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A critical investigation of the effect of thick level descriptors on progress: A case study with Year 8 students studying Buddhism

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Abstract

Recent policy documentation has indicated that assessment in Religious Education is inadequate in a substantial number of schools because of uncertainty about what progress looks like and an overreliance on National Curriculum (NC) levels. Given the abolition of NC Levels is imminent, the introduction of a new approach to assessment based on thick-level descriptors at a Cambridgeshire school was deemed a suitable focus for a case study. Focusing on one class of Year 8 students studying Buddhism, this study explores how use of thick-level descriptors in a system called 'Beginner, Competent, Master' impacts on differentiation, students' motivation and progress. The system revolves around student agency and the idea of progression towards Mastery in a range of RE skills – thus attempting to avoid the obsession with NC levels. Overall, it concludes by cautiously welcoming the system as overcoming various issues, but argues that it cannot replace NC levels for summative assessment.

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Introduction

This research comes at a difficult time for assessment of Religious Education in England. Ofsted has suggested that assessment is inadequate in a fifth of secondary schools because of 'a lack of clarity about defining attainment and progress' (Ofsted, 2013b, p. 15), also noting that National Curriculum (NC) levels (and sub-levels) were being over-used 'at the expense of genuine reflection on learning' (Ofsted, 2013b, p. 11). Nationally, assessment is volatile too – GCSEs and A Levels are being reformed (Gove, 2014); and NC levels are being abolished (DfE, 2013). Meanwhile, some researchers are criticising the overall system for emphasising statistical measures that are much less valid than they claim to be (Mansell, 2007) and for creating a 'performative' system where results become an end in themselves (Ball, 2003).

It was in this context of uncertainty and change regarding assessment that this research project came about. It focuses on a new combined differentiation and assessment system called 'Beginner, Competent, Master' (BCM) which has been introduced for Key Stage 3 (KS3) students of Religion, Philosophy and Ethics (RPE) at a village college in Cambridgeshire at which the researcher was undertaking an initial teacher education (ITE) placement. The RPE department includes five full-time teachers, and the subject is given three fifty-minute periods per fortnight for KS3 students (based on a two week timetable), taught in mixed-ability groups.

The school is an Academy Converter and, with around 1,800 students, is in the highest quintile of school population in the country. It has a low number of students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) – just 13.1% (national average: 28.2%) but an average number who are on School Action Plus or have a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) – 7.4% (7.7% nationally) (Ofsted, 2013a). The school's intake is largely White British, and a very small number of students have English as an Additional Language (EAL). The school's last Ofsted report (based on the new inspection framework) judged the school to be Outstanding in all categories. In particular, it noted that teachers at the school 'set high expectations and provide excellent individual support' for pupils (Ofsted, 2013c, p. 2). However, although it said there is 'much high quality marking', it noted that sometimes 'written guidance is less evident and some pupils are unsure about how to improve their work' (Ofsted, 2013c, p. 6).

I have thus far identified two issues – one macro and one micro. In terms of the former, what kind of system might provide a good replacement for NC Levels? Secondly, how might this school more effectively provide students with formative feedback on their work? With these in mind, the new RPE model of differentiation and assessment became the research focus. The system is based on 'thick level descriptors' – level descriptors are 'short textual descriptions of the achievement expected or required of students' (Greatorex, 2003, p. 126); thick level descriptors are more detailed versions. Although assessment can have many aims, this system in particular acts formatively, an approach that aims to 'identify how performance can be improved' (Weeden, Winter, & Broadfoot, 2002, p. 29) rather than simply ascribing students' work with a performance level (summative assessment). On this basis, the notion of *progress* was made fundamental to the research, as well as an emphasis on the formative role of assessment.

Blaylock (2000, p. 50) has identified three core areas against which assessment strategies used in RE should be evaluated – 'according to their ability to enhance/depress motivation, to enable more effective teaching and learning, and to stimulate and celebrate the widest range of religious education achievements'. This study's research questions (RQs) are built on these three categories – exploring the new system's impact on motivation (RQ1), differentiation (RQ2) and attainment (RQ3). Students must be *motivated* to do well (as opposed to learned helplessness – where they feel as though they cannot progress (Weeden et al., 2002, p. 55)), they must have work which is *differentiated* such that they can access it (O'Brien & Guiney, 2001)) and their work must then *attain* well. These questions are the basis for this research.

Literature Review

The rise and fall of National Curriculum (NC) levels

To judge the merits of a replacement for NC levels, it will be necessary to first consider their origins. Sainsbury and Sizmur (1998, pp. 181, 182) have noted that NC levels were a 'criterion-referenced assessment system' designed to provide information about 'pupils' attainment against the curriculum itself'. There are two important points arising out of the literature on NC levels. The first stems from Wiliam (2001), who has explained how they came to exist in the number and form that they do. In particular, he explains that the Government at the time initially wanted just three levels – above-average, average and below-average (which could have been reported as letters, e.g.

A, B, C). However, this would mean that at all reporting stages, a pupil who was consistently performing averagely would receive the same level, despite having progressed substantially. This was deemed a risk to students' motivation.

Instead, it was argued, there should be a clear sense of *progress* by students. Attempting to ensure that all students progressed by one level yearly would have necessitated twenty levels, but once it was accounted for that assessment would only be on a Key Stage basis (rather than yearly), it was settled that there could be ten. Wiliam does not explain why only nine came into use. The key point however, is that 'the focus was on progress, rather than absolute levels of achievement' (Wiliam, 2001, p. 7). This is important because it suggests that assessment systems should not only consider how to differentiate levels of achievement but how students may or may not be motivated by them. The fear was that if students did not feel like they were progressing by getting higher levels their motivation might decrease. It is on this basis that this study deems motivation to be a crucial part of progress.

The second key point is that given that NC levels self-evidently relate to the National Curriculum, it is not immediately obvious why Religious Education, as a non-National Curriculum subject, should have utilised them at all. Rudge (1991, p. 179) made a case shortly after the introduction of the National Curriculum against the adoption by Religious Education of accompanying levels, arguing that 'We must not sell the subject's soul just for the sake of what can, in a very limited sense, be measured and tested.' However, in 2000, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) constructed a level-based attainment scale for RE in line with other subjects, although Blaylock (2000, p. 51) has argued it was a 'crude tool' that merely evidences 'thin knowledge'.

The essential question arising from these two key points is that defining *what* is being assessed (and thus what constitutes progress) is crucial. The term 'progress' is itself highly problematic – Wiliam (2001, p. 8) notes that attempting to define what it is that actually gets better when a student progresses is difficult and varies between subjects. The more recent NC Level Descriptors published by the QCDA (2010, pp. 48–49) indicate a strong parallel with how Bloom's (1956) taxonomy perceives progress, with the lower levels focusing on skills such as 'recalling' and 'identifying', middle levels focusing on 'describing' and 'explaining' and higher levels focusing on 'interpreting', 'analysing' and 'evaluating'. Significantly, Grant and Matemba's (2013, p. 11)

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research in Scotland has found that the subject is continually 'reduced to assessing basic religious facts' or generic skills such as team work rather than these higher skills identified by Bloom.

The impending abolition of NC Levels means that now is an apt time to consider a new approach to assessment in RE. The Department for Education (DfE) has explained the change as because NC levels are 'complicated and difficult to understand' and encourage teachers 'to focus on a pupil's current level, rather than consider more broadly what the pupil can actually do' (DfE, 2013). The National Curriculum Expert Review (James, Oates, Pollard, & Wiliam, 2011, p. 44) expanded on this, noting that pupils had a tendency to 'label themselves' with their levels and that:

we believe it [the system of NC levels] actually has a significant effect of exacerbating social differentiation, rather than promoting a more inclusive approach that strives for secure learning of key curricular elements by all. It also distorts pupil learning, for instance creating the tragedy that some pupils become more concerned for 'what level they are' than for the substance of what they know, can do and understand.

(James et al., 2011, p. 44)

Similarly, Tomlinson (2001, p. 93) argues that traditional grades do not communicate or motivate effectively regarding learning. As a result the DfE (2013) has stated that schools 'will be able to introduce their own approaches to formative assessment'. That any replacement is presumed to be formative is significant – the DfE seem to be taking seriously the criticism of the current system, and advocating a system which advises pupils on how to improve rather than simply assigning them a level. Thus the overall move in KS3 is towards a system which views assessment as about facilitating *progress* through feedback. Here Blaylock's suggestions for an alternative focused on motivation, differentiation and attainment are helpful; these will form the basis of the remaining literature review in order to provide an evidential basis for the three RQs.

Why is motivation so important? (RQ1)

Just as assessment and behaviour are now increasingly considered as '*for* learning', motivation is increasingly being seen as a 'vital component' of learning (Weeden et al., 2002, p. 53). In fact, Harlen (2012, p. 172) argues that 'teachers can enhance or destroy students' desires to learn more quickly and more permanently through their use of assessment than through any other tools at their disposal'. Thus, teachers should seek to 'develop and sustain students' *motivation to learn*: their tendencies to find learning activities meaningful and worthwhile and to try to get the intended benefits from them' (Wentzel & Brophy, 2013, p. 7). Furthermore, as Alderman (2008, p. 12)

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argues, 'students that do not have optimum motivation for intellectual development are at a disadvantage.' However, despite these claims, defining this concept is complicated, resulting in much disagreement (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2002, p. 5). One example definition is Alderman's (2008, p. 3) description of three core psychological functions: energising/activating behaviour (what gets students engaged in learning), directing behaviour (why one course of action is chosen over another) and regulating persistence of behaviour (why students persist towards goals).

The importance of motivation to learning can be evidenced from Dweck's (2000) work into selftheories. Dweck has found that students will learn the most when they have a growth mindset (i.e. they want to learn for its own sake (intrinsic motivation) and feel like they can improve, rather than perceiving that they have fixed ability). Students with a growth mindset are more likely to choose a *learning* goal (that of learning something new) over a *performance* goal (that of succeeding in an evaluation), and are more likely to put effort into their work – namely because they believe that progress is tied to effort. In fact, Clarke (2008, p. 19) has even argued that having a growth mindset is 'what matters the most' in terms of motivation and should be an explicit aim of teachers.

However, motivation should not be sought at all costs. O'Grady (2003) has researched what motivates Year 8 students when studying Islam. Initially, he asked students to state activities that would motivate them (responses included drama, art, creative writing, watching videos and holding debates). He then replanned lessons accordingly with the aim 'to boost student motivation rather than to present Islam systematically' – in his case with a strong focus on drama. O'Grady's (2003, pp. 221–222) contention is that 'a student-centred rather than a religion-centred approach was more educational,' adding that 'when students were placed in the centre their motivation grew'. However, the assumption that increased motivation will lead to better learning raises issues about the impact on the content integrity. Hattie (2008, p. 193) has noted that giving students choice over their learning increases their motivation but has little impact on actual learning – thus improving the former does not necessarily improve the latter. Further, as Wentzel and Brophy (2013, p. 10) suggest, focusing on maximising motivation does not offer teachers opportunities to extend students' motivation in new directions – so even if the two are linked, it does not mean increasing student motivation is intrinsically good.

Overall, however, it is clear that student motivation is important to their progress. Students who want to learn and think they can achieve will progress more than those who do not. This leads on to the importance of differentiation – ensuring students *can* achieve.

What is effective differentiation? (RQ2)

Blaylock's second key aspect of a good RE assessment system is that it facilitates 'effective teaching and learning'. I am arguing that this particularly relates to differentiation. Indeed, in line with Vygotsky's (1978, p. 86) work arguing that learning occurs best within an individual student's 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) – i.e. the distance between what they can do independently and what they can only complete with a more-knowledgeable other – schools now focus strongly on differentiating for individuals. As O'Brien and Guiney (2001, p. 2) point out, 'the learning process involves humans who are diverse in their needs, development, attitudes and beliefs.'

Differentiation via formative assessment within a lesson will often start with sharing of lesson objectives with students. Wiliam (2011, p. 56) has been critical of the 'wallpaper objective' – something that students copy into their exercise books but subsequently ignore. However, used properly, Blanchard (2009, pp. 52, 54) has called them a 'cornerstone of formative assessment' that motivate students by 'offering the prospect of success', further noting that 'individual learners and groups can have differentiated objectives' – essentially thick level descriptors. Thus, the learning objectives are not simply indicators of the lesson content, but define how the lesson will be suited for all learners within the classroom. On this basis, an early decision was made to focus on the impact of utilising these.

Not all researchers agree that *differentiated* objectives are best practice, however. Clarke (2005, p. 45, 2008, p. 93) has argued that all students should have the same learning objective and success criteria, and that students should simply be deemed to succeed to different levels. However, this model seems problematic – constructing a learning objective that would facilitate everything from 'recalling' to 'evaluation' (in line with Bloom's (1956) taxonomy) would result in very vague learning objectives. Hattie's (2008, p. 163) meta-analyses of educational research suggest that 'it is important to adapt the learning intentions to make them appropriate to all students'. I contend that to do this it is necessary to have *more than one* objective, each catering to different ability levels. This allows students to work and achieve against the objective that best suits their abilities.

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Further, some researchers have argued that learning objectives should be decontextualised. Clarke (2005, p. 28) has argued that doing so allows students to see 'that learning objectives can often be applied to a number of different contexts'. Wiliam (2011, p. 61) has proposed an example of this approach for religious education: setting a learning objective 'To know what the local priest does' is confusing because it does not facilitate transferable learning. Instead, a clearer learning objective is 'To know the duties and responsibilities of religious leaders' *in the context of* 'the local priest'. Yet this approach seems to assume that learning can *always* be transferable. For the proposed 'clearer' learning objective the assumption is that the duties and responsibilities of all religious leaders are generic, yet an authentic understanding of religion would contest that such a generalised approach is problematic. Beyond this, a learning objective of simply 'knowing' the duties of a religious leader only targets the lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, thus not facilitating stretching higher ability students.

More generally, differentiation during lessons is crucial to effective learning. Tomlinson (2001, p. 4) has argued for 'proactive' differentiation, in which rather than simply adjusting the *quantity* of an assignment, teachers adjust the *nature* of the assignment. Alderman (2008, p. 18), too, argues that 'tasks that are meaningful with reasonable challenge' will foster optimum motivation; this aligns with research into formative assessment which argues that students will only put effort into work if they believe that they can achieve something (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2002, pp. 18–19) – here the link between motivation and differentiation becomes evident. Black et al. (2002, pp. 18–19) extend this to argue against a competitive system in which some students win and others lose, and instead advocate a task-oriented system, which they have found improves learning, especially for low-attainers. This manifests particularly in terms of feedback from a task – giving students marks means they compare themselves with others, whereas giving them comments helps them to improve. Thus, we can have differentiated learning objectives and tasks, which enable students to attain based on what is reasonable for them – and progress more effectively. This leads to the third stage of Blaylock's proposal for a better RE assessment system – measuring attainment.

How should we measure attainment? (RQ3)

I have already explained the distinction between formative and summative assessment, and the literature strongly suggests a focus on the former via Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques rather than a summative approach. Further, in their early pioneering work on AfL, Black and

Wiliam (1998, p. 9) argued that a classroom culture focused on rewards, gold stars, grades or rankings encouraged pupils to seek the best marks rather than the most learning. By contrast, utilising AfL techniques produced effect sizes of between 0.4 and 0.7 – large effect sizes for an educational intervention (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 4). Similarly, Tomlinson (2001, p. 93) advocates a system where students are graded against themselves rather than in competition with other students.

