

JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION is a refereed publication for the academic exploration of the task of religious education in modern society. The journal helps disseminate original writings and research in religious education and catechesis -- and in related areas such as spirituality, theology, moral and faith development, cultural contexts, ministry and schooling. It includes a variety of feature sections -- on contemporary educational issues, book reviews, conferences, resources and practical hints for teachers. Articles for publication on religious education in various contexts and on the related areas noted above, as well as on any of the feature sections are welcome. See the inside back cover for details.

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Prof Richard Rymarz

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As numbers of students enrolling into Australian teacher preparation courses in higher education institutions continue to increase, it is timely to consider the nature of teacher preparation for religious education in religiously affiliated schools. In the first article, Michael Buchanan makes an important point regarding the dearth of scholarly research and literature in this specific area in Australian higher education institutions. It is hoped that this special edition of the *Journal of Religious Education* will open and initiate further much needed research and debate into this important discipline. The edition comprises a diverse range of papers focusing on teacher preparation in religious education from both national and international perspectives which highlight many significant issues.

The first paper by Michael Buchanan reports the findings and implications of a research study which investigated pre-service teachers' implementation of peer assessment. Assessment is central to curriculum design and implementation, and within that peer assessment plays a significant role. This particular study was unique in that not only did it pay attention to pre-service teachers assessing each other, but they were also required to design and implement their own peer assessment instruments. Key insights were gained by the pre-service teachers involved in the study about the effectiveness of each of the peer assessment instruments. Their evaluation of the range of instruments enabled them to come to clearer insights into designing effective peer assessment for secondary school religious education.

Another area of growing interest within pre-service teacher preparation for religious education is that of 'formation'. Student diversity in the contemporary tertiary education sector is reflective of that in other educational sectors. Students enrolling into teacher education specifically for religious education increasingly come from quite diverse religious backgrounds representing a range of religious traditions and experiences. Many are not members of their faith communities and hence their understanding and appreciation of the religious culture of particular schools and settings can be at times foreign and daunting. A more frequent use of the word 'formation' is entering the discourse concerning teacher education and employment in religiously associated schools. Chris Hackett and Shane Lavery evaluate a program of formation, The Retreat Leaders Program which is an experiential learning program implemented with pre-service teachers of religious education. The results of this evaluation are positive from both students' and educators' perspectives. This paper makes a significant contribution to all educational sectors involved in religious education.

Teaching standards have become an integral element of the teaching profession in Australia for all Key Learning Areas since the 1990s and the Victorian Diocesan Catholic Education Offices have instigated a study seeking to articulate teaching standards for teachers of religious education. The study when completed aims to design standards for graduate, accomplished and leading teachers of religious education. The article by Kath Engebretson and Jan Grajczonek presents initial findings of interviews conducted with graduate teachers of religious education across primary and secondary schools in two Victorian dioceses. The findings enable a glimpse into what teachers themselves are thinking and see as important in their own roles as teachers of religious education, as well as raise a number of implications both for pre-service education as well as inservice professional development.

Since the 1990s particular emphasis has been placed upon an educational approach to the teaching of religion with some Australian dioceses now implementing a diocesan religious education test. This in turn demands a greater emphasis on the cognitive aspect of the classroom program. Teachers consider three key elements when they prepare and implement their curriculum: Teacher Content Knowledge, Pedagogical Learner Knowledge and Pedagogical Content Knowledge. When classroom religion programs take an educational approach to the teaching of religion, greater demands are placed on teachers' own content knowledge. Richard Rymarz's article outlines the crucial nature of this background knowledge for effective teaching and learning of the religious education curriculum in Canada which demands deep teacher knowledge. Two significant implications come from this study: (i) the first is for teacher preparation for religious education courses which need to pay attention to the level of content knowledge made available, as well as to Pedagogical Content Knowledge; and (ii) the second is for curriculum design that might need to be re-evaluated in terms of the actual content with which school students are required to engage. Are such curriculum documents asking too much of secondary students in a complex world?

Our final article in this special edition comes from a Finnish perspective which focuses on teacher competence in religious education. Our Australian context differs quite significantly from the Finnish teacher preparation for religious education wherein prospective teachers of religious education must complete a Master's degree before they can be accredited to teach this subject. Further, positions in such courses at the University of Helsinki are highly contested. In this study, Martin Ubani investigates teachers' perceptions of their competence at the beginning and end of the one year Master's course. This study examined their perceptions in three categories including: *Virtuous Personality* (virtuous educator, teachers' attitudes, empathy and caring, life-long learner); *Skilful Practice* (pedagogical skills, professional cooperation, social communication); and *Expert Knowledge* (knowledge of educational theories, mastery of subject matter, general knowledge and psychological knowledge). The findings elicited interesting results in which teachers' perceptions of their competence in *Skilful Practice* and *Expert Knowledge* increased at the end of the course but their perceptions of their competence in *Virtuous Personality* decreased most noticeably in the sub-category of empathy and caring.

Graham Rossiter provides us with a reflection on teaching and learning in religious education in higher education for over thirty-five years. Graham has contributed significantly to teacher preparation for religious education for almost four decades and indeed many reading this journal would have been in Graham's classes. His influence particularly in adolescent spiritual and religious education is notable. In his reflection Graham focuses specifically on higher education's move towards a greater implementation of eLearning and how that differs from face-to-face learning and proposes an 8 level framework of participant engagement in the study of religious education. Such a framework arises out of his experience and intuition and offers "a starting point for research on issues related to the professional development of religion teachers" (p. 69).

An issue not raised in this special edition is that of teacher preparation for a multi-religious education which is not surprising given that religious education is not, or likely to be, a compulsory Key Learning Area in Australian schools. A number of national educational policies and curriculum documents emphasise student diversity but only in terms of heritage and culture, not religious diversity. Given the increased explicit presence of religious practice beyond a Christian tradition in our contemporary context surely a knowledge and understanding of the role of religion in a multi-religious society is crucial. Australian society would be the richer and more tolerant if students were required to understand the role of religion in society and perhaps this is one issue that begs scholarly investigation within our higher education institutions; food for thought.

Jan Grajczonek
Guest Editor

PREPARING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: A PEER REVIEW APPROACH

Abstract

In higher education institutions across many countries peer review strategies have influenced approaches to learning and teaching in a variety of academic disciplines. There is a growing body of research in many disciplines other than religious education exploring the benefits of peer review for advancing achievement in learning. A recent study located within a constructivist paradigm focussed on the experiences of a group of pre-service teachers of peer review in the context of religious education. Their experiences were conveyed through a response to a survey questionnaire, focus group interviews, participant observation and journaling. This paper contributes to the existing body of knowledge regarding peer review in higher education by providing another perspective based on the experiences of pre-service teachers of religious education. It identifies some considerations that teacher educators could take into account when developing and designing a peer review process.

