of 'cultural studies' (broadly construed to encompass literature, language and area studies, history and classics)?but such analysis is at best provisional on the ev idence of this project alone.

Of course, such diversity also problematises the task of providing appropriately tailored support to the academic community/ies in question?for example, how might one best support the sharing of teaching practices in this field (and he nce address the challenge of developing PRS teaching in relative isolation from 'core' provision, as identified above), when the field itself is so varied and, as a result of this, it is often unclear how much such teachers will have in common? It is thus likely that this survey will provide just the first step in an ongoing programme of enhancing our understanding of, and support for, 'PRS beyond boundaries'.

What next?

Limitations of the current study and scope for further research

The current project methods?informal survey plus web-based research?clearly fall short of a robust and comprehensive study of the field. It is likely that the 'map' of PRS provision thereby obtained is at best partial, for a number of reasons, including the following:

- There may be significant PRS teaching embedded in a range of modules taught by members of staff in non-PRS departments that is not specifically mentioned in module descriptions (and thus not readily identified by means of web-based research).
- Relatedly, some of those teaching PRS topics/issues in non- PRS departments may not see themselves as teaching PRS (and thus may not easily be reached by the 'viral marketing' survey approach adopted for this project).[6]

As indicated in section 3 above, there are also some surprising gaps in the findings?not least the absence of any significant history and philosophy of science provision?which further suggests that this map of 'PRS beyond boundaries' is not yet complete.

It is possible that a more complete picture could be obtained by further extending the survey, for instance by designing and circulating a number of more discipline-specific versions which include tailored examples to encourage respondents to identify relevant PRS provision (e.g. 'do you teach science students ethics, philosophy of science...?'). It is far from guaranteed, though, that this would generate significant further responses, let alone a comprehensive set of data. However, it is proposed to continue the survey via the project website (**http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/beyond_boundaries/**), and to update periodically the findings of this study in light of further responses.

An alternative approach might be instead to supplement the existing survey by targeting students as well as academic staff?e.g. 'are you studying for a non-PRS degree, but have studied PRS-related topics?'?but this raises further challenges of how to distribute such a survey effectively.[7] It is thus likely that any such study would merely provide further samples of such provision, rather than furnishing a definitive picture. (It may, however, prove fruitful to explore whether students' perspectives of key learning and teaching issues, and what support would be useful, are the same as those of their teachers.)

In light of these considerations, it was decided instead to supplement the 'broad brush' survey findings with a set of in-depth case studies which would provide more detailed snapshots of 'PRS beyond boundaries' provision in a range of contexts.

Further activity to support Philosophical and Religious Studies 'beyond boundaries'

In order to capture the diversity of 'PRS beyond boundaries' provision, and to explore in more depth the learning and teaching issues raised thereby, a representative sample of survey respondents were invited to contribute case studies of their teaching. It is hoped that these will provide both a 'showcase' of the range of philosophical and religious studies teaching in UK higher education, and also a resource which can be used and adapted by other teachers of these subjects. The following case studies are currently available from the project website (**http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/beyond_boundaries/**):

- History of Art
- History and Philosophy of Science
- French
- Cognitive Science

- Psychology of Religion
- Spirituality and Responsibility

The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies will continue to encourage PRS teachers to contribute further case studies to be added to this database.

The Subject Centre for PRS will also seek to develop networks or 'special interest groups' in order to assist 'PRS beyond boundaries' teachers in countering the sense of isolation commonly expressed (see section 4 of this report) and in establishing contacts with colleagues in Andy Cochrane and Clare Saunders?PRS Beyond Boundaries similar fields to facilitate the sharing of teaching practices. In the first instance, these will focus on areas which currently lack tailored support (and thus will not include applied ethics, for which several such special interest groups already exist), where the 'beyond boundaries' study has identified a significant amount of PRS learning and teaching, such as:

- Teaching spirituality and faith?e.g. psychology of religion, medicine, health sciences and practices, applied social sciences
- Teaching PRS in cultural and area studies?e.g. philosophy and religion in modern languages; ancient philosophy and religion

The survey findings indicate that, in many cases, teachers of such PRS topics do not identify themselves primarily (if at all) as PRS academics; therefore such networks will be developed in collaboration with other Subject Centres and subject associations as appropriate.

Interested parties are invited to contact the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies with suggestions for networks or for further details (see below for contact information). The Subject Centre will provide support and assistance in setting up such networks, although it is anticipated that these will become self-sustaining. Subject Centre support may also be available for the development of any network resources (e.g. learning and teaching materials).

Sources of further information

Full details of the 'Philosophical and Religious Studies Beyond Boundaries' project?including a list of PRS-related courses identified by the survey, and the case studies developed?are available from the project website: **http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/beyond_boundaries/**.

Additional information about the project, including the proposed 'special interest groups', is also available by contacting Clare Saunders (Senior Academic Co-ordinator, Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies): **clare@prs.heacademy.ac.uk**.

The project website also provides a number of links to other relevant resources on PRS-related topics such as:

- Ethics?including an online guide (Approaches to Ethics in Higher Education: Teaching Ethics Across the Curriculum); a database of case studies; and details of resources available from the Inter-Disciplinary Ethics. Applied Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning
- Cultural and religious diversity and 'faith literacy'? including case studies and an annotated bibliography of relevant web resources.
- Education for sustainable development?including annotated bibliographies and details of PRS-related courses in a range of UK higher education institutions.