In particular, there appear to be two key ways relevant to thick-level descriptors in which the literature suggests AfL can improve attainment: sharing success criteria with students and encouraging self-assessment. Indeed, success criteria effectively are thick-level descriptors. Blanchard (2009, p. 69) has argued for their consistent use with students, although notes that no single way of doing so will guarantee success. One particular suggestion is that of students using the criteria to self- and peer-assess, to decide how to improve (Blanchard, 2009, p. 72; Blaylock, 2000, p. 53). This further encourages students to grade their work against themselves rather than against others. Indeed, Weeden et al. (2002, p. 25) have found that students who self-assessed work made greater progress than a control group who did not – making self-assessment a potentially significant part of how a new assessment system should secure progress.

Black and Wiliam (2012, pp. 18, 21) endorse this, arguing that students can only achieve a learning goal if they understand *how* they can do so; such an approach encourages them to take responsibility for themselves. Clarke (2008, p. 92) even argues that success criteria 'must be generated by pupils, or they have little meaning and less impact on learning.' Whilst I do not necessarily disregard the value of pupil-generated success criteria, I argue that it is an overstatement to say that teacher-generated criteria have 'little meaning' – provided students *understand* them it is not clear why that should be the case. Although it seems that there is potential for students to self-assess dishonestly or to be incapable of doing so, Black and Wiliam (1998, pp. 9, 10) argue that pupils are 'generally honest and reliable' when using self-assessment, but note that they may need to be 'trained' to use it effectively, something endorsed by Blanchard (2009, p. 95).

Overall, the literature suggests that effective progress can be secured with success criteria and self/peer-assessment. However, it will be important to note a proviso – an obsession with measuring progress may well be counter to effective formative assessment. Wiliam has argued instead that AfL is about 'pupils becoming owners of their own learning' (for example via self-assessment), and

not about 'monitoring pupils' progress' (Stewart, 2012). Any assessment system which claims to be formative must avoid the risk of becoming the latter rather than the former.

Summary

Thus far I have identified three core areas for consideration – how effectively a new assessment system motivates students (RQ1), how effectively it differentiates (RQ2), and the possibilities it affords for improving attainment (RQ3). Overall, the Beginner, Competent, Master system will need to succeed in these three areas in order to be effective in securing the principal aim of formative assessment – improving students' progress. The hypotheses to the RQs are that students will be motivated by the use of thick-level descriptors as learning objectives in that it will be clear how they can achieve in the lesson (RQ1), that differentiation is substantially improved via the system (RQ2) and that it will provide an effective way to present students with success criteria and thus for them to self-assess (RQ3).



Figure 1 – Data Triangulation



Methodology

This research is a small-scale case study based within the interpretivist paradigm. It does not claim to discover objective findings but to offer an interpretation of the data collected. This is necessary because the study is classroom research – the data collected would not be sufficient to make any claim to statistical validity or reliability, and instead seeks trustworthiness and authenticity (Taber, 2013, p. 179). The epistemological stance is social constructivism in that knowledge is deemed not to be objective but socially constructed by teachers and students in particular in response to their and others' (perceived) behaviour. Finally, it is exploratory in that rather than confirm the efficacy of a particular *intervention*, it

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aims to explore the specific context in question (Taber, 2013, pp. 78, 96) – i.e. the classroom context constructed by use of the BCM system.

Research Design

The study is based on six lessons, utilising the system in various ways, taught to a mixed-ability Year 8 group studying Buddhism in the spring of 2014. It utilises a range of sources of qualitative data in line with good practice for case studies (Demetriou, 2013, p. 258) – in particular motivation graphs, an interview with the creator of the BCM system, three group interviews with focus students and participant observation. The plurality of data sources is an attempt to triangulate the findings against the RQs (see Figure 1) and thus increase their trustworthiness (Taber, 2013, p. 218).

For the study, a scheme of work (SOW) was created entitled 'To what extent is the Buddha a good role model for Buddhists today?' (Appendix 1). It was planned as longer than the data collection period due to the limited practicality of attempting to teach a whole scheme of work on a religion in fewer lessons than that. As such, data was collected from the first six lessons in the SOW (see Figure 2), and so information about the end of unit assessment does not form part of the project. This is an unfortunate but necessary limitation, and I argue that the focus on *formative* assessment means that not including the concluding *summative* assessment is not prohibitively damaging. It is also worth noting that the scale of the data collected has necessitated focus on certain areas, thus not all relevant activities are referred to in this essay.

In order to facilitate greater depth, six students were chosen as focus students. Two had recently been assessed as Beginners (Alice and Louie), three as Competent (Bill, Ruth and Jane (who was nearing Master)) and one as Master (Chris). However, Jane was absent for almost all of the first three lessons, meaning she was removed from being a focus student prior to the first group interview. In addition, Louie was absent for the third and fifth lessons (and thus missed the first two group interviews), and although he attended the final lesson and agreed to come to the final group interview, he did not attend. His motivation graphs remain part of the focus data set for the study, but the findings will focus around Alice, Bill, Ruth and Chris (it is worth noting that the gender balance was maintained).

Lessons	Relevant Activities	Data Collected
1 – Introduction Lesson	Learning Objectives (LOs) BCM double-sided worksheet Talking Points self-assessment BCM Written task	Motivation graphs Participant observation Pupil Product
2 – Life as an ascetic 3 – Middle Way	LOs BCM differentiated role play BCM Written task LOs BCM differentiated circles of inference BCM Written task	Motivation graphs Participant observation Pupil Product Motivation graphs Participant observation Pupil Product
Group Interview 1		
4 – Three Universal Truths	LOs BCM differentiated discussion point x3	Motivation graphs Pupil Product
5 – Noble Eightfold Path	LOs Talking Points – differentiated	Motivation graphs Participant observation

	prior, self-assessment after	Pupil Product
	BCM Written task	
Group Interview 2		
6 – Five Precepts	LOs	Motivation graphs
	BCM Circles of inference	Pupil Product
	BCM Written task	
	BCM Peer Assessment	
Group Interview 3		
Teacher Interview		

Figure 2 – Lessons taught and data collected

For RQ1, it was important to have a meaningful and accessible definition of motivation for use on motivation graphs and observation schedules. Harlen (2012, p. 174) has argued that research studies tend to be more effective when they take several components of motivation, rather than attempting to treat it as a single variable. On this basis, three core components were identified for the participant observation, which it is argued are sufficient for the purposes of this study, but do not claim to be a comprehensive definition. Pintrick and Schunk (2002, p. 5) have argued that motivation in education as inferred from student behaviour can be based on three principles: goals, activity and sustained work. In the context of the research study in question, the 'goals' were achievement of the learning objectives (i.e. the BCM thick level descriptors).

To collect data on the six focus students, I invited my PGCE mentor to take the role of research assistant and fill in participant observation schedules in each lesson (see Appendix 2 for an example). The fact that he was their usual teacher helped prevent any distortion of the data from the presence of an unknown adult (Taber, 2013, p. 271). The observation schedules were formatted to

be simple to use during the lesson – rather than demanding constant observation of all six students, it focused on the on the three components of motivation (identified above, but amended to suit the format) and asked for observations coded with the students' names to be added at points related to the activities, along with additional comments. However, a risk with observation is that the constant generation of new potentially significant data means that the account may be superficial or unreliable (Wilson & Fox, 2013, p. 111). A further issue is that the research assistant was not available during two of the lessons, and no replacement was available. A third issue is that the phrasing on the observation schedule could have been clearer, but the notes nevertheless provide useful data.

Meanwhile, in every lesson, all students were given a motivation graph on which they could indicate their level of motivation at various pre-determined points of the lesson (see Appendices 3/4 for a plain/completed example). These points were identified in the lesson plan and, after the first lesson, in the PowerPoint (using a subtle marker), allowing the researcher to announce when students should mark their level of motivation onto their graphs. The same structure was used for the observation schedules. Pintrick and Schunk (2002, p. 8) have suggested various methods of measuring motivation (e.g. questionnaire), none of which could be utilised for this research as it required students to quickly and efficiently indicate their self-perceived level. The suggested methods would have been impractical without severely disrupting the flow of the lesson, resulting in the use of a simple graph. This was designed to use a very simple definition of motivation which attempted to indicate student interest and goal-oriented approach ('I am interested in what I am doing and want to do well.'). Once again, this could have been phrased better, but the aim was to ensure that students would be able to access the definition and make quick judgements during the lesson.

This definition was included on the sheets and carefully explained to students in the first two lessons. Meanwhile, students were given strict rules that they must mark one of four points on the scale (this forced students to decide whether they were 'not at all', 'not very', 'quite' or 'very' motivated, rather than being non-committal). Finally, to ensure students would feel comfortable marking an option low on the scale (e.g. 'not at all motivated'), they were given the option of turning over their sheets having marked on them so that no one could see their decision. Students were given clear instructions on when to mark on their sheets (they were always asked to mark on them immediately on entry to the room as a baseline, and then generally after activities). The

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findings for the focus students individually and averaged are presented in tables below, with the whole class average below that.

A further form of data collected was a series of group interviews with the focus students (see Appendix 5 for the transcripts). These took place after the third, fifth and sixth lessons. During these interviews, students were prompted to reflect on the lessons using their motivation graphs and non-leading reminders of what was happening at each point of the lesson. These enabled triangulation of what made students change/maintain their motivation between points. Beyond this, students were asked more general questions about the system to determine their perceptions of its utility. Interviewing students together can increase their confidence and allow the comments of one to stimulate the others, although the risk is that it cannot be ascertained how students would have responded had they been interviewed individually (Taber, 2013, pp. 276–277). Further, there are many opportunities for miscommunication and misinterpretation – especially given that the data was recorded via note-taking (Wilson & Fox, 2013, p. 119). Students were asked to clarify unclear points in order to prevent this issue, and individuals were asked at various points whether they agreed with others to try and encourage direct communication.

In order to triangulate student claims against their classwork, at the end of the six lessons, all pupils' books were collected in so that pupil product could be analysed. Although Taber (2013, p. 263) argues that doing so only provides indirect evidence of student understanding, the aim was more to see how students responded to the setting of different tasks/self-assessment activities, thus this problem is less salient. Finally, at the end of the six lessons, an interview was conducted with BCM's creator (see Appendix 6 for the transcript). This facilitated considerable depth, and conducting it after the lessons allowed the use of preliminary findings. Care was taken to avoid interrupting the interviewe, but prompting if necessary (Wilson & Fox, 2013, p. 118). In this case, the interview was recorded (with permission) and later transcribed directly, resulting in an accurate transcription (Evans, 2013, p. 149).

Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with the British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2014). The school in which the study took place had a policy of requesting consent for research at the point of entry for all students, thus no further consent was necessary. However, students who participated as focus students all agreed to attend group interviews, and indeed were eager to share their thoughts. They were incentivised through confectionary (although they were allowed access to it before the group interviews started to avoid any sense that it might be a reward for saying the 'right thing' and it was made absolutely explicit that they could say whatever they wished). Stutchbury (2013, p. 93) identifies some key ethical questions for interviews such as when they will take place, how long they will take and whether there will be any impact on classwork. In this context, the interviews took place during the second half of lunch break for 25 minutes and thus did not affect classwork. All student names are anonymised for this research in line with best practice (Stutchbury, 2013, p. 93), based on names similar to the real ones.

Data Presentation

The study has produced a wealth of data relating to the BCM system. I will begin by establishing the origins and fundamentals of the system before highlighting some of the findings from the lessons. The originator of the system (Zayn) explained during the interview that it came from 'the Bauhaus school' in which students 'have to be kind of a novice, a journeyman, an apprentice and then finally ... a Master.' The interview also identified its two core aims – firstly, to recognise that RPE as a subject requires students to use 'different skills in different areas' (i.e. schemes of work) and thus to characterise these such that different levels of performance in these different areas are identified.

These areas are identified in the system as four different 'languages' of RPE (basis, action, morality, reflection), with the intention that these are seen as 'second-order concepts'. 'Basis' relates to fundamental study of truth and proof, 'Action' considers religious practice, 'Morality' considers ethical issues and 'Reflection' considers 'relational consciousness' – how individuals relate to themselves, others, their environment and the divine. Students are assessed against criteria

for one of these languages/second-order concepts in each scheme of work. During the interview, Zayn drew links to historical second-order concepts – e.g. significance or historiography. Fordham (2013, p. 18) has argued that splitting history into these second-order concepts for the purposes of assessment with NC Levels makes the misguided assumption that progress in these skills is simple and linear; arguably having fewer levels and task-specific descriptors as BCM does avoids this issue. However, because this study could only explore effects *within* one scheme of work, this area will not be developed further.

The second aim of the system was to make assessment a 'formative *and* summative process [emphasis from interviewee]' in order to create a way to differentiate that staff were 'more comfortable' with and to give 'weaker' students 'more confidence'. It is worth noting that the system does not replace NC levels in the department completely, retaining them for marking end-of-unit assessments, but only *alongside* BCM formative feedback. The system effectively sits on top of NC Levels, meaning that it aligns with Bloom's taxonomy too.

The first test was to implement the system in terms of three differentiated learning objectives (RQ2) – one for Beginner students (which equates to NC levels 3-4), one for Competent students (NC levels 5-6), and one for Master students (NC levels 7-8) – across the six lessons. The interview with Zayn suggested that the aim of doing this is to 'engage the students at an appropriate level all the way through the lesson' and encourage 'personal target-setting'. An example is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 4 looks at motivation changes in response to the learning objectives (LOs) – the results from the motivation graphs are presented along with quotes explaining students' reasons for the changes. Evident from this table is a big increase in motivation in the first lesson amongst the focus students immediately after the LOs are explained, but their explanations indicate that this is because of an upcoming video. There is also a big increase in Lesson 5, but since the starter during this lesson was somewhat novel (a true/false game about statements relating to the teacher), this may be why the motivation increases (the change did not become clear until after the group interviews so no student explanation is available). It is also interesting to note Alice's comments regarding two lessons where her motivation drops due to a lack of interest and understanding, in contrast with Bill's and Ruth's response indicating an increase. Overall, however, there is no consistent increase in motivation as a result of differentiated LOs being conveyed to the students, and their comments

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suggest their views are based primarily on activity enjoyment with some influence from the objectives.



Figure 3 – An example of differentiated learning objectives

LOs = Learning Objectives 1 = Not at all motivated, 2 = Not very motivated, 3 = Quite motivated, 4 = Very motivated

Lesso	ns =>	Lesso Introd Les	on 1 – luction ison	Lesson Middl	3 – The e Way	Lesson 4 Univers	1 – Three al Truths	Lesson 5 – Noble Eightfold Path		Lesson 6 – Five Precepts	
Student Name	Initial Marker	Before LOs	After LOs	Before LOs	After LOs	Before LOs	After LOs	Before LOs	After LOs	Before LOs	After LOs
Alice	В	3	4	3	3	3	2	3	4	3	2
Chris	м	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	3
Ruth	С	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	4
Bill	С	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	4
Louie	В	2	4			3	2			2	2
Aver	rage	2.8	3.8	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.8	3.0	3.5	2.8	3.0
Class A	verage	2.8	3.1	2.7	2.7	2.4	2.3	2.0	2.6	2.3	2.5

Lesson 1

Chris 'we were just about to go onto watching a video' Ruth 'you wanted to find out about it – Prince Siddhartha. Heard the story before.' Ruth agrees that it is good to know what you're going to do, Bill nods. Chris knew a video was going to come up.