Introduction

Throughout Australia the study of religious education has not been a compulsory component of any state primary or secondary school curriculum. Nor is it likely to be in the near future as the proposed national curriculum does not intend to provide an explicit provision for the study of religious education (Reid, 2011). However, approximately thirty-two per cent of the student population in Australia is educated in independent schooling systems other than state schools. The vast majority of the independent schools are religiously associated schools and furthermore the majority of Australians claim to be religiously affiliated according to the Census figures (Fisher, 2012). Despite the significant proportion of the population claiming religious affiliation and the significant proportion of the student population attending religiously affiliated schools, neither the state nor federal governments have legislated for the inclusion of compulsory religious education as a key learning area in any school curriculum. Therefore very few higher education institutions that are committed to the education of trainee teachers include religious education as a curriculum and teaching area. In Australia only a select group of academics, in a small number of higher education institutions, share knowledge about the preparation of teachers for religious education. Subsequently there is a dearth of scholarly literature on student learning in higher education; particularly in relation to peer review.

Teacher preparation for religious education within a higher educational institution requires students to study courses that are both academic as well as contribute to their professional growth and development as educators (Buchanan, 2011). Academics are largely responsible for the design, development and delivery of higher education courses, including teacher education courses. The intention of this paper is to identify some considerations teacher educators could take into account when developing and designing peer review strategies by drawing upon a recent study of the benefits of peer review strategies for pre-service teachers of religious education (Buchanan, 2010).

Before examining the relevance of peer review in the preparation of pre-service teachers for religious education it is first necessary to provide an overview of some of the insights reflected in the literature pertaining to peer review in higher education. In the absence of a solid body of literature in the specialised area of religious education in higher education, insights pertaining to peer review will be drawn from the general body of educational scholarly literature. The paper then presents the research design underpinning the study and proceeds to briefly overview the findings from the aforementioned study regarding the benefits of peer review for pre-service teachers of religious education. The paper concludes by identifying

some of the factors teacher educators could take into account when developing and designing peer review strategies.

Insights from peer review

Defining peer review is not an easy undertaking because peer review can take many forms (Topping, 2010). In broad terms, peer review is understood as “a process whereby students evaluate, or are evaluated by their peers” (van Zundert, Sluijsmans, van Merriënboer, 2010, p. 270). However the forms of peer review can be as diverse as the number of peer review processes in place. This has implications for determining the benefits of peer review as each experience is unique and little attention has been devoted to the ways in which the benefits of peer review may change according to the form of the peer review (Topping, 2010). Despite this limitation it is still possible to make some general observations about peer review in the light of literature concerning various forms of peer review.

Research into the use of peer review in various higher education areas other than religious education revealed several benefits from these processes (Bindley & Scofield, 1998; Smith, Cooper & Lancaster, 2002; Wen, Tsai, Chang, 2006). Peer review led to higher levels of student satisfaction in learning, increased levels of motivation to study and completion of tasks that showed a level of deep learning (Topping, 1998). For other higher education students, peer review helped to minimise the imbalance between academic staff and their students (van den Berg, Admiraal & Pilot, 2006a). Students were more comfortable in receiving feedback from peers who were dealing with the same learning challenges than from their lecturers and tutors (Malone & Riggsbee, 2007). Peer review experiences often led to improved learning outcomes and improved academic skills (van den Berg, Admiraal & Pilot, 2006a; 2006b). Van Weert and Pilot (2003) claimed that peers also provide feedback that resembles professional practice and consequently assist students in identifying with the vocational aspects of their studies as well as the academic aspects.

A broad study involving pre-service and in-service teachers across several higher education institutions in Taiwan reported high levels of student satisfaction and motivation in learning as a result of a peer review process. However pre-service teachers tended to regard peer review as an assessment tool while in-service teachers viewed it as a learning aid (Wen, Tsai & Chang, 2006).

The design of the peer review is important as it has the potential to influence student perception and attitudes toward peer review and foster the orientation of constructive feedback between peers (Bernstein, 2008). The type of feedback received from a peer review experience can lead to academic growth as discovered in the study comprising identical history classes at a university in the Netherlands (van den Berg, Admiraal & Pilot, 2006b). Some classes incorporated peer review and others did not. Those that incorporated peer review received significantly better feedback and improvement in academic growth at a higher level than the groups that did not undergo a peer review experience. Participation in peer review therefore has the potential to change one’s educational outlook (Bell, 2005).

In recent times, Australian and European scholars have directed their attention towards the use of peer review and self-review in teaching programmes for teachers of religious education (Buchanan, 2010; 2011; Buchanan & Stern, 2012; Grajczonek, 2009a; 2009b; Ubani, 2011). In Finland Ubani (2011) as part of a peer review process provided opportunities for pre-service teachers of religious education to self review their perceptions of a competent teacher of religious education in two phases. The first phase was at the commencement of their pre-service teacher training course and the second phase was at the concluding stages of their teacher training. Their training was oriented towards preparing them to be teachers of religious education and they were asked to describe the characteristics of a competent teacher of religious education. He found that a competent teacher of religious education needed to demonstrate the following characteristics: good practice; motivation and commitment; professional awareness; and pro-social orientation (see Ubani, 2011). His study revealed some significant issues. It found that the pre-service teachers’ perceptions of the characteristics of a competent teacher of religious education had not changed

significantly as a result of undertaking the one year graduate teacher training program. Ubani (2011) also found that the pre-service religious education teachers believed that a competent religious education teacher should display the same competencies and characteristics associated with general classroom teachers: the elements of religion or theology were not significant in their perception.

Grajczonek (2009a) explored an approach to peer review to assess the contributions pre-service teachers of religious education made in a collaborative learning task. Her contention was that all members of a group assessment task should not necessarily receive the same grade since the contribution of each member may not necessarily have been equal. She hypothesised that peers involved in a group assessment task were best placed to assess the level of participation and contribution each member made to the group assessment task. Each member of the work group was required to assess the level of participation and contribution of each individual member of the group and award a grade to each member. Grajczonek (2009a) found that the grades awarded by peers were similar to those awarded by the tutor lecturer and that the pre-service teachers felt uncomfortable awarding grades to peers. However they did value the experience of the peer review process and of providing feedback to their peers. The pre-service teachers of religious education perceived that the peer review process made them more aware of their own participation and contribution to the group assessment task. It also assisted them in their awareness of the levels of participation and contribution of each individual member of the group. They also considered that responsibility to assess their peers influenced some to participate more actively in the group.

