

LASAR newsletter No. 2 (October 2010)

Dear Reader,

This is the second of our termly newsletters about the LASAR project and is emailed to all who requested it and those who are working on the project with us. If this has been forwarded to you and you would like to join our email list, please contact our PI, Berry Billingsley (b.billingsley@reading.ac.uk <mailto:b.billingsley@reading.ac.uk>) or our researcher, Helen Newdick at h.s.newdick@reading.ac.uk <mailto:h.s.newdick@reading.ac.uk>. You will find a section giving background on the project towards the end of this newsletter.

Website news

Our website continues to grow and we are delighted to announce that in addition to Year 7 content, the content for Years 8 and 9 is now live. You can find it at <http://www.faradayschools.com>

For each of these year groups there are pages for pupils and for teachers, looking at, for example: The Big Bang, Creation and Noah's Ark (Year 7); Scientific evidence, Galileo and the nature of science (Year 8); Darwin, Miracles and How life began (Year 9).

The pages for Years 8 & 9 were produced with the help of pupils from Maiden Erlegh secondary school in Reading who, in June, hosted our FaradaySchools workshop on Darwin and Galileo (which saw a swift costume change by our actor colleague, Peter Casey).

Professor Sir Colin Humphreys talks about how as a research scientist he understands miracles and Professor Jim Al-Khalili touches on the relationship between Islam and evolution.

In the Year 7 content, as well as pages for pupils, there are PowerPoints to show on the Interactive whiteboard. Similar whiteboard activities are on their way for Years 8 and 9 and we will be working on new content for Yrs 10 - 13 over the coming months.

If you'd be willing to help us write teacher session plans for any of our units or advise us as to topics we could usefully cover, please let Berry Billingsley know (b.billingsley@reading.ac.uk <mailto:b.billingsley@reading.ac.uk>). We'd be very glad of your support and have a small budget to offer those who write teacher notes.

Please contact us too if you would be interested in hosting a workshop at your school. These (like our website) are free.

Research progress

Over the summer term we conducted interviews in our research schools with pupils in Years 7, 9 and 11 and are now transcribing those interviews, before embarking on follow-up interviews in early 2011. We are also processing the data from the pupil surveys which have been completed by our seven research schools. Both the surveys and the interviews look at pupils' ideas about science, religion and the relationship between them. We would be glad to have two more schools taking part in the research project. If you can help, please let us know.

Conference sessions and accompanying papers

In August, Berry presented a paper about pupils and teachers' thinking about apparent contradictions between science and religion at the Association of Tutors in Science Education conference in Crewe. In September, Berry presented a follow-up paper at the British Educational Research Association, held at the University of Warwick. This paper is available as a download from our research website, www.lasarpj.com where we regularly post findings and updates.

We are planning a one-day conference for teachers and academics who are interested in pupils' thinking about science and religion and this will be held in Cambridge towards the end of the summer term, 2012. If you would be interested in chairing or contributing to a session at the conference, or can give us your thoughts about the best dates for teachers, we'd be glad to hear from you.

Background about the project

The LASAR, Learning about Science and Religion, Project was motivated by a concern that there is a strong public perception (reinforced by some popular media) that science and religion are in some sense opposites, that is that

science is an atheistic activity. In particular, we were concerned that school pupils may come to accept this as a normative standard: something that is both incorrect, and which could deter students who hold religious faith from considering science as a suitable basis of future study and career. Such an effect would not only be unfortunate when there is widespread concern about the limited numbers of young people seriously considering science careers, but in principle could set up a self-fulfilling prophecy. If people of faith are significantly deterred from science, then science could over time become dominated by atheists!

LASAR is looking at this issue from two complementary directions. We are planning research which will help us find out more about exactly what secondary age students do think about science and religion, something of the factors which they feel influence their views, and how their ideas shift over time. We intend to report our findings widely, and when we have results available we will use this newsletter to direct readers to these reports. We are also looking to develop curriculum materials and approaches which can support teachers in engaging secondary age pupils with something of the broad range of opinions and scholarship in the area of science and religion. In this way we hope to make sure that there are sufficient accessible and balanced presentations to help pupils to recognise that this is a nuanced area where there are no simple answers (so scientists hold a wide range of faith positions and views on religious matters), and offer them interesting resources to stimulate their own thinking in this area.

Yours with best wishes

Berry, Keith, Fran and Helen

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