Alice interested by the video

Lesson 3

Bill – likes clear explanations of the lesson contents (participant observation quote)

Overall

Bill – 'it's not which is easier but which one sounds more fun' **Ruth** – 'I know which one I'm aiming towards and I know what to do to achieve that level.'

Lesson 4

Alice 'not that interested in the topic'

Lesson 6

Alice 'I didn't really get what the objectives were.' Bill 'it sounded interesting' Ruth 'it was something new ... I wanted to know what it meant'

Figure 4 – Student response to learning objectives



Figure 5 - A circles of inference activity using thick-level descriptors

Students were also asked about two circles of inference activities and uses of talking points with selfassessment afterwards. The former are exercises involving short extracts placed in the middle of a sheet, with differentiated questions requiring short answers placed around them. Four questions were Beginner level (comprehension), two were Competent (analysis) and two more were Master (evaluation). Each set of questions was identified with a small icon indicating the level; effectively rendering them as activityspecific level descriptors. An example is presented in Figure 5. The latter (talking points) involves a series of statements for students to discuss with a partner and collaboratively conclude on whether they agree, disagree or are not sure about them (the aim is to promote dialogic, exploratory discussion (Alexander, 2008; Mercer & Littleton, 2007)). After this, students were given self-assessment sheets and asked to fill in how well they felt they had done against the thick level descriptor they were trying to achieve (see Figure 6 for an example).

Talking Points Self Assessment Sheet (6/3/14)

Name:

I am aiming for ______ (Beginner, Competent or Master).

Now look at either Beginner, Competent <u>OR</u> Master. Next to each sentence write a number into the box to explain how well you think you did.

1 = I did very well 2 = I did quite well 3 = I could do better 4 = I didn't do this

	I was able to use information about the story of Prince	
Beginner	Siddhartha.	
	I could explain how Prince Siddhartha and his father may	
0	have been feeling.	
	I used some information that other people said.	
	I was confident using information from the story of Prince	
	Siddhartha while we discussed.	
0	I could compare Prince Siddhartha's point of view and his	
Competent	father's point of view.	
	I was able to explain why I agree or disagreed with others	
	and give a reason.	
	I was able to use information from the story very	
	confidently as we discussed.	
Master	I could compare a range of different points of view.	
	I was able to argue for what I think is the best point of view	
	and give clear reasons.	

Figure 6 - A talking points self-assessment sheet using success criteria

CoI = Circles of Inference task

1 = Not at all motivated, 2 = Not very motivated,

3 = Quite motivated, 4 = Very motivated

Lessons =>		Lessor	n 3 – The Middl	Lesson 6 – Five Precepts		
Student Name	Initial Marker	Before Col Task	Col Task Introduced	End of Col Task	Before Col Task	After Col Task
Alice	В	2	3	3	2	3
Chris	м	3	4	4	3	4
Ruth	С	3	4	4	4	4
Bill	С	4	4	4	4	4
Louie	В	2	3	2	2	2
Avera	age	2.8	3.6	3.4	3.0	3.4
Class Av	erage	2.3	2.8	2.8	2.5	2.6

Lesson 3

on the sheet

Alice 'You don't really expect in an RPE lesson to learn about cows.' Ruth liked it because 'you start at the easy questions and slowly build up to the harder ones' Chris 'it was a new layout' The students thought all in the class had progressed methodically through the questions

Observation: 'Lots of very quiet focused work'

Lesson 6

Bill 'I like the circles of inference ... because you can like work up ... and it feels like you're making progress but you can visually see it as well.

Chris 'I think people who are Beginners, they'll make their way to Competent quite easily.' **Alice** 'I quite like visualising it and working your way up.'



3 = Quite mo	tivated, 4 =	= Very moti	vated		
Lessor	IS =>	Lesson 1 – Introduction			
		Les	son		
Student Name	Initial Marker	Before TPs	After TPs		
Alice	В	3	3		
Chris	м	4	4		
Ruth	С	3	4		
Bill	С	4	3		
Louie	В	3	4		
Avera	age	3.4	3.6		
Class Av	erage	3.2	3.3		

TPs = Talking Points (and self-assessment)

1 = Not at all motivated, 2 = Not very motivated,



iiiie

Figure 8 – Student response to talking points

30







Figure 10 – Louie's completed circles of inference activity (lesson 6)

Figure 7 shows the motivation ratings and relevant student comments for the circles of inference activities, and Figure 8 for the talking points (motivation data for the second use of these is lacking as not all students recorded ratings, thus only the first use is utilised). When the topic of the first circles of inference task is announced there is a substantial increase in motivation, but after the task itself motivation is stagnant, although still high. However, after the second task there is an increase in motivation. Overall, student comments suggest that the nature of the activity promotes motivation and progress. Figures 9 and 10 suggest good engagement with one of the tasks from even the weaker students Alice and Louie and the participant observation comment from Lesson 3 (Figure 7) that all students seemed very focused indicates that this may extend to the whole class.

After the talking points, motivation is also flat but still high (Figure 8). However, student comments and observation data suggest a strongly positive reaction to the self-assessment. Bill's question during the lesson (noted in Figure 8) is a significant one as various focus students self-assessed against more than one level (e.g. Beginner *and* Competent *and* Master) despite verbal and written instructions to choose *one* (see Figure 11).

Figure 12 shows the motivation changes resulting from writing tasks set according to the different levels (thus the question becomes a thick level descriptor) and Figures 13 and 14 show examples of students' writing. Again, motivation is almost completely static before and after the activities, although Ruth's comment suggests such an approach is conducive to progression, and the Lesson 1 observation notes indicate the effectiveness of clear differentiation by task. Finally, Figures 15, 16 and 17 include some of the most relevant points identified from the group interviews and Zayn in response to the three core RQs. These will be discussed in the Findings.

Name:	Alice		
I am aiming for	Marten	(Beginner, Competent or Master).	
Now look at ei write a numbe	ther Beginner, Com r into the box to ex	petent OR Master. Next to each sent plain how well you think you did.	ence
1 = I did very we	ll 2 = I did quite w	ell $3 = 1$ could do better $4 = 1$ didn't d	lo this
Brill drank above ?	I knew what each ste	p of the Noble Eightfold Path meant.	1
	I expressed my opini	on on whether I agreed or disagreed	1
Julia angereria	I used some informat	ion that other people said.	1
	I was confident in tall Fightfold Path	king about the steps of the Noble	1
	I could compare diffe	rent points of view about the	1
	statements. I was able to explain	why I agree or disagreed with others	;
	and give a reason.	the second se	
- Contraction of the second	Path very confidently	as we discussed.	
M	I could compare a ran	ge of different points of view.	2
Contraction of the	I was able to argue to	what I think is the best point of view	1
Name:	Falking Points Self.	Assessment	
l am aiming for	Prompeter	(Beginner, Competent or Master).	
Now look at eit	ther Beginner, Com r into the box to ex	petent <u>OR</u> Master. Next to each sent plain how well you think you did.	tence
1 = I did very we	ll 2 = I did quite w	3 = 1 could do better 4 = 1 didn't	do this
1 = I did very we	1 2 = 1 did quite w	ell 3 = 1 could do better 4 = 1 didn't	do this
1 = I did very we Beginner	 2 = 1 did quite w I was able to use info Siddhartha. I could explain how have been feeling. 	ell 3 = I could do better 4 = I didn't prmation about the story of Prince Prince Siddhartha and his father may	do this
1 = I did very we Beginner	 2 = 1 did quite w I was able to use info Siddhartha. I could explain how have been feeling. I used some information of the soft damp using 	ell 3 = 1 could do better 4 = 1 didn't prmation about the story of Prince Prince Siddhartha and his father may ation that other people said.	do this
1 = I did very we Beginner	I 2 = 1 did quite w I was able to use info Siddhartha. I could explain how have been feeling. I used some informa I was confident usin Siddhartha while w	ell 3 = 1 could do better 4 = 1 didn't ormation about the story of Prince Prince Siddhartha and his father may ation that other people said. In ginformation from the story of Prince e discussed.	do this
1 = I did very we Beginner Competent	 1 2 = 1 did quite w 1 was able to use info Siddhartha. 1 could explain how have been feeling. 1 used some informat 1 was confident usin Siddhartha while w 1 could compare Pri father's point of vie 	ell 3 = 1 could do better 4 = 1 didn't ormation about the story of Prince Prince Siddhartha and his father may ation that other people said. og information from the story of Prince e discussed. nce Siddhartha's point of view and his w.	do this
1 = I did very we Beginner Competent	 2 = 1 did quite w I was able to use info Siddhartha. I could explain how have been feeling. I used some information in the second se	ell 3 = I could do better 4 = I didn't prince Siddhartha and his father may ation that other people said. ig information from the story of Prince e discussed. nce Siddhartha's point of view and his w. n why I agree or disagreed with others	l l l
1 = I did very we Beginner Competent	I 2 = I did quite w I was able to use info Siddhartha. I could explain how have been feeling. I used some informat I was confident usin Siddhartha while w I could compare Pri father's point of vie I was able to explait and give a reason. I was able to use inf	ell 3 = I could do better 4 = I didn't prination about the story of Prince Prince Siddhartha and his father may nation that other people said. ig information from the story of Prince e discussed. nce Siddhartha's point of view and his w. n why I agree or disagreed with others formation from the story very	l l J
1 = I did very we Beginner Competent	 1 2 = 1 did quite w 1 was able to use info Siddhartha. 1 could explain how have been feeling. 1 used some informat 1 was confident usin Siddhartha while w 1 could compare Prij father's point of vie 1 was able to explain and give a reason. 1 was able to use init confidently as we deter the second seco	ell 3 = 1 could do better 4 = 1 didn't prmation about the story of Prince Prince Siddhartha and his father may ation that other people said. gi information from the story of Prince e discussed. Ince Siddhartha's point of view and his w. In why I agree or disagreed with others formation from the story very iscussed.	I I

Figure 11 – Two example self-assessments

Task = Differentiated writing task (one question each for Beginner, Competent, Master) 1 = Not at all motivated, 2 = Not very motivated, 3 = Quite motivated, 4 = Very motivated

Lessor	15 =>	Lesso Introd Les	on 1 – luction son	Lesson 2 an As	– Life as scetic	Lesson Middl	on 3 – The Lesson 6 – F Idle Way Precepts		6 – Five epts
Student Name	Initial Marker	Before Task	After Task	Before Task	After Task	Before Task	After Task	Before Task	After Task
Alice	В	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Chris	м	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4
Ruth	С	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	4
Bill	С	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	4
Louie	В	4	4	3	3			2	2
Aver	Average 3.6 3.6		3.2	3.0	3.5	3.8	3.4	3.4	
Class Av	verage	3.3	3.3	2.8	2.8	3.0 3.0		2.6	2.5

Lesson 1 – Observation Notes

Bill – well-focused and clear on what the outcome of the written task was

Louie – said he liked knowing what was expected of him [and] found it easier to answer questions that he felt confident about

Chris - able to see where to stretch and challenge himself.

Lesson 6

Ruth – 'with today it helps me to get to Master. I started on the Competent one ... I did that then went onto Master. It helped me work towards Master as well.'

Overall

Chris – 'sometimes when you try for Master ... you end up doing the one below because you ... forget about the question and then sometimes end up writing the advantages or disadvantages' **Ruth** – Sometimes you don't understand the questions. ... It can get quite confusing. You should have two questions for each one [level] and have a choice between the two. They should be different questions. You may understand it more. *Broad agreement on this from the focus students*

Figure 12 – Student responses to differentiated writing tasks

Precepts are more better to have than rales
because rules er are boo over-powering and
if a bully asks you a avestion about where
is youre make and you have no choice to well
him where he is because theres a rule the aut lie
So precepts are more bester because there not
Precedus are breaking the law so you could
Say I dont know to the build, precessor
use a positive thing not a negitive because
Youre Sticking to For each other

Figure 13 – An example of Louie answering a Beginner question

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Figure 14 – Alice attempts a Master question

Zayn: It's really tricky when you ask a Year 8 student, you know, what was good about that lesson, or what helped your learning in that lesson. [KU: mmmm] or, you know, any of those questions. I think often they just respond by saying 'What did you enjoy in that lesson?'

'giving the students the option to do Beginner Competent or Master ... there are obviously problems with that. The danger is that students will always just go for the Beginner task and just get the minimum kind of done. But I suppose . the drive there is that we're very lucky in [this school] in that we've got students who on the whole want to do well'

'I think that's that kind of ethos of understanding where you situate yourself is, is really important. That's what pushes the students up I think.' **Bill** – 'I think ... this competent beginner and master is better than levels because it's not like if ... it was the same format but without the competent, beginner and master it would be like 4, 5 and 6 and then it's a bigger jump.' **Researcher: Why**?

Bill – 'it's more psychological knowing that there are three sections in one so it's like going up ... there's like nine levels between it rather than three'

Alice – 'sometimes beginner, competent and master is quite good because it's overall what you are. Sometimes the levels if you want more of an aim it's a lot better because you can really work your way and know exactly what you have to do. ... If you're aiming for master and you really tried it might be a bit depressing if you're competent. You could be making half a level progress each assessment. If you're

[Beginner/Competent/Master] you'd stay the same. You wouldn't feel like you're making an improvement.'

Figure 15 - Zayn/student comments on the system's impact on motivation

Zayn: 'I think where Beginner, Competent, Master has improved, is on doing much more . differentiation from a teacher's point of view, differentiating in the classroom or . I think, making those levels .. the level language accessible to students .'

Zayn on LOs: 'I think students like to know what they're learning, maybe and at what level they're learning it. Um, Instead of just sort of sitting and waiting for something to happen, I think it's much more proactive actually in kind of saying 'This is what, this is the plan for today.'

Zayn: 'I think what I'd like them to do is to be able to see ... over maybe a series of lessons, they go 'Ah, I was a Beginner, I'm now gonna try Competent, because I found Beginner work .. was easily achievable.' I think as I said already, there's a danger particularly with boys that they go, 'Oh I'm just going to do the Beginner bit today.' Um .. I, I ... have to be honest and say I haven't found that happening. Maybe on one or two occasions the minority of students do it.'

Alice – there are three different levels and you can choose which one you're aiming at to make your answers ... explain your answers more

Bill – they're like steps of learning ... if you weren't very confident in RPE you could start off with Beginner and then if you found that quite ... you did that well and you then feel like you're fine to move onto Competent

Figure 16 – Zayn/student comments on the system's impact on differentiation



Figure 17 – Zayn/student comments on the system's impact on attainment and links to NC Levels

Findings

I will now consider what the data suggests about the three RQs – relating to the system's impact on motivation (RQ1), differentiation (RQ2) and attainment (RQ3).