Another study from which the insights of this paper are based focused on two broad areas pertaining to peer review for pre-service teachers of religious education. One area explored the benefits of peer review for pre-service teachers of religious education from the perspective of the participants involved in the study (Buchanan, 2011; 2010). The other insight which is the focus of this paper identified some factors teacher educators could take into consideration when developing a peer review strategy. The findings are likely to be limited to, but not exclusive to, this particular approach to peer review. Given the diverse nature of peer review strategies and processes (Topping, 2010) it is useful to give a precise overview of the research concerns and design relevant to this particular peer review process.

Research concerns

The research was underpinned by two key questions or concerns. The first concern was with identifying the benefits of a peer review process for pre-service teachers of religious education. These findings have been published in (Buchanan, 2010; 2011; Buchanan & Stern, 2012). The second concern, which is the focus of this paper, sought to identify the factors that teacher educators could take into account when developing and designing peer review strategies. To provide a context for understanding the findings which emanated from this study an overview of the research design drawn from previous publications will be outlined in the following section (Buchanan, 2010; 2011; Buchanan & Stern, 2012).

Research Design

Participants

The participants were pre-service teachers from a Postgraduate Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) / Graduate Certificate in Religious Education course and they were enrolled in the second semester religious education curriculum and teaching unit at the Melbourne Campus of the Australian Catholic University. The total number of students was sixty and they were divided among three tutorial groups. The unit took place over a twelve week semester. During each week of the semester, each student attended a one hour lecture and a two hour tutorial.

Setting

The Melbourne campus of the Australian Catholic University offers a one year combined Postgraduate Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) / Graduate Certificate in Religious Education course. Upon successful completion of this course pre-service teachers can apply for registration as a secondary teacher in schools in Australia as well as apply for accreditation to teach religious education in Catholic schools. The

minimum prerequisite for enrolling in this combined teacher education course is a three year Bachelor's degree (or equivalent) from a recognised tertiary institution.

Students enrolled in the unit were divided into three tutorial groups. Each group consisted of twenty pre-service teachers. The unit included an assessment task which incorporated a peer review component. The assessment task required pre-service teachers to conduct a professional learning seminar for their peers in their tutorial. The pre-service teachers were divided into groups of five. Each group was required to present an overview of a teaching and learning model and to demonstrate its application to a religious education curriculum area for a specific year level. In particular, each group was required to demonstrate a teaching and learning model to a religious education curriculum topic. Each group presented one of the following models: De Bono's Thinking Hats (De Bono, 2006); Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (McGrath & Noble, 2005); the Composite Model for Teaching Scripture (Caswell, 2001); or an Inquiry Learning Model (Wilson, 2006). The time assigned to the seminar was thirty minutes from introduction to conclusion.

At the conclusion of the seminar each presenting group was given an opportunity to conduct a peer review in order to seek feedback from all members of the tutorial who had participated in the seminar. The peer review instruments incorporated both written and oral feedback. Each group prepared a questionnaire generally consisting of closed-ended questions including Likert scaled questions. Table 1 provides an example of the types of questions asked.

Table 1: An example of the types of questions incorporated into the written peer review instruments developed by the pre-service teachers.

Was the overview of the teaching and learning approach comprehensive?

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

The application of the teaching and learning approach to the curriculum area at a given year level was relevant.

1. Strongly disagree
 2. Disagree
 3. Neither agree nor disagree
 4. Agree
 5. Strongly agree
-

The actual benefits and use of Likert scale questions as a peer review instrument for this study were difficult to determine. Furthermore even though the pre-service teachers researched and decided upon the peer review instruments they would develop or adapt for the purposes of receiving feedback, they were unable to justify their choice in adopting and developing an instrument based on Likert scale questions. In fact, they had trouble explaining any benefits arising from their choice and use of Likert scale questions as a peer review instrument. Indeed, the focus group discussions (which formed part of the investigation) revealed that the pre-service teachers who used Likert scale questions did not consider that they gained any significant insights from the use of this type of feedback instrument.

Given that the pre-service teachers were responsible for the construction of their own peer review instruments, their reflection and critique on the worthiness of the peer review instruments they had used suggested that their research and preparation for the professional learning workshop was not confined to the content knowledge and processes necessary to facilitate the workshop. Their research skills were also used to decide which peer review instruments to adopt and develop and later to critique the worthiness of these instruments. A culture of pre-service teachers of religious education being researchers of their own learning and reflecting on that learning should be fostered through this approach to peer review. This is vital because many contemporary learning communities in recent times are trying to promote cultures where teachers see themselves as researchers of their own practice (Stern, 2010).

While the pre-service teachers of religious education lamented the adoption of a Likert scale approach to develop a peer review instrument they were also glad that they had adopted another strategy for receiving peer feedback. The use of an oral feedback session as part of the peer review process was perceived as beneficial. They found that the oral feedback from peers provided them with in-depth insights into how their ability to deliver a professional learning workshop was perceived by their peers. They were able to use the oral feedback to reflect upon and make judgements about their own learning and professional growth needs.

Once the presenters had collected the written peer review questionnaires they were given an opportunity to seek oral feedback from their peers. Some groups prepared questions and others asked for general feedback. It was expected that the feedback from peers should be relevant to the assessment task criteria. Table 2 provides examples of some of the peer review questions asked as part of the oral feedback phase.

Table 2: An example of the types of questions asked during the oral feedback aspect of the peer review process.

To what extent were the strategies used appropriate to the target age group?

In what ways has the professional learning seminar added to your own confidence and ability to teach this topic?

What have you gained from this professional learning seminar that might inform your own classroom teaching?

The time allocated for the peer review feedback session was approximately fifteen to twenty minutes and each group determined how much time it would allocate to the written or oral peer review instruments. One week after presenting the professional learning seminar and receiving the (written and oral) feedback from peers, the pre-service teachers were invited to meet with the tutor and discuss their reflections on the whole experience as well as clarify any issues or concerns. They were then required to write their own individual evaluations of the seminar experience.

Method

As a participant and observer, the lecturer (researcher) collected data for the study by taking notes on the pre-service teachers' seminar presentations and post seminar reflections. Furthermore, towards the end of the semester all of the pre-service teachers were invited to participate further in the study by completing a short survey questionnaire as well as a focus group discussion relating to their experience of undergoing a process of peer review. All pre-service teachers completed the survey questionnaire and fifty-five of the sixty pre-service teachers participated in a focus group discussion. Their participation helped to validate and clarify the categories of findings emanating from the responses to the questionnaire. The focus groups were held outside of timetabled tutorial time to ensure that students did not feel under any undue pressure to participate. Table 3 provides an overview of the key questions in the survey questionnaire. These questions were also used to guide the focus group discussions.