Appendix 1:'Philosophical and Religious Studies Beyond Boundaries' Survey

The survey below was circulated as follows:

- Discipline-specific email announcements and discussion lists, e.g. Philos-L, Dolmen.[8]
- Subject association newsletters, e.g. the British Association for the Study of Religions bulletin.
- Publicity on the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies website, and in Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies.
- Colleagues in other Subject Centres of the Higher Education Academy, for distribution to their own discipline-specific networks.[9]

In each case, colleagues were encouraged to tailor the content to their discipline context, for example by using specific relevant examples.

Scoping Study of Provision of PRS Subjects Outside Core Departments

Do you teach philosophical, theological or religious studies in UK HE, but are not based in a PRS department?

We at the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies (PRS) are beginning a scoping study of PRS provision in non-PRS departments. ('PRS' subjects include philosophy; theology; religious studies; history and philosophy of science, technology and medicine.)

Just as there are learning and teaching issues that are specific to philosophical and religious studies, and which the Subject Centre for PRS aims to support, we feel there are similar specific issues involved in teaching courses with a PRS element to non-specialists, such as natural and social scientists, literature students, artists or historians. We would like to hear from you if you are teaching PRS subjects outside a philosophy or theology and religious studies department, to find out more about the courses you are teaching or contributing to, and how we might best support you in this.

We aim to produce a map of current provision, an analysis of key learning and teaching issues for this constituency, and, depending on responses received, to initiate special interest groups for PRS academics working outside PRS departments, to facilitate practicesharing and networking.

If you are involved in the teaching of philosophical or religious studies in a non-PRS department, and would like to share your experiences and/or to suggest ways in which the Subject Centre for PRS could support you, please email **clare@prs.heacademy.ac.uk**. For the initial mapping exercise, we are particularly interested in the following:

- What are you teaching and in which department are you teaching it?
- Which academic subject(s) do you identify with?

We would be grateful if you could assist us by disseminating this call as widely as possible to your colleagues working outside core philosophy, theology or religious studies departments.

Appendix 2:'Philosophical and Religious Studies Beyond Boundaries' Case Study Template

The following template was used for capturing case studies of 'PRS beyond boundaries' provision, by means of telephone interviews with a sample of survey respondents. The case studies are available from the Subject Centre for PRS's website: **http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/beyond_boundaries/**.

1. Curriculum and intended learning outcomes

- Department / subject / discipline area
- Topic
- Number of times you have taught this topic (or courses with similar topics involved)
- Mode of delivery
- Intended learning outcome(s) - have these changed / been made easier / more detailed
- Student resources
- Level of study
- Pre-requisites

2. Activity

- General approach
- Learning task(s) / how the learners carried out the tasks

3. People involved

- Number of learners
- Learner characteristics

4.Assessment

- Method of assessment

5. Outcomes for learners

- Learner feedback or formal / informal observations from learners during course

6. Reflections

- Benefits and opportunities from taking the approach you did (what worked well / benefits to approach taken?)
- Problems and risks (what worked less well / risks taking this approach / teaching these topics)
- Advice you would give to another practitioner planning to deliver a similar activity or use a similar approach
- Other reflections - (a) on the process of planning / delivering the teaching; (b) on further developments that you may undertake; (c) on anything you have learned as a result of this teaching

Endnotes

- The survey 'deadline' of end January 2009 was a notional cut-off point for the purposes of compiling this project report. Further responses have been received since this date, and it is hoped to provide ongoing updates to the map of 'PRS beyond boundaries' provision via the project website: **http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/beyond_boundaries/**.

- For further details of ethics teaching, see for example the outcomes of the ETHICS project: **http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/ethics/index.html**.

- It also seems likely that PRS provision is an element of many (if not all) degree programmes not identified via this project?e.g. medicine (ethics and/or history of medicine), literature (philosophy and religion), engineering (e thics). The project focused on PRS-specific courses within degree programmes, and thus is likely to have overlooked any provision which is embedded within other modules but not explicitly characterised as PRS in module descriptions, for instance.

- The discussion list in question is Philosophy in Europe (Philos-L): **http://listserv.liv.ac.uk/archives/philos-l.html?4,269** subscribers as at 8 April 2009.

- See note 3 above for details of previous Subject Centre research and resources in this field.

- Indeed, one of the survey respondents raises precisely this point: 'However, possibly many [biologists] would not regard themselves as teaching philosophy'.

- As many academic colleagues will be aware, existing student surveys such as in-house course evaluation questionnaires or the National Student Survey present significant logistical challenges. It would be still more challenging to conduct an effective national survey without recourse to such institutional mechanisms.

- See note 5 above for details of Philos-L. Dolmen is an English-language electronic discussion list sponsored by the European Association for the Study of Religions (**http://easr.eu/dolmen.html**).

- The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies is part of a network of 24 Subject Centres, who collectively provide discipline-specific support for all subjects in UK higher education: **http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/networks/subjectcentres**.

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