Motivation (RQ1)

Use of thick level descriptors does not seem to have a direct impact on student self-report of motivation. Changes on motivation graphs tend to relate primarily to student enjoyment of activities – similar to O'Grady's (2003) findings that students see certain activities such as videos or drama as motivating. However, it is important to relate this back to Hattie's (2008, p. 193) finding that students indicating higher motivation do not necessarily learn more. Although their explanation of their fluctuations in motivation during the group interviews tended to relate to the activities, it is also the case that the students described the circles of inference activities and the talking points as motivation, but also in identifying areas that students did not directly perceive as motivating them. Should this study be conducted again, 'motivation' would need to be more effectively defined to prevent this problem and achieve stronger triangulation. Finally, another significant point is that learning objectives that are less immediately understandable (e.g. relating to 'precepts') can cause drops in motivation from weaker students and increases from stronger students.

Beyond this, the findings from the group interviews on student perceptions of how BCM motivates them compared to NC levels highlight disagreements. Bill argued that the psychological leap from Beginner to Master is smaller than the leap from NC level 4 to 5 - a stark suggestion because the ability gap between Beginner and Master is equivalent to the gap between NC Levels 3/4 and 7/8. Bill's suggestion is that sub-levels (notably criticised by Ofsted (2013b, p. 11)) made progression seem harder. However, Alice raised a contrasting point saying that remaining the same level for a long time might be de-motivating, especially if great effort was put into work – this resonates with the reason for there originally being ten NC levels (Wiliam, 2001, p. 7) although it is worth pointing out here that for assessments NC Levels are still awarded to students, perhaps reducing the demotivational impact. Finally, it is significant that Zayn perceives that its success might be connected to the school's generally motivated intake – BCM may not work at all schools if pupils

have lower intrinsic motivation. The key methodological finding, then, is that 'motivation' and 'motivation for learning' are different (Wentzel & Brophy, 2013, p. 7) – the graphs identified the former, but the group interviews helped distinguish it from the latter. Overall, in response to RQ1, thick level descriptors may increase 'motivation for learning' and thus could improve progress, but the triangulation here is not robust.

Differentiation (RQ2)

Importantly, the system has been designed with a strong element of individual agency in its differentiation – the quote from Zayn's interview (Figure 16) suggests that it relies on students individually deciding the appropriate level to work at, which he suggests tends to work (and is backed up by the pupil product). It is significant that the notion of responsible individual agency has filtered through to the students – for example, Alice says 'you can *choose which one you're aiming at*', and Bill adds 'you could start off with Beginner ... and then *feel like you're fine to move onto Competent*' [emphases added]. By contrast, their explanation of NC Levels is highly technical, suggesting that the new system has achieved a stronger connection with progress than NC Levels have for at least some students.

Meanwhile, the circles of inference activities generated a positive response in the group interviews – there was a strong sense that it would help students reach higher levels through gradual progression. Similarly, there was a positive response to the talking points self assessment. It is noteworthy that in both cases, students highlighted the visually structured nature of these tasks as helping evidence their progress through the different levels. However, the overall comments in Figure 12 indicate areas for improvement – students suggest they may need more scaffolding in writing tasks and possibly a choice of questions at each level to improve access.

Other issues have also been identified. Firstly, there was a dissonance between the design of these two activities which confused students. The first task (circles of inference) demanded all students work incrementally up from Beginner to Master (or as far as they could). The second (self assessment) required students to simply *choose one* of the thick level descriptors – the one that they were aiming for – and assess themselves against it. Despite clear instructions both verbally and on the sheet, many students either did not understand this or chose to ignore it, instead self-assessing against more than one level. Because analysis of pupil product only happened after the group interviews, it has not been possible to determine why students did this, but the principle that

sometimes they must progress linearly through the levels and other times must choose one level descriptor seems to have confused them. In this context, differentiation is insufficient – thick level descriptors will only work when students have a very clear idea *how* the assessment should take place.

Overall, relying on students choosing the difficulty of their work based on thick-level descriptors is not problematic within this school context, and the focus students described the system in terms of progress than performance. Further, the activities supported student engagement (in particular through visually indicating progress), but some thought is needed about how to convey whether activities require passing through the different levels, or are based on choosing one descriptor – it may be that students always want to feel they have achieved in as many ways as possible, and thus want to fill in the whole self-assessment. Nevertheless, in response to RQ2, this system supports effective differentiation and therefore good progress.

Attainment (RQ3)

The most significant finding about use of this system during lessons for attainment is that it encourages students to attempt work at levels beyond that which might be ascribed to them, suggesting that the system is conducive to high attainment. Louie's work in the Five Precepts lesson demonstrated him attempting Competent-level questions (see Figure 10). Further, one of Alice's circles of inference sheets (Figure 9) and talking points self assessments (Figure 11), as well as her writing (Figure 14) suggest a strong engagement with Master-level work. However, there are two potential problems here - one is that the work indicated as Master-level may be answerable at a lower level (as happens in this case) or students may self-assess incorrectly (it is not possible to know whether or not Alice self-assessed accurately, but it is unlikely based on prior assessment data that she would discuss at Master-level). The second problem follows on from this, which is that if students perceive that they are working at Master-level, they may gain a sense of their attainment which is inaccurate. Although the student perception was that self-assessment was useful and helped them see where they could improve, the assumption that they have determined their own attainment accurately is problematic. This backs up Black and Wiliam's (1998, p. 10) suggestion that students must be trained to self-assess and indicates that students constructing their own success criteria as Clarke (2008, p. 92) advocates could suffer worse problems.

However, some of the focus students did perceive that the system helps them target the level they were aiming for more effectively. Bill suggested that simply being given an NC level does not encourage students to improve, something he contrasts with being presented with 'questions' – arguing that the latter is easier to 'sort out, work out' (Figure 17). He is effectively arguing in favour of thick-level descriptors, and backs up Harlen's (2012, p. 177) suggestion that summative assessment focuses on performance rather than learning. Similarly, Zayn's suggestion that students feel less shame admitting to being a 'Beginner' than to being Level 3 is backed up by Ruth, who suggests that having fewer different levels makes students feel that it is easier to progress to the next one. However, Alice's suggestion that staying 'Competent' for a long time might be demotivating is also significant. Overall, in terms of attainment, at any one point the system would seem to encourage progress, but when considering it in terms of long-term progress, that there are fewer levels might demotivate students.

One further issue, is that the student responses regarding how BCM relates to NC Levels indicate confusion in this area that will need to be dealt with (Figure 17). The students seemed unclear which NC Levels linked to which of the thick-level descriptors, which may mean their sense of their attainment is inaccurate. This finding is well triangulated because it was identified as an area potentially requiring further development by Zayn, in particular as NC Levels are still used alongside BCM to provide feedback on end-of-unit assessments.

Overall, in terms of RQ3, students seem encouraged by the system to attempt work at higher levels (thus making the system conducive to progress), but great care must be taken when creating tasks utilising the descriptors that they can only be answered at the appropriate level. It is worth returning to Wiliam's warning about formative assessment – that it should not simply be used to demonstrate progress (Stewart, 2012). Arguably, this use of the system risks creating a superficial notion of progress which does not fulfil the aims of formative assessment – i.e. that of providing diagnostic information. Further, some uses of self-assessment will not necessarily be accurate (at least, initially) and thus might distort students' perception of their own attainment. One of the more important findings for RQ3 is that the system may impact positively on communication of attainment in any one task, but there is a risk that students will lose motivation if they remain Beginner, Competent or Master across a period of time. However, at the same time, the system must be carefully implemented to avoid superficial notions of progress. In this context, NC Levels

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should be kept for summative assessment to make progress more tangible to students, but during lessons BCM is an effective system for promoting progress.

Conclusion

The core finding from this study is that the Beginner, Competent, Master system has a lot of potential but should be used alongside NC Levels to secure student progress. Students find that thick level descriptors used with activities provide clear structuring of their progress, and may improve 'motivation for learning'. Although students do not directly suggest their motivation increases as a result of the system's implementation, they do describe the system in these terms. It will be necessary to consider further the impact of learning objectives where the meanings of key terms are not initially obvious as they can polarise student motivation.

Further, students have internalised the system's axiomatic notion of agency, but their sense of how progress happens can become confused. Similarly, their sense of attainment is not necessarily clear – self-assessment against success criteria would require further practice before it could be relied upon, and student understanding of the system's relation to National Curriculum levels must be clarified. Finally, student perception of whether the system makes progress seem easier than under NC levels is inconsistent; it may be the weaker students that disagree with this more.

The findings have already had a small-scale impact on the researcher's teaching practice. Whereas previously students were given one writing task per level (a choice of three tasks), the student feedback suggested they sometimes did not understand the task for their level. Thus, a move has been made to include two questions per level, and allow students to choose the one they feel most confident in answering. More broadly, the system has some significant benefits which could transfer to other schools – for example, in quickly communicating the difficulty of certain tasks, providing a replacement for NC levels that discourages obsessive measurement and facilitating greater student understanding of attainment – but the challenges will be ensuring students are motivated enough to choose an appropriate level, rather than the easiest one and that they can self-assess accurately.

Overall, the potential for simple structured indicators of both task difficulty and student progress are very significant for more efficient teaching and learning. This approach to formative assessment could be a key way to assist with the move away from NC Levels over the next few years with an intrinsically motivated student body. However, the biggest challenge is ensuring students are not demotivated by remaining at the same level for an extended period of time – arguably, making these descriptors consistently explicit to students requires a self-awareness of their achievement which might impede progress and reinforce a sense of stasis. Thus NC Levels are still needed to make progress more tangible, and students will need to learn to better 'handle' the descriptors (e.g. with self-assessment). Nevertheless, the fundamentals of the system are a very promising way to improve student progress in RE.

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Appendix 1 – Scheme of Work

To what extent is the Buddha a good role model for Buddhists today?

To what extent should Buddhists today follow the Buddha's teaching of the 'Middle Way'? To what extent was the Buddha's father right to try and keep suffering from the Buddha? To what extent is the Noble Eightfold Path an appropriate approach to living? How right was it for the Buddha to leave his family to seek Enlightenment? What is the impact of the Three Universal Truths on Buddhists? Lesson Enquiry Question Students work in groups to construct a PRESENTATION Post Easter: What can we remember about Buddhism? Are Buddhist monks the best Buddhists? What different ways are there of being a Buddhist? To what extent are precepts better than rules? What is to be gained from meditation? LINK back to Year 7 Scheme of Work Who are you?' Conflict between family and other duties Scheme of Work 'To what extent is love of money the root of all evil?' Link to Year 9 SOW on making moral decisions Strong link back to Year 8 SoW Links Assessment Practice Tensions Context Focus

	To what extent is the B	uddha a good role mode	el for Buddhists today?	
Lesson Inquiry Question	Learning Objectives	Activities	Assessment Opp/Outcomes	End Goal
To what extent was the Buddha's father right to try and keep suffering from the Buddha 2	Beginner: Explain how the Buddha's father kept suffering from him, what this was traine to achieve and	STARTER Mind Map – What do we know about Buddha? Show students the video	Set benchmark to influence planning/teaching rest of SoW.	The first two lesson in the SOW focus on the earlier par of the Buddha's life.
	 Competent: Analyse whether it is good for a leader to have no knowledge of suffering. 	explaining the foundation of Buddha's story. B/C differentiation by task double sided worksheet		As a teacher I will gain understanding of what they know so far, and as students, they will:
	Master: Evaluate whether parents should always have authority over their children,	TALKING POINTS	Dialogic => FEEDBACK => leads onto structured writing BCM – Self-Assessment	Understand the family context of the Buddha and the implications for his life
	and whether this depends on their role in society.	BCM differentiated writing task.	Pupil Product (D by Task)	and buddnists today.
How right was it for the Buddha to leave his family	Beginner: Explain why the Buddha left his family	Recap story so far with images.		This lesson builds on the last lesson sequentially and thematically The Buildhe
	behind and how he lived. • Competent: Analyse whether	Notes from video on the Four Sights. Watch the video, pause after each sight students take notes.	Drawn images identifying the Four Sights.	Earlightenment realising how fake his life in the Palace is.
	 the Buddha needed to leave his family to achieve his goals. Master: Evaluate whether Prince 	Role play – imagine you're Buddha / wife / son / father / monk (BCM differentiated tasks to think about)	Self-assessment of role play	Students will understand wh the Buddha left his family and engage with the moral implications of doing so.
	Siddhartha's family responsibilities	Talking Points		
	were more important than his desire to seek truth.	BCM differentiated writing task	Written product	

	To what extent is the B	uddha a good role mode	el for Buddhists today?	
Lesson Inquiry Question	Learning Objectives	Activities	Assessment Opp/Outcomes	End Goal
How practical is the Buddha's teaching of the 'Middle Way' today?	 Beginner: Explain the four noble truths and the meaning/practice of the Middle Way Competent: Analyse whether desire is the cause of suffering. Master: Evaluate whether Buddha's teaching is right that craving causes suffering, and whether it means we have to give up all possessions. 	Starter – Students match up key points to Buddha's life as a prince, or life as an ascetic Summarise Four Noble Truths (Information Hunt) Cravings – Table of what the Middle Way would be. Use of Religious Narrative (e.g. releasing cows) (Circles of Inference) Discussion Point BCM differentiated writing task	Completed mini-worksheet Pupils have summary of Four Noble Truths Pupils have some examples of Luxury, poverty, middle way. Complete circles of inference (label circles according to BCM => Pupil Product) Written product	This lesson builds on the first two lessons in the SOW. The first one focuses on 'luxury' and the second focuses on 'poverty'. This third one, then, creates the idea of the Middle Way between the two. In this way the first three lessons follow on strongly from the prior scheme of work on wealth/poverty. Students will appreciate and respond to the notion of the Middle Way.
What is the impact of the Three Universal Truths?	 Beginner: Describe the Three Universal Truths and some of the impacts it might have Competent: Analyse some of the strengths and weaknesses of the truths Master: Evaluate whether this view of the world will help Buddhists live well. 	Images => Which of these lasts forever? Anicca Buddhist poem; list of ways your life changes, discuss/write down view Anatta – video of child growing up, draw images of this, discuss/write down view Dukkha – how will things change and cause suffering; discuss/write down view. Mark each Truth – how far do you agree?	BCM differentiated discussion leading to short written conclusion for each of the three Universal Truths	Students will be able to explain the Three Universal Truths and how they might affect the lives of Buddhists. Higher ability students will evaluate the merits of taking such an approach. Students will consider the positive and negative impacts of the Three Universal Truths.

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	To what extent is the Bu	uddha a good role mode	el for Buddhists today?	
Lesson Inquiry Question	Learning Objectives	Activities	Assessment Opp/Outcomes	End Goal
To what extent is the Noble Eightfold Path a good way to live?	 Beginner: Explain the Noble Eightfold Path and some of the challenges Buddhists might face. Competent: Consider whether our mind can be trained to get rid of hatred and whether that is always a good thing. Master: Evaluate the viability of the Noble Eightfold Path and whether it is valuable in relation to the practical world. 	Construct the Noble Eightfold Path through mini tasks. Talking Points BCM differentiated writing task	Students will have written copy of the Noble Eightfold Path Pupil Product	Students will now consider whether the Noble Eightfold Path is too ambitious and how easy it would be for Buddhists to follow. Students will engage with the challenges of the Noble Eightfold Path in terms of its advantages/disadvantages and usefulness.
To what extent are the Five precepts better than specific rules?	 Beginner: Describe the Five Precepts and how they are different to a rules-based system. Competent: Contrast the Five Precepts with specific rules and consider the benefits/challenges for Buddhists Master: Evaluate whether Precepts provide a more flexible approach to ethics than a rules-based system. 	Students come up with five rules for everyone to follow => identify problems with this. Contrast rules and precepts. Zen Story – Muddy Road (Circles of Inference) Cut + stick of precepts and when Buddhists would/may not follow them. Discussion point BCM differentiated writing task.	Five rules written in their books. Identify issues with this. Pupils note down definitions Completed circles of inference sheet Completed table of precepts to be followed and what this means. Differentiated writing task	Students will consider the extent to which morality is best defined by rules or by more general guidelines by contrasting the Five Precepts that modern Buddhists follow with the more strict approaches followed by Buddhist monks. Students will contrast the Five Precepts with a more strict system.