Table 3: An overview of the key open-ended survey questions

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- 1) What contributions, if any, did peer review feedback make to your own understanding of the work you presented?
 - 2) What insights, if any, did you gain from the peer review process that will impact on your development?
 - 3) In what ways, if any, did the peer review process contribute to your own professional growth and as an educator?
 - 4) In what ways, if any, has the peer review process contributed to your ability to critically self reflect on your work as an educator?
 - 5) What factors helped your group to prepare a peer review instrument?
-

Data analysis

The study was situated within a constructivist paradigm (Crotty, 1998) and drew upon Glaser and Strauss' (1967) original principles of grounded theory to identify the emergent categories of findings. Since there is very little documentation about the impact of peer review upon pre-service religious education teachers, the principles of grounded theory were adopted in order to gain insights into this relatively unknown area. This methodology and adaptations of it are commonly used where little is known about the phenomenon under investigation (Goulding, 2002). The study provided insights into the benefits of peer review for pre-service teachers of religious education and also identified some considerations teacher educators could take into account when developing and designing peer review strategies. The insights arising from the study are outlined in the following sections.

Perceived benefits of peer review

The perceived benefits of peer review arising from this study have been discussed extensively in previous publications (see Buchanan, 2010; 2011; Buchanan & Stern, 2012). However a summary of the benefits arising from the study are outlined as they provide a context for considering the factors that educators could take into account when developing and designing peer review strategies.

The pre-service teachers of religious education involved in this study regarded the peer review experience as a positive one which helped them to identify and articulate their own strengths and limitations regarding their understanding of educational models and their application to religious education curriculum and teaching. The peer review experience also enabled them to critically reflect on the professional role of a teacher of religious education and they also perceived that the experience contributed to their own professional growth as a religious educator (Buchanan, 2010). If the conditions are right, peer review can help pre-service teachers of religious education to become researchers of their own practice (Stern, 2010). It can encourage them to seek and value the feedback from peers as a significant aspect of academic and professional learning and growth (Buchanan & Stern, 2012). For pre-service teachers of religious education to perceive a peer review experiences in a positive light required the teacher educator to be attentive to various considerations. The following section of this paper identifies some of the key considerations a teacher educator should take be attentive to.

Considerations for developing peer review opportunities

In a peer review situation where the pre-service teacher of religious education is able to take responsibility for the development and design of their own peer review instrument teacher educators have a role to fulfil. This study identified some factors that teacher educators could address in order to allow pre-service teachers to have more control over their learning and professional growth as future teachers of religious education. The use of peer review in this study required the pre-service teachers to design and develop their own peer review instrument(s) as well as to conduct their own peer review. To enable pre-service teachers of religious education to construct their own peer review instruments, a teacher educator should provide opportunities for the pre-service teachers to: understand the outcomes that are to be achieved; be familiar with different approaches to peer review; be familiar with different methods of constructing peer review instruments; provide opportunities for pre and post reflection on the process; and hand over control to the pre-service teachers seeking a peer review.

Understand the outcomes that are to be achieved

To enable pre-service teachers to effectively achieve the outcomes underpinning a learning activity they must know and understand the learning outcome and its implications and demands (Ramsden, 2003). This can be achieved through an exercise commonly used with adult learners. This exercise requires adult learners to analyse the demands of the outcome(s) and Biggs (2003) argued that a good way of doing that is to provide opportunities for the student (or in this case pre-service teacher) to consider the outcome and write it in their own words. Having done that, the teacher educator could provide an opportunity for the pre-service teachers to share their interpretations of the learning outcome and reach a clear understanding

by consensus. This understanding will form the basis upon which the peer review instrument should be oriented towards assessing or providing feedback.

Be familiar with different approaches to peer review

In order to prepare a peer review instrument it is vital that pre-service teachers have some understanding of various approaches to peer review. This could involve teacher educators providing examples of various peers review approaches. Some examples that might be worthwhile looking at are referred to in Topping (2010). Furthermore, van den Berg, Admiraal and Pilot (2006b) and Wen, Tsai, and Chang (2006) illustrate approaches to peer review. In this study pre-service teachers were also given an exercise involving a library search to find a resource on various peer review instruments or approaches and evaluate their appropriateness in the light of their own task of developing a peer review instrument.

Be familiar with different methods of constructing peer review instruments

It is also beneficial to enable pre-service teachers to consider different methods that could be used to construct a peer review process and to evaluate their appropriateness for the development and design of their own peer review instrument. Some methods to consider could include those mentioned earlier in this paper such as, oral feedback, written feedback in the form of open-ended questions, close ended questions, Likert scaled questions.

The teacher educator could consider providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to use these various methods to practise writing different types of questions. In this study several groups used Likert scaled questions and later lamented that this choice did not provide them with the depth of peer feedback they sought (see Buchanan & Stern, 2012). It is important to know and understand the implications of employing different types of methods to obtain feedback from a peer review process. Some groups of pre-service teachers used oral questioning but had not prepared their questions beforehand or they had not set up members of their group to be active listeners and note takers of the oral feedback. These factors limited the quality of feedback they were able to later critically reflect upon. This suggests that it is beneficial to test the methods prior to the actual peer review as it will help to ensure that the intended method can be effectively used to achieve the intended aim.

Provide opportunities for pre and post reflection on the process

Teacher educators could consider providing opportunities for the pre-service teachers to pre-reflect on the peer review instrument's appropriateness and usefulness in achieving the stated outcomes. The pre-reflection could take place with the teacher educator (tutor / lecturer) and should occur prior to the group's presentation. In this study the groups had pre-booked meeting times with their teacher educator. The group members were responsible for leading the group meeting and the teacher educator acted as a critical friend (Ramsden, 2003). This strategy also helped pre-service teacher group members check that their proposed group seminar linked to the learning outcomes underpinning the task. It also provided an opportunity for them to consider the appropriateness of the peer review instrument in terms of its potential to achieve the intended aims. Once the group had presented their seminar and received feedback from their peers, the teacher educator could provide them with another opportunity to post-reflect on their presentation and the feedback from the peer review. In this study the pre-service teachers used this opportunity to debrief and consider how they would use the peer feedback to help write their own critical evaluation of the experience of leading a learning seminar (Buchanan, 2011).