1C MOTIVATION OBSERVATION SCHEDULE

The particular aim of these observations is to attempt to isolate the motivation of the following students:

Louie	LW - ABSENT	
Jane	Wf	
Bill	BL	
Chris	CHM	
Ruth	RH	
Alice	AF	

For the purposes of this observation, 'motivation' is taken to mean:

Do the students seem to understand what they are doing?

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- Do they appear to be interested in what they are doing?
- Do they engage with their work, even if they seem to find it challenging?

Please focus particular attention on instances at which the BCM system is explicitly used (as indicated by the markers that I will

announce in the lesson).

I have left a row blank between each marker to account for any notes between the markers.

Appendix 2 – Example Observation Schedule

Additional comments			
Strong engagement?	Very strong (vs), strong (s), weak (w), very weak (vw), unclear (u)	S – routines and rules keep calm classroom – all students on task completing pre-starter	Students all listening and looking at teacher – not fiddling.
Strong interest?	Very strong (vs), strong (s), weak (w), very weak (vw), unclear (u)	S – listening to teacher	LOs in combination with intrigue offered by first task seems to keep students really engaged in the topic – lots of questioning of each other "What do you
Good understanding?	Very good (vg), good (g), poor (p), very poor (vp), unclear (u)	G –AF writing a great deal in response to the questions on the board. CHM – continuing master task from last lesson	BL – comments that he likes these clear LOs as he can see what he has to do clearly. RH – says she likes them too because she wants to do
14/3/14 - LESSON 3	Shorthand =>	MARKER 1 – BASELINE (Before LOs)	MARKER 2 – (after LOs stated)

The markers relate to what has just happened.

well in the lesson	think this means?" etc.		
		Information hunt – working as a group seems to keep the group really engaged in the topic. LS – (weak ability student) actively leads his group of stronger students to gather information on the 4 noble truths.	Teacher uses timings (E.g.2 minutes left) effectively – there is a clear deadline given to students which encourages quick engagement and increased engagement towards the end of the task
		Students every interested in Japanese 'Middle Way'	
			WZ – very interested in today's lesson – very smiley and happy (unusual) could be that he feels like the expert (his family are Chinese Buddhists)

Lots of very quiet focused work – not many students are off-task (a few are fiddling but not distracting other people). W shares his experiences with EG on the backrow (on-task discussion about the story of the cows and what it might mean)	BG – "I liked it when we moved around the classroom." 'I'm tired today but I like moving about"
AR – "Oh I like the picture!" LS- very happy that he can write on the sheet a whispered "Yes!" when you explain how to complete the task (manageable short-term task?)	LS – some low interest in the open ended question – perhaps not clear on outcome (tangible outcomes?)
BL – able to explain what he's doing and why – can make a clear link to the topics in the lesson. AF – understands what the lesson is about. RH – making links between previous lessons and learning in the lesson today	CHM is able to draw links between literal meaning and symbolic meaning BL – engaged in the topic with discussion of family and attachment WZ – makes clear links between loss and attachment
MARKER 3 – After students construct Middle Way examples (slide has a Master extension Q)	MARKER 4 – After Releasing Cows Circles of Inference

Everyone has their heads down working – even the weaker students (MS/LS) give the task some attempt
All students want to show the teacher what they can do – it might be worth considering how marking of this work is carried out (peer/self/teacher?)
BL – understood why he was doing the written task and seemed to be enjoying it CHM – tackled Master task and was confident in completing
MARKER 5 – After BCM Differentiated writing task







Appendix 5 - Group Interviews

GROUP INTERVIEW 1

Alice

Ruth

Chris

Bill

Louie – Not in on the day

• Before we start, I want you all to know that you can say whatever you want – if you were bored at some point in a lesson, you can say that, if you didn't understand or didn't like certain things you can say that.

• Just like with the graphs, the most important thing is for you to say exactly how you feel and as much as you can remember. Don't feel like you need to be nice or say what you think I want to hear.

• I'm going to be typing a lot as you speak. Please try not to be put off and just keep talking, and if I'm a bit slow to respond then sorry!

Start by handing back the 1C Motivation graphs and a print out of where we were in LESSON 1.

1. Look back at your graphs, I want you to think back as hard as you can to the first lesson on Buddhism. A lot of you go up from 'Quite motivated' to 'Very motivated' at point 3. That's just after I explained the Learning Objectives. Can you remember what it was that made you go up a level? CHRIS: we were just about to go onto watching a video

RUTH: you wanted to find out about it – Prince Siddhartha. Heard the story before. RUTH: nods good to know what you're going to do, BILL: nods.

CHRIS: knew a video was going to come up.

ALICE: interested by the video coming.

Double sided sheet

CHRIS: – Helpful to have double sided sheet one for B and one for C

RUTH: look at the questions first, work out if you understand them.

ALICE: – easier to look at master then go below, than it is to move up, if for example you feel really confident in one topic, you want to master. For one you're not so sure about, it's easier to go down one.

[my typing here doesn't make clear her point – she suggests she prefers to look at the harder questions then decide to try easier ones if the harder ones look too challenging. When you really want to Master a topic you'll look at those ones first, but if you're not so sure you might choose to try Competent/Beginner tasks instead.]

CHRIS: – NDEs completely different to Buddhism. You might be master in NDEs but not really understand Buddhism.

Students agreed that you might be Master in one area but not in another.

BILL: NDEs more about philosophy and what goes on in the brain. Buddhism is completely different. It's more religious.

2. Chris, Louie and Ruth – you are at Very Motivated after the Self Assessment of the Talking Points and after answering the question in your books. Why did you go up there? Bill why did you go down at that point?

RUTH: - Talking Points quite like doing them. Explain and argue your point.

CHRIS: – talk in different aspects – when you write down it's quite limited – because of not having enough time. Changing your ideas quite quickly with help from another person.

What did you think of the self-assessment sheet?

BILL: A good thing to do

ALICE: Just to see visually where you are.

RUTH: - Just to see something to work on next time.

BILL: Easier to improve things that you've set yourself.

RUTH: Sometimes you don't understand what the teacher has said (in terms of targets).

BILL: Easier for you to understand targets you set yourself.

Where you think you are might not be where the teacher thinks you are.

BILL: Better for the teacher – you can then just look what they think.

The teacher can then make a link between what students are thinking about how well they did and what the teacher is thinking.

3. Chris, in Lesson 2 you go up to 'Very Motivated' at Point 2 – that's just after the role play. Why did you go up?

CHRIS: – Role Play a lot more fun. We never have done role play before in RPE – a different way of doing it, you can learn how to be in someone else's shoes quite easily. You can see other views.

Most of you stayed in the same place throughout the lesson, why was that?

RUTH: – not sure why I stayed the same. I'm not ... I don't like it. But I think it did help me quite a lot in the end.

On the cards you could think about what each person was thinking that helped you.

Don't like role play. One person who was just messing around.

ALICE: - big problem sometimes

CHRIS: and RUTH: - Liam was just messing around. He didn't like his character.

Did you look at the BCM questions on the board?

RUTH: - it was useful.

ALICE: - you think more about the question on the board. They vary quite a lot.

RUTH: - you can work towards it.

BILL: – thing with role play is sometimes it's better to let people pick their own groups, there will be friendship groups that don't work as well.

Spoils it for the other two if there are two messing around (RUTH). It's messing around.

I asked them, if they chose their own groups, would they end up with mainly Beginners or Competents in the group?

ALICE: – if you put all the Beginners in one group, they have the same level. Mixed ability helps explain a different level

RUTH: - beginner and master in the same group the beginner could learn from the master

CHRIS: – choosing your own groups, there's a lot of groups that would just mess around. [names three students]. And also when we're doing that sort of thing there were 3 male characters and 1 female. They'll often choose an all boy or all female group.

5. What really motivates you in lessons? Is it where you can really see what to do to achieve Beginner, Competent or Master; is it because you are doing something where it's really open and you don't know exactly where it's going to go? Is it both sometimes?

RUTH: – sometimes you look at question sometimes you look at Competent. I'll try the Competent one first, if I can't do it I'll go to the Beginner. Sometimes easier if you finish one question to go back to the other ones.

CHRIS: – If you did the Master one you could try the Beginner and Competent ones just to make sure you've really understood it.

ALICE: – what's quite useful is if you start competent, often Master is the same question but 'Why' so you can just add to it.

What do you think of the writing task at the end of the lessons?

BILL: – a nice way to summarise the lesson and for an assessment if you've done tonnes of work before it's set, it'll be quite nice to just go back to the final question and it pretty much summarises the whole lesson – what you've done in the lesson it summarises it up in one. Read that and see if it's useful for your assessment.

It's like the conclusion of the lesson CHRIS: mmm

RUTH: - reflect back on what you've done.

BILL: 'if the lesson was a paragraph, it would be the conclusion'

CHRIS: - when you get onto the assessment each lesson contributes to a part of the essay.

ALICE: – often we start a lesson and we don't know about it, and finishing it is not really a conclusion but like to see if you really understand the subject.

How do you think that links to the learning objectives?

ALICE: – the LO is often a question and then at the end of the lesson it's more an answer to that question. Today it was an answer to ... yesterday, last time it was the question to whether two people had the same view. And that is kind of the answer to the title but not completely.

CHRIS: – objectives are that you like think of questions yourself to see if you learnt about that. What did we learn about? Dot dot dot. W

when we do the end paragraph

Do you prefer it to be clear outcome, a clear paragraph

CHRIS: If you just conclude the lesson they will be helped by having answered one of the questions

BILL: some people like it, other people won't. Some people like writing more than others, putting their thoughts down on paper. Some people are the other way around

6. In today's lesson, Alice, Chris, Ruth all jumped up to 'Very Motivated' at Point 3. That was just after you had thought about life of luxury vs life of poverty and the Middle Way, and just before the Circles of Inference. Why did you all jump up then?

ALICE: - You don't really expect an RPE lesson to learn about cows

CHRIS: - look like you were going to play a game

RUTH: – how you put it got my attention the bits after it I found interesting.

CHRIS: - once you get motivated it has to be quite bad to lower the motivation

RUTH: – really liked it circles of inference – worked your way up, tried all the questions build up to ...

CHRIS: - It was a new layout.

What was the best thing about the layout that made it better?

ALICE: – quite useful sometimes to have a piece of paper to note down answers. Mind map really helps.

RUTH: - Start at the easy questions and slowly build up to the harder ones.

All started at B, then C, then M.

They think everyone in the class did that.

7. Bill you went down after that, could you tell me why?

8. Chris and Ruth, why did you stay at the top after that?

9. At the end of the lessons there has always been a writing task – one for Beginner, one for Competent, and another for Master. What do you think of that? Do you think about which question you can answer, or do you decide to try the B, C or M one?

10. Did it make any difference having Beginner, Competent and Master on the circles of inference sheet or not really?

11. Do you think of yourself 'I am Beginner' 'I am Competent' 'I am Master' or do you look at the task and then decide?

12. Do you prefer Beginner, Competent and Master to Levels or the other way around? Or do you like both in different places?

13. Do you think BCM makes any difference to your achievement at school? Do you think it has any negative impacts?

GROUP INTERVIEW 2

Alice

Bill

Chris

Ruth

• Before we start, I want you all to know that you can say whatever you want – if you were bored at some point in a lesson, you can say that, if you didn't understand or didn't like certain things you can say that.

• Just like with the graphs, the most important thing is for you to say exactly how you feel and as much as you can remember. Don't feel like you need to be nice or say what you think I want to hear.

• I'm going to be typing a lot as you speak. Please try not to be put off and just keep talking, and if I'm a bit slow to respond then sorry!

Start by handing back the 1C Motivation graphs and a print out of where we were in LESSON 4.

You all go down at the end of the lesson, why is this?

CHRIS: Not sure, can't remember, getting tired?

RUTH: Done quite a lot on suffering so that's why we went down

BILL: agrees

Alice do you know why you went down at Point 2?

ALICE: not very interested in 'three universal truths' just overall

Not that interested in the topic

Chris, Ruth you don't go up there, but you go up later - why is that?

RUTH: I think it was the poem

CHRIS: it was slightly different

RUTH: with the ... when we looked at how we change over time, the video, it did show how he was different every single day. Showed how you change and how you change and stuff. Liked the video and learning about it and If you accepted it would you be happier?

BILL: A video does always help.

ALICE: quite a visual thing so you remember it more than just speaking

BILL: sticks in your mind

RUTH: yeah it does ... cos you get visuals and listening at the same time

ALICE: you sort of replay it afterwards

CHRIS: especially if there's music, upbeat music – you wake up a bit

Period 1 you're always quite tired when you walk in.

I asked if that affected their motivation, noting that when they enter they're usually 'quite motivated'.

RUTH: - quite motivated when you arrive because you're tired

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CHRIS: - even if you don't know you have the sort of surprise of what you're going to do

RUTH: - that can be quite fun

ALICE: - we used to have RPE at the end, the problem is you're tired both times.

I asked about how their motivation changed at Point 3 and why.

RUTH: Because it really liked ... I like learning how the Buddhists live and how would they be able to stick to all of them, why would they want to and I just sort of enjoy the topic

ALICE: and we'd explored it in primary school and we were just shown the wheel, not what it meant

CHRIS: did it last year with [names teacher]

RUTH: - yeah

BILL: - The Michael and Andy show

CHRIS: - but we never learnt it in much detail; I liked doing it in different ways which were leading us up to each point

BILL: – visuals and videos help a lot because I don't know about different forms but our form learn better when there's stuff to look at

RUTH: - yeah, yeah

RUTH: – also liked the sheet because it had the wheel and it had the points on and space for each point and you could see it clearly.

Talking Points Self-Assessment (was it better than last time?)

RUTH: - it was

BILL: – a bit better

RUTH: - a bit better

What was better?

BILL: - the questions were easier.

CHRIS: – not sure there was much different, just that ... Talking points help people express their points of view

ALICE: – good in this lesson because there was a little game just before it. (*referring to the teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path*)

RUTH: - like how before you got to each one had a bit before,

BILL: – like what was true about you (here he is referring to me)

RUTH: - really understood what it was

CHRIS: - especially cos there was an example before you were explaining

BILL: – yeah it's better before than after because after you know what it is and you might find it hard to find the link. When it's before it's easier to find the link

CHRIS: - if you just gave us the example afterwards we wouldn't have remembered as much

Does having the BCM criteria at the beginning make a difference or not really?

RUTH: – yeah it helped having it at the beginning because I could see what I was trying to work towards

ALICE: - if it's after it helps you improve it next time

RUTH: – and you can see how to go up a level.

You know I have the three learning objectives at the beginning of the lesson – one for B one for C and one for M. What do you do when I show them? What do you think?

BILL: I read each one

Usually I look at competent to master

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RUTH: yeah same

BILL: - it's not which is easier but which one sounds more fun

RUTH: - I know which one I'm aiming towards and I know what to do to achieve that level

CHRIS: – if you write it in a Master-y way then you'll just aim for a Mastery way. So, some people who don't have their Master, without the questions they'd go for Master.

I ask him to clarify what he has just said (I'm unclear about how accurate the prior typing is as well)!

With the question they can look at what they prefer to do. *[At this point I wonder if he is thinking of when they are given a written task using the same design layout rather than learning objectives] Do you mean at the beginning or at the end or both?* Both the beginning and the end, with the questions you can easily look at all of them and decide, but at the start you have in your mind what sort of thing you're aiming for

I think his point is that being able to display all three questions at once means that students can easily see the different levels AND what that involves, so they can make a judgement based on the content of the lesson rather than a perception of overall status. Thus, rather than thinking 'I am a Master I'll do this', they think 'I am a Master, can I do today's Master work? No – in that case I'll do Competent.'

ALICE: - often the beginner point is the main thing and then you can add onto it as you progress.

If I was to ask you to explain the BCM system how would you do it?

ALICE: – there are three different levels and you can choose which one you're aiming at to make your answers ... explain your answers more

RUTH: – beginner's the easiest, then Master's in the middle *I ask her 'Master's in the middle!?'* ... no, Competent's in the Middle and Master's the hardest one and like you should start where you think you are so like if you think you sort of get it a bit then you start at Beginner, if you're competent you start at competent and start at the Master ...

BILL: – they're like steps of learning. *I ask him to explain that.* So, it's like beginner is the easiest, Master's the hardest, and Competent's the middle and I think if you weren't very confident in RPE you could start off with Beginner and then if you found that quite ... you did that well and you then feel like you're fine to move onto Competent, rather than having the like 4a, b, c, because that seems more of a harder step up from a 4 to 5 than a Beginner to a Master.

RPE's the only subject that does it but it definitely does help when there are three instead of like ...

CHRIS: eight

BILL: ... yeah, eight that you could possibly get. It's then easier to target what you want

RUTH: – BCM they're sort of like 4a, 5a, 6a, they're sort of like specific levels it's sort of with BCM ... I don't know how to say it, it's not just a specific level it's a couple of levels thrown together.

BILL: A beginner might be a 3 and a 4 , and then a 5 and a 6 and then a 6 and a 7

BILL: They're not as specific

CHRIS: instead of aiming for a 4 or a 5 you can just aim for a Competent and that'll get you in the middle.

BILL: – none of the questions, you can answer them if you're a beginner you can answer the master questions which might give you more confidence.

If you get a grade you get a 4a you don't want to do a 6a, when they're like questions it's just easier to sort out, work out.

If I was to ask you to explain levels to me – level 4, 5, 6, 7 etc – how would you do it?

12. Do you prefer Beginner, Competent and Master to Levels or the other way around? Or do you like both in different places

All say yes, CHRIS: because there's no real difference when you get marked when you're competent or master you get the levels with it

RUTH: – if you're marked beginner it's not like I'm doing so bad, like 'I'm 3a'. I can work up to competent and stuff, it's like a lot easier

If you did it 3a, 4a, you'd have to do loads of different things.

Easier to work up to next question

CHRIS: - 6b, 6a, 7c, question - it would be completely ...

RUTH: – a lot harder.

13. Do you think BCM makes any difference to your achievement at school? Do you think it has any negative impacts?

GROUP INTERVIEW 3

Alice

Bill

Chris

Ruth

Louie - did not show up

• Before we start, I want you all to know that you can say whatever you want – if you were bored at some point in a lesson, you can say that, if you didn't understand or didn't like certain things you can say that.

• Just like with the graphs, the most important thing is for you to say exactly how you feel and as much as you can remember. Don't feel like you need to be nice or say what you think I want to hear.

• I'm going to be typing a lot as you speak. Please try not to be put off and just keep talking, and if I'm a bit slow to respond then sorry!

Start by handing back the 1C Motivation graphs and a print out of where we were in LESSON 6.

Bill and Ruth, you went up to 'very motivated' at Point 2 – just after you found out what you were going to be studying today. Why is that?

BILL: because it sounded interesting

RUTH: and it was something new

Did you know what they meant?

BILL: kind of

RUTH: I wanted to know what it meant

Alice you went down then, why is that?

ALICE: I think it was just because I didn't really get what the objectives were. I didn't get that motivated when we learnt them.

Was it the word precept that made you not sure?

ALICE: *Nods* Yeah

CHRIS: didn't really know what precept meant so I didn't know what to expect.

If I don't know I say quite motivated. It could be rubbish, so I always stay in the middle

BILL: yeah that's what I do

CHRIS: some people will be 'not at all' but since you don't know what's gonna happen you say quite.

Alice you went up again at point number 3 – that's just after the Muddy Road story. Why is that?

I found it quite interesting. Just overall. Because it had loads of hidden meanings. Well I've always been quite good at seeing the double meanings of things since I was quite young.

And did you find the circles of inference helpful or not that helpful?

ALICE: Yeah, quite a lot

Chris why do you go up at Point number 3?

It's a bit more interesting when we started to do that because it was something sort of new and um seemed much more ... I was much more sort of surprised at what we were doing. It was much better than I expected.

Do you prefer surprise?

CHRIS: – sometimes, if it's a really bad surprise ... if it's rubbish but you say something great's gonna happen it'll lower you

If you keep the keywords in it that might make people more excited just by the key words if it's a good surprise then some fun things. Say a video or something you weren't expecting in a good way, it makes people go up a bit

Like when we had 'release the cows' I think everyone was excited by that.

RUTH: - mmm -

I asked would it be better or worse if I had put 'today we're going to learn about how Buddhists see cows as desiring possessions.

BILL: - Worse ...

Ruth and Bill you stay at the top for the rest of the lesson. Why is that?

BILL: - I like the circles of inference thing

Because you can like work up .. and it feels like you're making progress but you can visually see it as well. I think that's better than like ... Better than having those eight questions on the board ... you can see how you are going up

CHRIS: – I think people who are beginners they'll make their way to competent quite easily. They can easily do the beginner questions and move onto competent that way

ALICE: - I quite like visualising it and working your way up.

RUTH: – I stayed up on the fourth point – that bit at the end where you write the Beginner, Competent and Master and then you have to like write a paragraph because you like ... I dunno it just helps me to summarise what I've been doing in the lesson.

I asked them to say whether those questions at the end are very, quite, not very or not at all helpful.

ALICE: - Quite helpful - you can summarise it all in one place.

What made you say 'Quite' rather than 'Very'?

ALICE: - Sometimes you can't always put it together and it doesn't make sense.

RH?

RUTH: – Very helpful – because it helps me to summarise all my points together in one paragraph and if there's a question on the board it helps me to answer the question and understand the topic. And also like with today it helps me to get to master. I started on the competent one ... I did that then went onto master. It helped me work towards master as well.

BILL: – I found it quite helpful – because if you are doing … if you write all of it in a little paragraph, when you do your assessment or essay at the end of the term, (*corrects himself*) topic, you can just go through and look at the end and so you don't have to go through all the lesson and then summarise it, it's then easy to find … so it saves time and it's nice just to be able to round it all up.

I asked why it was 'Quite' helpful rather than 'Very'.

BILL: - On one of them I remember I didn't really get the end questions ...

CHRIS:? Very, Quite, Not very or not at all?

CHRIS: – exactly what Bill said. When we get to our assessment it's already there for us, so it's not like we have to go onto the Internet and then find extra internet research ... and makes something

up from our books. You can change it when you write your assessment because you're learning a bit more about it. It's there if you needed it.

I know we didn't really get time to do the peer assessment. What do you think of it as an idea? Did you read someone else's work?

(Louie you stay at 'not very motivated' for the whole lesson. Why is that? You can say whatever you want.)

What's the worst thing about BCM? If you can think of one.

RUTH: – Sometimes you don't understand the questions. You try to answer it but you get confused and you don't really understand the questions. It can get quite confusing. You should have two questions for each one and have a choice between the two. They should be different questions. You may understand it more

CHRIS: – sometimes when you try for Master or something you end up doing the one below sometimes because you sort of write what you think and then forget about the question and then sometimes end up writing the advantages or disadvantages

ALICE: – it can be irritating just having to answer a question and a paragraph and you don't know how to structure it and include your opinion

CHRIS: – some of it can even be a yes/no answer sometimes it can be a bit hard to find a thing to write about

BILL: – on top of what RUTH: said, I think they shouldn't be completely different but I think they should have the same question but worded differently or maybe a slightly different aim but not completely different questions

RUTH: - yeah

BILL: – [if they were completely different] you might have people doing two different things (*in a bad way*). You could have competent one and competent two and then like that at all the levels. (*he suggests having two questions at each level rather than one*).

CHRIS: – or sometimes have competent one and competent two – they could be the same difficulty but a different structure. So you can fall back on the other if you don't understand one.

Bill, in the last focus group you said that going from a Level 4 to a 5 seems a harder step up than going from Beginner to master. Could you explain why you think that?

You also said that if you get a 4a you wouldn't want to do the level 6a work - why is that?

Can you explain levels to me really quickly?

ALICE: - so there's 1, 2 3, 4, 5 and 6,

CHRIS: - and seven, eight.

ALICE: -7, 8. Eight is the best, one is the lowest. But there are three bits in that one number. For example, 1c which is the worst, 1b which is ok, 1a which is near level 2

So if you are 5c - you're the bottom of 5 but you're near 5b. If you're at 5a then you're almost at 6c but you're not doing one or two things that you need.

CHRIS: - for beginner it's 3-4, I think for competent it's 5-6

BILL: - no I think it's 4 and 5

RUTH: - yeah, 4 and 5

CHRIS: - no it's 5 and 6 because master is seven and eight.

RUTH: – I think, I don't know

BILL: – I think ... this competent beginner and master is better than levels because it's not like if ... it was the same format but without the competent, beginner and master it would be like 4, 5 and 6 and then it's a bigger jump.

Why?

BILL: – it's more psychological knowing that there are three sections in one so it's like going up ... there's like nine levels between it rather than three

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CHRIS: – but it's confusing when you get your results back and you don't know if you're Beginner Competent or Master. Some people think a seven is a master

RUTH: - some people may think it's competent.

You should Put both – in the lessons so you can see where you are.

BILL: - then if you're a beginner you can push for the competent and then so on.

CHRIS: – when you do the practice ones they tell you ... it's quite annoying sometimes. A couple of people got a 6a in their practice ones and then they got competent/master but they didn't really know what that meant. That either means the 6a is competent or like master because you don't know which one is which

ALICE: – sometimes beginner, competent and master is quite good because it's overall what you are. Sometimes the levels if you want more of an aim it's a lot better because you can really work your way and know exactly what you have to do

I double check that she means levels, not BCM

I think it's levels because you're really looking for a 6c from a 5a. if there's competent and master it's such a wide range of levels it's hard to work up.

If you're aiming for master and you really tried it might be a bit depressing if you're competent.

You could be making half a level progress each assessment. If you're BCM you'd stay the same. You wouldn't feel like you're making an improvement.

For assessments it would be good to have both. On the back have that thing which tells you what to achieve to get the levels.

CHRIS: – in the assessments, the back sheet is done with beginner, competent, master. So you don't know what level you would be achieving.

Appendix 6 – Interview with Zayn (creator of Beginner, Competent, Master)

INTERVIEWER: OK, right, interview with Mr XXXXX. OK, so I want to talk about the

underlying philosophy [ZAYN: mmhmm] behind Beginner Competent Master. So when you set out to design it, what was your intention for ... designing this approach?

ZAYN: Yeah so there were two ideas .. really behind the changing of how we assess student work. One was this notion of different skills in RPE, or different areas of .. like, interest, different areas of academic study umm ... and, it w- to some extent, it was a way of breaking it down for students so it was clear ... precisely what they were study ... what aspect of religion they were studying or what aspect of philosophy or ethics they were studying.

so . the kind of the .. driving, kind of, force was this . what was appearing was, um we were setting .. assessments, two or three assessments or four assessments in a year .. and students were going up and down all over the place in some respects, some very bright students were going up and down, and it was just recognising that perhaps ... they were using different skills in different areas .. of study and acknowledging that, and kind of work, building on that. So instead of saying 'you're a level 4', 'you're a level 5', it was much more about saying 'you're a beginner in this kind of skill area or this kind of area of interest', or 'you're a master in that kind of area' and trying to develop some maybe second-order concepts so .. recognising how you might go about studying .. those particular areas.

And I think the other, the other reason was to do with .. um, levelling, to try to improve .. the, the amount of feedback that we give to students, um ... so that, there was ... um, it was a kind of formative *and* summative process, which I know, .. the literature seems to suggest that that's not ... helpful, but using those broader level descriptors seemed to, like, staff seem to be more comfortable with using those to differentiate for students as well, and students seems to prefer the language of . beginner, competent and master. um ... Instead of saying, ... you know ... 'you're . like a level 7 ... er, people that are aiming for level 5 do this, 6 do this, and 7 do that.' I think the notion of Beginner Competent and Master, um, ... in some respects gave . maybe the weaker ability students a bit more confidence; ... so that they were aware of what was the minimum they had to achieve in the lesson, or the skills that they'd need to show to do well in the lesson.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm, ... so .. you've talked about this way of breaking down, . um, . different aspects of a religion [ZAYN: mmm] that students are studying and then ... Do you think students recognise that idea that .. you can be a Beginner here and a Master there?

ZAYN: Yeah I think that's an idea that needs further development, because I think ... um, not necessarily .. I think, I think in lots of the, kind of . work that staff have done ... in re-planning and re, . maybe, re- . conceptualising some of the schemes of work we've got, that they don't necessarily link those schemes of work to those different criteria. Um, . and there is a danger that sometimes we sort of slip back into just loose national curriculum levels. .. Um, and so the kind of work . to be done over the summer really is to kind of, really focus on making those areas a bit more distinct. Um, I think ... it's a real difficult, it's a really difficult balance. Um, in sort of, in our department we've discussed .. if we make it completely separate, .. is there a danger that students will just sort of ... view ... um, like those areas of study as almost like chopped off at the knees, you know to paraphrase, um, ... Plato... Or, or will they kind of ... er, er, Or ... we kind of end up with this sort of amorphous .. blob where they just do everything . and don't really recognise that they're using different skills, so it is really tricky. I, I would say, at the moment, students don't recognise that they are ... that they get different levels in different areas. But, having spoken to history, I don't think . in history they necessarily recognise . that they achieve well in different areas . in that respect. You know, because you could be .. er, excellent at recognising significance of issues but rubbish at doing kind of, historiography and interpretation, .. and um, I'm not sure that students necessarily recognise that they ... they are doing well in different areas.

INTERVIEWER: How do you think you would change that to make it clearer?