Hand over control to the pre-service teachers seeking a peer review

Handing over control to pre-service teachers to construct their own peer review instrument and peer review process was a unique feature of this study and not evident in studies situated within the general body of literature pertaining to peer review in higher education. Past studies have favoured the

development of peer review instruments by the lecturer and/or tutor (Topping, 2010). It is claimed that when lecturers and/or tutors take control of the actual development and design of the peer review instrument then the development of a coherent criteria for peers to review the work of peers is guaranteed (Wilson, 2006).

This may be the case in situations where the task that is to be subject to a peer review is homogeneous and when responses to the task are expected to be similar. However, in this study, the pre-service teachers were working in groups to prepare learning seminars using different teaching and learning models (which were outlined earlier in this paper) and were applying them to different content areas or topics pertaining to a centralised religious education curriculum framework. This study found that pre-service teachers could take responsibility for developing their own effective peer review instrument and receive valuable feedback from their peers (Buchanan, 2011). It enabled them to critically reflect on their own learning and professional growth. Enabling pre-service teachers to construct their own peer review instrument(s) does not abrogate the teacher educator from responsibility for leading the learning that enables pre-service teachers to develop appropriate peer review instruments and processes. Teacher educators need to be instrumental in putting the right learning conditions in place to enable the pre-service teachers to do so.

Concluding comments

The diverse nature of peer review strategies and instruments (Topping, 2010) makes it difficult to generalise from the findings of this study. However the aim of this paper was to identify some of the factors a teacher educator should take into consideration when developing a particular peer review strategy for a particular group of pre-service teachers of religious education.

The process of enabling pre-service teachers of religious education to construct their own peer review instrument required the teacher educator to enable the pre-service teachers to take control of their own learning. Ultimately, professional educators not only take control of their own learning and teaching but also that of their students. The opportunity to model this through peer review during their pre-service training will equip them with some valuable skills that may assist them in their lifelong learning journeys as teachers of religious education. The experience of peer review as reflected in this study of pre-service teachers of religious education promoted opportunities to become responsible for one's own learning (Wager, Godlee, & Jefferson, 2002). It provided opportunities for them to be more critical of their work and to be open to seeking feedback that is relevant to their professional growth. Peer review is one vehicle that may assist in the formation of pre-service teachers of religious education. It required teacher educators to take risks and provide opportunities for peer review that have the potential to improve academic achievement and the professional growth of pre-service teachers for religious education.

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FORMATION OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: THE RETREAT LEADERS TRAINING PROGRAM

This article reports on the formation of pre-service teachers for religious education through an experiential learning program called the Retreat Leaders Training Program (RLTP). First, the article examines the need for formation for pre-service RE teachers, especially as the formation relates to the development of three forms of teacher knowledge: content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and experiential content knowledge. Second, the article reviews the literature on the role of experiential learning in professional formation and the contribution live-in retreats may make in this formation. Third, the article presents the Retreat Leaders Training Program as an example of the formative influence of a retreat based on experiential learning. Fourth, feedback from pre-service teachers undertaking the 2011 program is reported. Lastly, the article discusses the outcomes of the RLTP and the significance of the program as a key ingredient in the formation of teacher knowledge for religious education.

Formation of pre-service teachers for religious education

Teaching in the twenty-first century requires pre-service teachers to have the requisite content, pedagogy and aptitude to teach competently (Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Education, 2007; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012, p. 5). Teaching is more than subject matter or technique; it is as much about the quality of relationships between the teacher and students (Palmer, 1997). The professional formation of pre-service teachers would therefore necessitate the development of a strong commitment or vocation towards teaching (Department of Education and Training, 2004; Teaching Australia, 2009; Hackett & Lavery, 2010b). The same is true for teachers involved in religious education¹. In the case of Catholic schools in Western Australia, Religious Education (RE) teachers are required to have tertiary study, training in teaching the RE curriculum and be committed to espoused Catholic beliefs and values taught (Director of Catholic Education, 2008; Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 100). Furthermore, they “need up-to-date spiritual and religious formation” to take on the demanding task of teaching Religious Education (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 98). Hackett (2010) has proposed that the quality of teaching in RE is related to the degree to which teachers not only have deep content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge but also experiential content knowledge. That is, teachers can model what they teach because they have lived what it means to be a Christian today:

Everything that has to do with their own theological and pedagogical formation, and also in the course syllabi; and they should remember that, in this area above all, life witness and an intensely lived spirituality have an especially great importance (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 59).

The formation of pre-service teachers for religious education would suggest that they have the opportunity to experience not only teaching RE but also the practices that assist Christian people to grow in faith, such as through prayer, worship, ritual, service and community. As Pope Benedict XVI (2011) recently affirmed at a meeting with young university professors: “teaching is not just about communicating content, but about forming young people. ...To awaken their innate thirst for truth and their yearning for transcendence.” Indeed, this religious awakening can only happen if the teachers have experienced the same for themselves and share this experience by word and example to their students.

Role of experiential learning in professional formation

Experiential learning within adult and teacher education has become popular, especially as a means for discerning professional careers (Hedin, 2010). The approach relies on participants drawing meaning or learning from experiences in which they are directly involved. Dewey (1938) suggests that learning arises when a person reflects on the significance of an experience that engages him or her. Learning from experience is more than just doing activities, as T. S. Eliot (1941) put it, “We had the experience but missed the meaning” (Section II, para. 7). There is a need to reflect deeply about the context of the experience and how it may influence a person in the future. The approach allows a person within the present (experience) to evaluate what he or she learnt from the past (experience) and plan or make decisions about the future (experiences). The experience is more than an event, it involves the whole person – cognitively, affectively and spiritually (Steinaker & Bell, 1979). The experience is not only personal and meaningful but also occurs by interaction with others and can potentially be transformative (Roberts, 2008). A live-in retreat has the potential to offer such experiences as participants are immersed fully in the program (Ribbe, 2010). The value of live-in retreats with a focus on religious or spiritual experiences continues to be recognised (Henderson & Scanlin, 2004, Knowing that Positive Change occurs is Important, para. 2).

A key facet of experiential learning is the quality of reflection that can be achieved. Learning from experience results when a person comprehends that experience and then seeks to transform the experience from a concrete understanding to an abstract concept (Hedin, 2010, p. 111). These concepts then provide the basis for new experiences. Learning will be transformative when the reflection of experience occurs with a revision in a person’s frame of reference (Taylor, 2007, p. 173). In a group, individual experiences can be shared but the group can evaluate (and re-evaluate) the frame of reference of these experiences. New understandings may emerge that challenge a person’s point of view and new learning occurs. However, an experience may be so profound that there is an impact upon a person whilst still immersed in that experience. This significant experience is sealed upon a person’s being that affects his or her actions and attitudes (Ribbe, 2010). Hopefully, in a safe, supportive learning environment such an experience will be positive and inspiring. Such experiences also have a place to be considered and shared as testimony.