ZAYN: Well I think definitely er, in terms of ... just erm, .. so, so, so, in terms of lesson objectivesetting, .. I think also making sure that we refer back to it for students. I think at the start of the year we were really good . at saying 'Right, this is a Basis scheme of work.' so this is all about disseminating how religions have made meaning and the sources that they might draw upon to make meaning. . But I think as the year's gone on, people have just sort of got tireder and tireder and then have kind of slipped back into old habits. So I think to a certain extent . it is just making sure that students are aware . of like, the field of study that they're, they're working in . Um, . I think that's really clear with the reflective stuff . because I think that's so different to the other areas. Um, I think there's a danger that you can kind of slip into old habits, and I'm very aware that we don't do enough on religious practice at the moment .. and so, that'll be another area that's developed ... this, you know over the next coming academic year.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm, erm, ... ok so ... instead of saying, you were saying about you know,

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rather than saying to a student 'You're a Level 4,' 'you're a level 5' [ZAYN: mmhmm] you say 'You're a Beginner,' 'You're a Master', erm, how do you think that impacts their view of their achievement?

ZAYN: I think it's really interesting in terms of mid-term assessments, so if you, [clears throat] with the kind of, um summative assessments, students are given a National Curriculum gr- level for that . and that's based on Bloom's Taxonomy. But in terms of the . formative feedback that students get on .. on . the lesson by lesson basis, or . er, from a sort of, min . mid-term assessment or that the students call mini-assessments, I think that they have got a much better grasp of like, where they sit, in .. in the kind of taxonomy . if that makes sense. Instead of saying, like, 'You're Level 4', that's a very sort of, f-final thing to say to somebody. 'You're a level 4.' And they might not necessarily conceptualise how to get to Level 5, or what Level 4 actually means, but if you say to somebody, 'Right at the moment that piece of work was Competent. This is what you'd need to ... this is why it's not a Beginner piece of work and this is what you'd need to do to make it a Master piece of work. I think that kind of three broad levels makes it much easier for them to understand how they're going to improve their work, than just . sort of saying . I'm Level 5 and that's that, um . that that's what kind of happened in the past is you'd level a piece of work and then students would not consider any further what they've got to do to develop their understanding or their skills in a particular area.

INTERVIEWER: So, you're saying that .. s- you think students see the level as a kind of .. just an endpoint

ZAYN: yeah. Yeah, I suppose that's the language makes it much more process led and much less . um, results led if you like ... which is kind of where we want the students to be. I think we kind of .. the philosophy of the department is that . we don't take a kind of approach of 'Well we're going to teach everything about the six world religions so that when they leave they are, they know everything about them, because I think we've got the understanding that the retention of knowledge past . Key Stage 3 is .. is if you're not *using* it on a daily basis, . er, it's not there. But if we've got, if we've introduced them maybe to some ways in which they can investigate ideas further, and some skills for breaking down what it means to be part of a religion, then I think that's kind of where we want to get to really. So not necessarily with the kind of inform, you know, informative knowledge of religion but maybe more of the as . the notion of using .. erm, skill, you know, skills

to disseminate what is going on in a particular like, world-view or particular religion. . Erm, obviously you can't have skills without content though so, that's the the marriage there is, is sometimes tricky. I think there's a danger that some ... there is a danger, we use this system of levelling and this system of setting inquiry, that it just all becomes about skills, targets and levels, and actually we lose sight of the content so, that's a really fine line to kind of tread.

INTERVIEWER: Hmm, .. erm ... so OK, let let's take this idea that . it's much more processled. Erm, . if you're thinking 'How do I implement Beginner Competent Master [ZAYN: Mmhmm] across, I don't know, an ideal lesson. . What does that lesson look like, you know, just give me some typical ex, ex, examples [ZAYN: Mmhmm] of how you might implement it.

ZAYN: I think the use of Beginner Competent Master, it's a tool for . erm, creating an inclusive classroom really. Erm, ... I would say a typical lesson of mine would be a mixture of people working er, together to achieve some kind of end and assessing them by outcome, um, through use of dialogue, discussion and through kind of more open-ended or creative . activities. But then also, er, giving them specific level .. or specific kind of tasks, in those areas . and . enabling them I think, op-, giving the students the option to do Beginner Competent or Master not being prescriptive and saying 'Right, you are doing the Beginner task.' or er, you know and actually allowing them to stretch and challenge themselves, . um, and there are obviously problems with that. The danger is that students will always just go for the Beginner task and just get the minimum kind of done. But I suppose . the drive there is that we're very lucky in [school name] in that we've got students who on the whole want to do well and will push themselves further and I think that's kind of a school ethos. Um, kind of .. reward . I think using rewards, the school's rewards policy is really useful. So, giving out merits um, to students that have achieved beyond their . like, current, their current expected level is one of the ways in which we get them focused. Erm, but I do think honestly, sharing the idea that where their work, their work sits within a spectrum, definitely helps students to go 'Ah! Well, you know, I could just do this little bit more I could try and train myself to use this skill and I'm going to become more skilful I'm gonna get, you know, I'm gonna push myself up to being a Master in this area.' I find that that's .. becoming more and more kind of like, the classroom practice and ethos and the classroom .. um .. so, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And you, you might have sort of said this already, but what do you think about it ... about this system it is that m, that makes students just say 'I'm going to push

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myself up to be a Master.'

ZAYN: I think, as I said before, it's kind of seeing themselves . situated within a spectrum of ability and not just saying . 'I'm Level 5.' I think that's my experience has been that giving the level is very much a final thing, it's very much kind of that's it, that's all I've achieved, um, and I don't know I think, if you constantly refer to Levels in lessons there's a danger isn't there that they just kind of switch off and it all just becomes level-driven and I know Beginner Competent Master does relate to levels but to a certain extent it's more about holistic language. I mean the idea came from, um, in the Bauhaus school, the, the, the notion of . becoming skilful in a particular craft . and actually you know, along the process you have to be kind of a novice, a journeyman an apprentice and then finally you're a Master. And I think that's that kind of ethos of understanding where you situate yourself is, is really important. That's what pushes the students up I think.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that Beginner Competent Master is .. n .. wouldn't fall foul of that same issue that you have with levels where you end up just making it . is it built into the system do you think that students will see them as sitting within a spectrum?

ZAYN: Yeah, I think so because the .. the ... I think we're very lucky because no other subject's adopted it, so to a certain extent we're setting learning objectives or setting, um .. specific like, level tasks . the students err, don't necessarily go 'Well, I'm a Beginner in my, Drama too,' I think we're quite lucky . I think there was concern from people going, 'Oh, we're the only subject that's going to be using this. Isn't that a problem?' I think actually, er, it's it worked to our advantage because the students . haven't really. I think they haven't really made the connection between Key . like National Curriculum levels and, um, Beginner Competent Master. So actually that's kind of working in our favour at the moment.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so .. you know, let's assume that I've asked students how they see them as relating to each other. What do you think they would say if they were asked that?

ZAYN: What, the relation between National Curriculum Levels and ... [INTERVIEWER: mmm]

ZAYN: I have absolutely *no* idea I'll be honest. I probably would say at a push, they've probably twigged onto the fact that they relate to like sort of different skills, they're more than like a specific number. So saying Beginner is between Level 3 and 4, Master at, er . Competent is 5 and 6 and Master is 7 and 8. Even though we do share that with them at the beginning of the year and we do

share you know, that's in front of their books it's stuck there as, assess, you know the kind of, assessment policy of the department so, .. erm, yeah. I don't know. I would need to find out more.

[INTERVIEWER laughs]

INTERVIEWER: What do you think erm, to saying there's that kind of, you know . connection between Beginner and Levels 3, 4, Competent: Levels 5, 6, Master: Levels 7, 8. [ZAYN: Mmhmm] Erm, where do National Curriculum levels sit now that you've got Beginner Competent Master. What is the role of those levels or are you trying to get rid of them ... completely?

ZAYN: I think it's important to use. I. I disagree with the notion that all assessment can be formative. I think there does need to be . points of summative assessment in there . to kind of . add some closure to to pieces of work. So it's not just . um, umm so there is that sense of 'That is the ending of this piece of work and this is the final level that you've got.' I wouldn't . we, we discussed this in department at the beginning of the year, like, just moving away from completely from National Curriculum levels and only using them at a reporting stage, but I think we realised with Year 9s for instance, that they needed, they were trained from a very very young age to need a final grade on a piece of work. I think where Beginner, Competent, Master has improved, is on doing much more . differentiation from a teacher's point of view, differentiating in the classroom or . I think, making those levels .. the level language accessible to students . and I think definitely making sure that we've got this um ... that when we give a level it is summative and it's not formative. There's a danger . in like lots of marking that you were doing in the department before, if we just put a level on something and then just always use the same . stock phrases . So always just say 'Oh you've got a Level 5 so therefore you need to analyse.' and actually not really thinking about what that analysis might be. Cos in different areas it might be a different type of analysis that we're asking students to do .. so perhaps Beginner Competent Master gets you into much more developed n-nuanced language when communicating with students what you want them to do to improve their work.

INTERVIEWER: OK, ermmm .. so, so you're saying the Year 9s, they were trained they need a final grade on their piece of work. [ZAYN: Yeah] ... and that's something you're not necessarily taking an issue with, that actually as Year 7s come through .. that you're still, you would still be happy to be using the level at the end?

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ZAYN: Yeah, I think . that's more, yeah. I think that's definitely, I think you need to give them some kind of final closure **[INTERVIEWER: Mmm]** on there. I mean the idea is that, it should im-prove with which teachers can level these types of work. Instead of having just a tick and flick over a piece of work and just sticking a number on it, we can kind of communicate Beginner, Competent and Master, and that has a lot more attached to it than Level 5. Level 5 is just a full-stop if you like, whereas Beginner, Competent Master is much, is a much broader kind of . assessment criteria. Um .

INTERVIEWER: Are there any .. risks with taking that approach, that there are just three core levels?

ZAYN: Yeah I think . the jump obviously, the jump obviously between Level 3 and Level 6 is enormous, but then, um . actually . I can't, I think the risks are that students . if it was used completely all the time they would look at RE as not a proper subject, 'They don't get proper levels in it.' I think that's one of the other reasons why we use, kind of, numbered levels as well .. but from my perspective as a teacher in the classroom and Head of KS3, the response has been positive from staff and students. I think anything which improves . the . in-inclusiveness and differentiation in the classroom has got to be a good thing. I think just using those broad level descriptors gives you the freedom . um, to really see your classroom um, as . though, I don't know, to see, in terms of seeing students as a diverse body, and not just saying 'Oh they're all just gonna work, I'm just gonna set all the work at Level 4 today, that will do, and I'm gonna throw in a couple of Level 6 tasks at the end.' I think that's where it goes wrong, with you use numbers or you use these level descriptors, is sort of, that notion of linear development of skills, doesn't necessarily work. I think that we've got now much more focus on, we might do an activity as a whole class to learn a concept and *then* we've um ... made it so that there *is* differentiation by task or differentiation by outcome and it's really clear that not everybody in the classroom has to go through the Beginner, then the Competent and then the Master stage. I think, where that, where we've fallen down in the past, is we've had a switch on from the bottom and the top at different points in the lesson, so the top switch off at the beginning of the lesson, and the bottom switch off at the end of the lesson, and actually what we want to do is engage the students at an appropriate level all the way through the lesson .. because we don't get that much time with them.

I think . the other thing is there's a danger . that somebody could be a Beginner for an awful long

time, um .. generally speaking when students come into us in year 7, they're about, between Level 2 and a Level 3 with RE because they haven't really done it before, so it's really tricky to go um, you know, there aren't many Year 7s that are going to get to Master level, but to a certain extent, I quite like that because you say to them 'You're in Year 7, that's a Year 9' er, the danger is, if you have er, Competent and Master levels being given out to Year 7 and 8 and 9, and it's not necessarily linked to anything specific, just people have done a good piece of work, but I don't think that will happen here. . Cos we've got lots of, we, we have much more of a skills-focus, I think there's a good understanding in the department, between those different skills.

INTERVIEWER: So, [???] you're talking about this risk of Year 7s coming in at Beginner and maybe staying there too long. [ZAYN: yeah] On the other side of the spectrum, if someone is hitting Master [ZAYN: yeah] relatively early on in Key Stage 3 [ZAYN: yeah], is there a . do you think there's any risk there as well?

ZAYN: Umm, . I think you get round that by communicating the fact that there are different areas and it's very rare for somebody to be a Master in all of those areas, . and actually that drives people, from my ... experience, that drives people much more, so if you say 'You're a Master in that area, but. [tuts] sorry you're only Beginner or you are only Competent in that area' that drive is to get everything at that level, is actually, it makes it much clearer to students, they go 'Oh yeah, I can do this, I can do that, I can improve on my work this way.' Whereas before, you just said to somebody 'You're a Level 5', and they assumed that was Level 5 across all areas of Religious Studies, Philosophy and Ethics, and I don't think they necessarily understood that, an-and when the Levels went down, you had this kind of parental going 'Oh my gosh he got Level 6 on this piece of work, why is he getting a level 4 on this piece of work.' And I think now it's much easier to say, 'Well, that piece of work was in a different area of our subject and this is an, you know, . so your student has very got very good understanding, very good sort of philosophical mind if you like, they can trace, er they can interpret texts and trace ab- abstract meaning, but they're absolutely useless at ethical thinking and that kind of grounding, grounding theory and case study and . um, actually sort of, issues based ethics applied ethics, so . yeah. I think that's where you get . if somebody is a very quick, very quick to gain a Master or Competent level, you can kind of say 'Well . it's not across the board, ... um until that happens, of course. Which is highly likely at [school name], that we'll have somebody who comes in at Year 7, err gets Master in like two sort of areas, and then we'll sort of . We've also introduced the, the k, the pin badge, the 'Master' pin badge, for Year 9 students

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who've achieved two areas of Masterful . learning in a year. Just to try and raise the profile of the subject across the school a bit more.

INTERVIEWER: Mmm. ... Interesting. What was I gonna say next? Umm ... [thinking noises] [quiet muttering] ... Erm, OK. So, let's, let's, go back to this you know an example lesson using BCM [ZAYN: Mmhmm]. You know at the beginning students are shown three learning objectives [ZAYN: Mmhmm] One beginner, one competent, one master [ZAYN: Mmhmm] What do you think happens in the student's head when they see the learning objectives?

Or, what would you, OK, what would you like them to do?

ZAYN: I think what I'd like them to do is to be able to see ... over maybe a series of lessons, they go 'Ah, I was a Beginner, I'm now gonna try Competent, because I found Beginner work .. was easily achievable.' I think as I said already, there's a danger particularly with boys that they go, 'Oh I'm just going to do the Beginner bit today.' Um .. I, I .. have to be honest and say I haven't found that happening. Maybe on one or two occasions the minority of students do it. And the ones that do it actually are the weakest students and to a certain extent you'd expect them to be at a Beginner level and probably stay there for quite a long time anyway. . So in terms of people going 'Oh, well you know, what's going through their minds? Well, in terms of using learning objectives in the department, there's been a big increase in that. I think that's had a lot more um, positive impact umm, because people are kind of saying, er you know teachers are actually saying 'Oh I've got to think about what different levels of student are gonna do in my lesson today' instead of just looking at them as a homogenous sort of group of people that need to be taught how to do describe, explain, and then analyse and then evaluate. . Um, hopefully it gives the Master students the feeling that they're being stretched and challenged as well. . That they're not just sitting in the lesson having to go through every .. you know, having to do something that they already feel very confident in. . So to a certain extent, h-hopefully it sets off in their mind that kind of sense of, like personal targetsetting and not just saying .. you know, 'Oh, it's another RE lesson.'