Live-in retreats and experiential learning

One way to provide experiences of these practices is through the live-in retreat. On a live-in retreat, a range of personal, spiritual and religious experiences may be offered. These experiences may be reflected upon by the individual and also discussed in groups. Through this reflection and sharing, new insights may emerge to deepen a person’s spiritual or religious formation. For many pre-service teachers, there is an opportunity to deepen the well of their spiritual and religious experiences from which to draw and share with their future students (Taylor, 2008). The notion of retreat is an ancient one (Debuchy, 1911). Jesus himself took moments out of his hectic life of ministry to be alone, to pray and to consider his vocation (Mk 1:35; Lk 9:18). He extolled his disciples to do the same, to take a break from “all they had done and taught”, to spend some time together as a group (Mk 6:30-32; 45-46). The live-in retreat is characterised by participants coming together at an ‘off-site’ location, sharing and discussing aspects about themselves and their faith, and participating in a number of activities including worship and prayer. This form of retreat was initially called ‘communitarian retreat’ or ‘Christian Living Camp’ during the 1960s when first introduced to Catholic schools in Australia to distinguish it from the traditional silent, testimonial retreats previously held (Tullio, 2010). The format of the retreat holds much in common with the camp activities promoted by the Christian living camp movement in the USA (Ribbe, 2010). There were five essential characteristics to these camps: “(a) experiences; (b) temporary community; (c) outdoor environment; (d) trained leaders; and (e) focused spiritual objectives” (p. 147). For many young adults today the live-in retreat may be the only form of religious retreat they have experienced from their schooling. The experience of such retreats has remained one of the highlights of religious education in Catholic schools (Flynn & Mok, 2002; Maroney, 2008).

The use of a retreat as a professional formation tool has become more common place. Businesses, professional associations, university faculties, school leaders and teachers have found the opportunity to get away, to discuss issues deeply, to learn new ideas and skills, and to plan for the future to be invaluable (for example, see Lynn, 1999; Bergeron & McHargue, 2002 ; Intrator & Kunzman, 2006; Smith et al, 2007). Since 2008, the School of Education on the Fremantle campus of The University of Notre Dame Australia has used the live-in retreat as a means of providing professional development for pre-service teachers. It is called the Retreat Leaders Training Program (RLTP) and is one of the key components of the ASPIRE program that seeks to promote the vocation of teaching through leadership, service, care and reflective practice (Hackett & Lavery, 2010b). ASPIRE complements the training of pre-service teachers by providing “purposeful activities” (Arnstine, 1990, p. 235) that allow them to consider their identity and integrity as a teacher (Palmer, 1997). Such purposeful activities when voluntary increase the intrinsic motivation and concentration of participants (Larson, 2000). The RLTP has a twofold purpose within ASPIRE. Firstly, the RLTP provides practical skills in ways to contribute to school live-in retreat activities, including leading small groups. Secondly, the program provides a retreat experience to reflect on the vocation of teaching, especially in religious education. In essence, the RLTP is a retreat experience within a retreat training program. The program focuses on experiential learning to assist the personal and professional formation of pre-service teachers.

Formation Model for the RLTP

The experiential model of formation adopted for the RLTP is based on the assumption that teacher formation is founded on three forms of teacher knowledge: content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and experiential content knowledge (Hackett, 2010). These three forms of knowledge are required if a teacher and, especially an RE teacher teaches young people through learning experiences and example. The three forms are not discrete but interrelated to one another; as Pope John Paul II (1984) remarked, “To teach is not only to facilitate learning but also to reveal who we are by living what we believe” (para. 3) and reiterated by Pope Benedict XVI (2009):

The very person of the Catholic religion teacher constitutes this bond: to you, in fact, in addition to the duty of the human, cultural and didactic competence proper to every teacher, belongs the vocation to make it clear that the God of whom you speak in the classrooms is the essential reference point of your life. (para. 7)

The interrelationship between these forms of knowledge is reflected in the identity and integrity of the teacher (Palmer, 1998, p. 10). When many young adults today lack adult religious formation, an expectation that, as RE teachers, they can manage the demands of promoting religious education in schools would be challenging (Hackett, 2010). As the Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) warned, “This is what makes the difference between a school whose education is permeated by the Christian spirit and one in which religion is only regarded as an academic subject like any other” (para. 43). The School of Education, Fremantle at The University of Notre Dame Australia provides a teacher education course that provides opportunities for developing the three forms of teacher knowledge that includes a focus on experiential content knowledge (Hackett and Lavery, 2010b; Chambers and Lavery, 2012). As part of the course, education students can access units and programs in the three forms of teacher knowledge. For example, in theology, there are units that emphasise content knowledge; in Religious Education methods, an emphasis on pedagogical content knowledge; and, there are programs or opportunities that can provide experiential content knowledge through participation in liturgies, leadership, service-learning, school placements and retreat leadership training.

Table 1 outlines the three forms of knowledge within the context of the RLTP. In essence, the program reflects a “retreat experience within a retreat leaders training” program. The sessions are designed to provide content about retreat activities, for the participants to become involved in these activities and develop a degree of competence in using these activities on their internship.

Table 1: Three Forms of Teacher Knowledge in Retreat Leaders Training Program (after Hackett, 2010)

Content Knowledge <i>(Knowledge of School Retreats)</i>	Pedagogical Content Knowledge <i>(Competence in leading School Retreats)</i>	Experiential Content Knowledge <i>(Personal experience of School Retreats)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is a retreat? • Games • Group dynamics • Christian Prayer • Second Rite of Reconciliation • Mass 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to organise a retreat • How to run games • How to lead small groups • How to organise prayer • How to organise a Second Rite of Reconciliation • How to prepare a Mass for students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To experience a retreat • To participate in games • To participate in small group activities • To pray • To experience a Second Rite of Reconciliation • To experience a small community Mass

The RLTP – aims, cohort, structure

The Retreat Leaders Training Program provides important professional skills in school retreat programs for final year pre-service teachers. The aims of the RLTP are:

1. To understand the nature and purpose of school retreats;
2. To provide practical retreat experiences;
3. To develop leadership skills pertinent to coordinating and facilitating retreats;
4. To appreciate the significance of the faith paradigm; and,
5. To experience ritual and prayer as they relate to a retreat program.