INTERVIEWER: [laughs] Ummm, ... interesting. So .. you're saying .. you're, you're wanting them to look at the learning objectives and to see .. to choose the level that they think they want to try and achieve well at [ZAYN: mmm]. Do you think there's . anything else that happens as well, or do you think, or is that your main focus, your main ...

ZAYN: I suppose the other thing is the fact that the learning objectives are shared means that th . unless the teacher wants the lesson to have mystery in it, it doesn't and so there is a clear, I think students like to know what they're learning, maybe and at what level they're learning it. Um, Instead of just sort of sitting and waiting for something to happen, I think it's much more proactive actually in kind of saying 'This is what, this is the plan for today.' Um, I would real . I mean I don't know .. how different teachers are using those learning objectives. . Maybe some don't refer to them at all. I mean I think in my practice it's probably explicit-explicitly refer to them and explain them in the first ten minutes of the lesson, but it may be that some other people don't at all. Um, so I mean that's always gonna be the problem when you've got a big diverse department.

INTERVIEWER: Is, so is that a s-specific problem for using BCM successfully, if you don't first the learning objectives Is that missing a very important part of it?

ZAYN: Um, I would say 'Yes' because it's that . notion of sharing the journey with the students and saying 'This is, this is what we're doing today.' I don't, I, ... I dunno, I would be worried if it wasn't happening in lessons, because I think it's just generally good practice to share with students . what they're learning and what you hope and what you are hoping they will achieve in that lesson.

... Even you know, even if you weren't using BCM, if you were using 'All some and most' or . 'should, must, and could' or something like that. . Um, ... but the third, the worry for me is if you're not doing that with them, they're just walking into a classroom and just getting content thrown at them and then just walking out at the end of it and they haven't done any transformative learning at all in there.

OK, so the learning objectives are important as a kind of marker for students to identify where they're going to try to achieve [ZAYN: Mmhmm] Um let's look at the other end of the lesson, perhaps. [ZAYN: Mmhmm] If we're thinking about a plenary [ZAYN: Mmhmm] or something like that .. How does that . translate at the end of the lesson, when you're finishing that journey [ZAYN: Mmhmm] as it were.

[clears throat] I mean obviously using explicit learning objective with students is really helpful on a number of different levels. On the le-on, in terms of getting students to see where they have made progress, it's really useful. And conversely, if you've got a student who's really misbehaving in the lesson, it is *incredibly* useful to have that kind of 'Well you were told this is what you needed to do at the beginning, this was the work that was achievable for you, and you didn't do it,' so there's

got to be some other reason why you didn't do that work, and it's down to attitude to learning, it's not down to . access to the learning or the challenge of the learning. Umm ... I don't know, my overall feeling is the number of less ... number of .. low level behaviour incidents which you usually cause by pupils switching off in lessons have gone down this year. I haven't had to deal with as many kind of ... um, just silly issues that I've had to deal with in the past. There are, I mean, there are still, there are still the major issues in that . I think we've still got a long way to go in terms of inclusion and differentiation. I think we're on the right steps at the moment . And they're, so they're useful at the end of the lesson, they give the students a sense of what they've done in the lesson, they consolidate their learning, they s-, to a certain extent they lead you into the next lesson. They give you the overview of the scheme of work, which wasn't necessarily always there before. So, before it would be kind of 15 random lessons on interesting things and I think now it's much more inquiry led, so there's an inquiry question that's set . and there's a key, er key points in the, in the sequence of lessons where it's made clear to students where they are in achieving answering that er, inquiry question.

... So, it's actually also tied strongly to that inquiry model [ZAYN: mmm]

I think there's also, there's this notion as well of, of working in the zone of proximal development so it's quite nice . if you say to people 'Right, who's a master right you can go and help somebody that thinks that they're a beginner and try and boost them up a little bit, try and get them on their journey. You know, I think that helps a lot i-in lessons. So it's not just 'Oh you're level 5 and that's it full stop.' There's that notion of . OK . so how did you become a Master and actually getting the students to do the metacognition . is really useful um, cos they then share that much more effectively than I would probably share it. They use the language that the students use, um, and they seem to be less ashamed of saying 'I'm a Beginner' than saying 'I'm a Level 3' um, I don't know why. It'd be interesting to see why, the students' perception of that.

... Mmm ... errrmmm OK. That's . quite a lot of stuff for the moment, I'm just thinking if there's anything else I want to ask about. Ummm I tell you what, given, so if we talk, draw a quick line there and say a few things that erm, .. the students said to me . and . um ... [ZAYN: Ohhh! – dreading noise] [INTERVIEWER: laughs] [ZAYN: You've put me on the spot now, OK.] INTERVIEWER: Umm ... okay. I'm not going to focus on the actual lessons themselves but more on the general questions they asked. ... So, actually I'm

wondering if that's going to be particularly ... Er, actually, so w, one more question. They've been doing those motivation graphs throughout the .. um, lessons [ZAYN: Yeah] I've been teaching. Um If you were to make a prediction as to w-why that they say they go up at a certain point, why they say they go down at a certain point [ZAYN: Yeah, Right.] What do you think it would be, if you have any ideas?

Errrrr to be perfectly honest probably a lot to do with the activity they're doing **[INTERVIEWER:** mmmm] and not a great deal to do with their . Beginner/Competent/Master. I think that's probably due to . the notion of motivation, although it's explained well, it was explained well to students, I think sometimes. It's really tricky when you ask a Year 8 students, you know, what was good about that lesson, or what helped your learning in that lesson. [INTERVIEWER: mmmm] or, you know, any of those questions. I think often they just respond by saying 'What did you enjoy in that lesson?' and of course they then . I don't know, there was some research carried out in the school in the sixth form and there was a *big* debate about whether . an enjoyable lesson was a lesson which had a great deal of learning going on. And that sounds horrible . but it basically was saying, you know like students were saying, 'Well I don't like doing card . um, what was the one they said? I don't like doing, um . like mind maps or concept mapping. I just don't like it.' And actually, when we investigated further with the students they said 'We don't like because we find it challenging but it does help us learn' then they're saying 'We prefer much more watching a video. That's what we like, that's what helps us learn.' And when you actually say to them, 'Well, like, why?' they just go 'oh because you don't have to make notes.' And I don't know, I think there's a real tricky dilemma there when it comes to students' understanding their own learning. I still don't think we've cracked that at [school name]. I have to, I feel like I'm sort of saying 'Teachers knows best.' but I actually do kind of think that to a certain extent. I think also there's, it's really tricky um, the kind of initial research that you showed me on the students, about the role that the teacher actually plays in the classroom. And, I'm very aware actually following on from that research that sometimes their perception of the subject, their perception of their own achievement has an awful lot to do with what the teacher's saying to them and the teacher's personality and probably more to do with that than really clear learning objectives although really clear learning objectives all . I don't know, it's *really* tricky. Cos the student perception might not necessarily be, they might not necessarily be able to break down *why* they think something is particularly motivating . or not. So, for example they might say 'The teacher's really good' but when you actually ask them what they're saying is 'the teacher's practice is really good in the classroom so they are, they make it really clear about

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how you achieve well and they praise you for doing well.' There's not necessarily that the teacher's some great stand up comedian that kind of engages people, er, although that does seem to help with Er, [laughs] Year 8s! Erm, yeah.

INTERVIEWER Hmmm. Ummm ..

ZAYN: So did they, did they all say, 'it helps, we feel much more motivated when they see the levels' or did, was there no, was there nominal change?

INTERVIEWER: I haven't identified . the only thing that they've picked up on in particular so far is . um in the last lesson, so the very first lesson that I taught, they all seemed to go up when I explained the learning objectives and I asked them 'Why did you go up at that point?' and they all said 'because we were about to watch a video'

ZAYN: Right.

INTERVIEWER: So there was that sense that actually *that* was what made them go up, rather than the sense that 'OK I know what we're going to do'. That said, erm, I asked them . err, in the last lesson, some of th- I think one or two of them went up when I said we're looking at precepts today. Oh of course you weren't there. So a couple of them went up [ZAYN: Yeah], a couple stayed the same and then Alice went down. So I asked her why she went down and she said she wasn't really sure about what a precept was, so I kind of wasn't sure how I could achieve in that lesson I suppose. Something along those lines. Whereas and Chris and somebody else stayed the same because they said 'well if you don't really know, you just say 'Quite motivated' because you .

ZAYN: You want to know more

INTERVIEWER: You want to know more. And then I think somebody went up, I can't remember who went up, maybe it was Bill. So . yeah, I mean pretty much as you've been saying, if they go up, it tends to be because

ZAYN: of the activity they're about to do

INTERVIEWER: Of the activity they're about to do. One thing that was interesting was that .. well ..

ZAYN: Well I suppose that, the indication there is that the activities .. I dunno . from a student perspective activities have to be enjoyable, from a teacher's perspective they have to be . appropriately challenging.

INTERVIEWER: Mmm

ZAYN: And work within students' perception frame of mind.

INTERVIEWER: Umm, what do you think they would have said about the circles of inference 'Releasing Cows' thing?

ZAYN: Umm, my guess would be that they liked it because they could see quite clearly . the different levels that they could work at, the different like sort of, you know, if you want to be a Master then you you have to kind of work through this and it's scaffolded, I think probably they wouldn't have expressed it in this way but, that the scaffolding really helped them to see, so it wasn't just saying 'Oh you've got to do that and that gets you this level.' but it was actually really gradual, there was like that sort of scaffolding and support to go through the levels.

INTERVIEWER: ... Umm, yeah, I mean it was interesting, they, they seemed to really like that very visual [ZAYN: Yeah] indication and broadly they seemed to like the sequential approach, umm,

ZAYN: But presumably the other advantage of that was that they were setting their own pace weren't they.

INTERVIEWER: Mmmm

ZAYN: So it wasn't a case of saying to a Beginner right you've only got ten minutes to do that or you've only got two minutes to do that and then I want you to go up, and then go up and then go up. They could actually work at a level that they felt comfortable with. And I suppose that could work with the Master as well, they could race through the more descriptive comprehension questions and get into that sort of evaluative thinking much sort of faster than maybe if it was a teacher-led sequence of learning.

INTERVIEWER: Mmmm. Actually so this is, that's um . interesting. In this, in the circles of inference activity, everyone starts at Beginner, then Competent, then Master [ZAYN:

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mmhmm] But that's, say for example with, those double sided worksheets, it's different. Do you think students understand .. ummm .. or how do you, how do you think you convey to students a situation where, you know,

ZAYN: I suppose the thing is .. ummm. if I use those double sided worksheets I try to say 'Right I want you to have a look at the Beginner side and see whether you really need to do that and if you do need to use that if you don't feel comfortable going onto the other side. So I suppose, instead of .. because I think the good thing about that . it's a very simple thing to do but double-siding it instead of saying right take a Green, Blue or Red worksheet, umm, or just giving the worksheets to students and going 'You're a level 4 and you're going to do this.' Is that it does open up that possibility a bit more. Um, I've noticed that people like that have done the Comp- the Beginner side things have gone 'Oh actually, I managed that' and then they attempt a couple of Competent questions and vice versa. People have jumped in and gone 'I'm going to go for a Master' and then have gone 'Oh actually, perhaps I need to drop back a bit, and . you know, 'This was a bit too complicated.' or 'I didn't quite understand that so I'm gonna go back' and then they go up again. Um .. yeah I think s-saying to the students, cos sometimes I think if you hand them a bit of paper they just work on the bit that's . like the side up so actually taking them through and saying 'If you find that a struggle go back and do that. If you find that too easy go on and do that.' Um, I mean that would fit with that same notion of [clears throat] 'It's better than just having a teacher-led linear sequence of learning where you say 'Right Beginners you do, er, just sort of, right taking the' Right Beginners do the beginner task now, then competent, then Master. In that students can set their own pace for the lesson. I don't know, I would assume that that's what they said. Or they said 'I didn't really notice.'

...INTERVIEWER: Mm, interesting. Ermmm ... I won't er, yeah, that's pretty much. Um .. they did feel that sense that you know I might try the Master thing or drop back to Competent. Errmm, Yeah it was interesting. I, I asked them to explain if if I was to ask them to explain the system to me how would they do it. [ZAYN: Mmhmm] Er, Bill said they're like steps of learning

ZAYN: Mmhmm

INTERVIEWER: Erm, and what was interesting is that he said Um 'Rather than having 4a 4b 4c that seems more of a harder step up from a 4 to a 5 than a Beginner to a Master.

ZAYN: OK,

INTERVIEWER: Which was I thought quite interesting because obviously Beginner to Master is obviously a *big* jump

ZAYN: Yeah there's a huge jump

INTERVIEWER: So I asked him in the second focus group and he repeated it, oh sorry in the third focus group he repeated that so I, I kind of, erm delved into that a bit more. I can't remember why I didn't do it so much in the first one I think we were about to run out of time. Erm, ... but he said .. 'It's more psychological.'

[both laugh]

He said it very slowly, but I was like 'Wow!' He said 'it's very psychological knowing there are three sections in one so it's like going up . there are, so, . rather than having nine levels between it you have three. So it feels less like there's this like constant [ZAYN: yeah] which was quite an interesting perspective on it. Um ... was that something you anticipated? Um, this more just out of interest more than anything else.

ZAYN: Well I think it is, . kind of fits with, yeah, it kind of is yeah. I think because the language is easier to understand as well. I mean what does 4 actually mean? 4 is a very summative kind of. 4! What, you know it doesn't have any meaning. It doesn't have any like meaning beyond that classroom is very artificial. Sort of understanding, whereas if you say to somebody 'Well you're a beginner on that PlayStation game' they'll understand what you're saying they won't go 'What?' You know. Er, 'Can you explain that a bit more?' And they'll probably be able to say 'Well if I was a Master I'd be able to do that.' Um . I think just practically as well, you know, students can't hold nine different level descriptors in their minds at once. Um . it just becomes really, really artificial if they, they are always just going 'What's my level? What's my level?' er, er, and kind of .. I don't know, cos we still use, we don't use nine levels, but we certainly use.

INTERVIEWER: Sorry I, I should clarify, when he said nine, what he meant was 4a, 4b, 4c,

ZAYN: Yeah, Yeah, I mean we don't use, we we we, we do use nine levels because we use 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and E . Exceptional Performance and then we have .5s in-between them. So working that out so like eighteen, seventeen levels or something we use with them, but um, I dunno well I

suppose like on the feedback sheets that I've been giving students as well there's much more emphasis on putting their achievement in context and not just saying 'I've got Level 5, well done.' You know you explained, well done. It's actually saying 'Right these are all the things that you do if you wanted to be a Master, or you wanted to be Competent.' .. So yeah, there are probably people like um . what's his name that wrote the th Black Box that they go 'You can't have summative and formative assessment at the same time, it doesn't make any sense.' Um but I don't know, I like to think this is sort of *guided* formative assessment. Summatively formative.

INTERVIEWER: Summatively formative!

ZAYN: [laughs] Formatively summative or something...