Within the context of these aims, the program's theme is 'Confidence in the Future: Meeting the challenges of engaging young people in school retreats and camps - a place and a space to retreat, to share the past and discuss the future'. Between 2008 and 2011, 79 pre-service teachers undertook the RLTP. The majority have been young adults: 59.5% in the 20-24 years age bracket and 21.5% in the 25-29 years group (Table 2).

Table 2: Age Range of RLTP Participants, 2008-2011

Years	Number	Percentage (%)
20-24 Years	47	59.5
25-29 Years	17	21.5
30-34 Years	6	7.6
35-39 Years	3	3.8
40-44 Years	2	2.5
45-49 Years	2	2.5
50-54 Years	1	1.3
55-59 Years	1	1.3
TOTAL	79	100

The RLTP is an 'off-site' two day with an overnight stay and, in 2011, was held at a campsite in the Darling Ranges, 45 minutes south of Perth. To build a sense of community, there is a limit of 35 participants and eight staff as the campsite has enough beds for 45 people with rooms in combinations of double, four and six bed bunks. There is also a meeting hall, kitchen and dining rooms facilities plus the usual ablutions and bush setting (including an outdoor chapel). The staff consists of two experienced retreat facilitators, a campus minister, campus chaplain, site manager and three recent alumni teachers. The program is scheduled a fortnight before the participants go on their final teaching internship or "prac placement". Participants are required to attend pre-arranged sessions organized by the retreat staff. Table 3 highlights the key sessions conducted.

Table 3: Schedule of Sessions for the RLTP, 2011

DAY ONE	DAY TWO
<p><i>1. Community building & trust</i></p> <p>The session focuses on outlining the parameters of the program, including Occupational, Health and Safety guidelines, session times and participation expectations.</p> <p><i>2. What are retreats?</i></p> <p>This session focuses on participants' past experiences of school retreats and clarifying the nature of retreats with the retreat facilitators.</p> <p><i>3. Managing retreat groups</i></p> <p>This session focuses on strategies to motivate and manage groups of school students. The practical organisational aspects of preparing & running a retreat are also addressed.</p> <p><i>4. Moments alone (Chinese lantern walk)</i></p> <p>The session focuses on the role of personal reflection and time alone for retreat participants. A feature of this session is the practice of Gospel reflection.</p> <p><i>5. Sacrament of Reconciliation (Second Rite)</i></p> <p>The session invites students to participate in the Second Rite organised by the campus chaplain and retreat facilitators.</p>	<p><i>6. Positive Relationships (Myers-Briggs)</i></p> <p>This session focuses on facilitating and developing positive rapport with and between school students.</p> <p><i>7. Faith & Life Paradigm</i></p> <p>This session focuses on the challenges of sharing faith insights with school students. A feature of this session is the personal faith journey and the place of personal testimony.</p> <p><i>8. Mass preparation</i></p> <p>The focus of this session is the organisation and celebration of liturgy and prayer on retreat. The Mass is prepared by the participants in consultation with the campus chaplain.</p> <p><i>9. Mass</i></p> <p>The Mass is held at an outside chapel. Participants elect to be responsible for different parts of the Mass eg. music and singing, readings, prayers etc.</p> <p><i>10. Affirmation & Evaluation</i></p> <p>The focus of this session is on acknowledging the dignity of others and looking forward to the future with optimism.</p>

Examples of experiential learning in the RLTP

The examples of experiential learning in the RLTP are outlined using Ribbe's (2010) characteristics: range of experiences; community building; outdoor location; expert leaders; and, a focus on spiritual objectives (p. 147) as a framework for describing examples of experiential learning in the RLTP.

Experiences

The sessions are designed to present the aims and practicalities of managing school retreats as well as allow participants to experience key retreat activities themselves. Foremost among these experiences are the faith experiences of prayer, meditation, reconciliation and Eucharist. While the participants are expected to be at each session, they are able to participate to the degree to which they feel comfortable. Clear rules are identified at the start of the program about respecting the environment and each other and to allow a person to "pass" on any activity whether it is physical, emotional, spiritual or requiring some level of disclosure. The assumption made is that participants and facilitators can learn from each other's experiences.

Community building

A key focus of the program is to build a sense of community and trust within the group. The participants are in the final year and come from different teacher education courses, some wish to become secondary teachers, others primary, and others, early childhood. While most of these students do share theology units together, they do not know each other well. Even amongst students doing the same course, it is quite possible that they do not know each other's names. The same may also be the case with knowing the facilitators. Students may know some of the academic staff because they have done units with them; however, the other facilitators may be relatively unknown as well as the alumni teachers, campus minister and campus chaplain. As the group participates in the sessions together, prepares meals, dines together, and enjoys each other's company, the group begins to bond.

Outdoor location

An attractive feature of the program is its outdoor environment. The campsite is located on the outskirts of the Perth Metropolitan Area on the foothills of the Darling Ranges. The ambience of the location lends itself to be appreciated. The retreat centre is purpose built for small to medium sized retreat groups while still providing basic retreat facilities (e.g. bunk beds, ablution blocks, meeting hall etc.). Participants can find a quiet place to sit in the natural bushland or visit the outdoor chapel located on the side of a hill overlooking a pastured valley with cattle and horses.

Experienced Leaders

The program uses experienced retreat facilitators from different backgrounds and age groups. One facilitator was responsible for retreats at the Christian Brothers' Amberley retreat house in Lower Plenty, Victoria. Other facilitators have had extensive experience in running retreats for young people as part of youth ministry. Different facilitators led the sessions and participants are encouraged to also take a lead where possible. Some participants have competence in running games or preparing Masses or running youth groups in their local parish. The focus is on promoting a shared expertise and for participants to be trained by "doing".

Focus on spiritual objectives

The objectives of the program are clearly laid out from the beginning. No assumption is made about where participants may be in their faith journey. While the majority of participants are Catholic, others may not be or not practising regularly. For this reason, the program encourages participants to explore the religious and spiritual aspects of the program to the degree to which they feel comfortable. A common key spiritual

objective of the program is for the participants to reflect on their commitment to teaching as they approach their internship. How participants discuss and justify their commitment is left to them to explore.

Feedback from participants – the training; the experience

At the conclusion of the 2011 Retreat Leaders Training Program (RLTP), all 25 participants completed a written review as a means of evaluating and improving the program. Feedback from earlier years has been reported previously (Hackett & Lavery, 2010a). Overall, the 2011 feedback reflected the earlier findings, albeit the program was now held at an off-site country location with a larger cohort. The review asked participants (a) to indicate the best thing about the program, (b) to signify what aspects of the program helped them professionally, (c) whether there was anything that they would like added to the program, (d) what they had learnt about themselves through involvement in the program, and (e) why they undertook the program. Participants were also encouraged to comment on any other issues that they felt relevant. The participants undertaking the RLTP came from all three pre-service teaching courses: early childhood, primary and secondary. Their responses indicated four major ways the RLTP had had an impact. These ways included: the importance of experiential learning; the opportunity for spiritual and faith development; a strong sense of collegiality and community; and, prospects for acquiring and refining professional skills.

Many participants acknowledged that the RLTP provided valuable experiential learning opportunities. Comments included: “the mix of spiritual and personally interactive experiences was well-balanced and gave insight into how to ‘construct’ a retreat”; “I wanted to learn the purpose for retreats from a teacher/adult perspective – it was a great experience for a graduating student”; “actually experiencing a retreat, not just talking about it”; “I’ve experienced retreats from a student point of view, and was wanting to experience it from a different perspective”. A constant focus in the participants’ remarks was “the wealth of experiences on offer” which provided an occasion to “reflect on the usefulness of a retreat”.

Participants outlined how the RLTP enhanced their spiritual and faith development. A number of statements centred on specific activities within the program: “the forest walk to the chapel was magic”; “the early morning liturgy ... was a moment of serenity and contemplation”; “the Mass in the bush was ‘something’”. Participants also remarked on a wider, more generic spiritual understanding: “I learnt about my ability to put God first in teaching”; “I was able to slow down and reflect on my life a lot more during this retreat”; “getting time to be more in touch with my spiritual side – it is what I really need”. One student additionally remarked, “as a Christian, retreats are extremely important”.

Participants remarked on the strong sense of collegiality and community generated during the RLTP. For example, one participant noted that involvement in the program “gave a strong sense of belonging to a community tied together by the common goal of teaching”. Another person commented on the opportunity to “interact with and build community with other pre-service teachers, many of whom I would only know casually from lectures and tutorials”. A third respondent highlighted “the opportunity to make friendships with like-minded people, meet and hear from current RE teachers, and get to know our lecturers”. Participants were strong on the idea that the RLTP gave opportunities for networking, collaboration, sharing ideas and meeting people beyond the superficial level.

Finally, participants indicated that the RLTP was an effective professional means to develop and refine retreat skills. Comments ranged from specific activities to more general observations. For example, participants commented on opportunities to learn “group activities”, “trust exercises”, “conduct games in an outside environment”, “plan a Mass”, and “run liturgy and prayers”. Respondents also remarked on the more encompassing professional value of the RLTP. Comments included: “it was good to get some formal training on running retreats”; “gained a deepened understanding of the planning and dynamics of retreats”; “discussed what could potentially go wrong and strategies to use”; “the number of resources, ideas, and stories passed around was awesome”. One participant’s statement nicely summarised the pragmatic value of the RLTP: “to learn more about retreats and how to run them so I can be of help when I go out and teach in a Catholic school”.

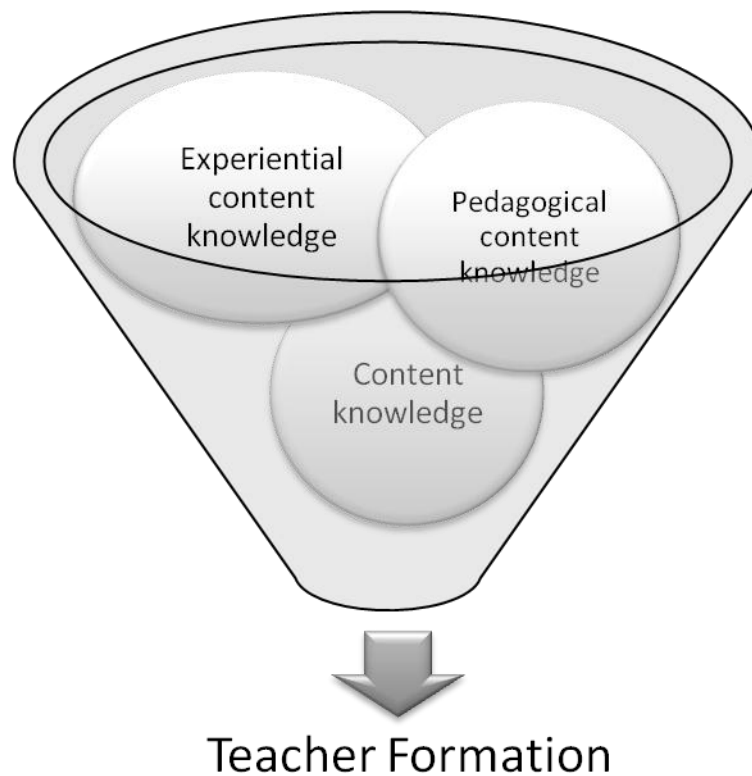
Discussion

Responses from participants from the 2011 RLTP were predominantly positive. There was, for example, a clear emphasis from participants on faith experiences centred on prayer, reconciliation and Eucharist. Participants indicated that such experiences were pivotal to spiritual and faith development. Participants were adamant that the RLTP promoted a strong feeling of community amongst all present. The main reason proffered was that the program demanded constant interaction from participants. The universal expectation was that people contributed to the best of their ability. This expectation to positively contribute also enhanced a sense of collegiality amongst the pre-service teachers. That is, there was an awareness that “we’re all in this together”. Another significant factor that enhanced the sense of community was the off-campus site linked with the over-night nature of the RLTP. Participants’ daily pre-occupations were temporarily replaced with the demands of the program. Finally, participants articulated a strong appreciation that the RLTP provided an effective method to develop and refine retreat skills. This appreciation was particularly important for a number of participants as skills learnt could well be immediately used on their upcoming teaching practicum.

The few negative comments from participants tended to focus on insufficient free time to relax or to become better acquainted with other participants and staff. In particular, a number of participants believed that the program should be longer. Individual participants also proffered various recommendations to improve the RLTP. For instance, one person believed that there needed to be “more explanation on how to make students comfortable with things like Reconciliation”. As this pre-service teacher pointed out, “it was uncomfortable, even for me at stages, when people were crying – I just think secondary students would need more guidance”. A second participant asked for “more opportunities to lead programs”. Another participant requested “some logistical details on how to go about organising a retreat”, especially, as this participant indicated, “we are in schools from next year”. In similar vein, one other person felt it would be beneficial to provide various “retreat schedules and outline examples” that participants could use.

What was considerably less obvious in participant responses was any reference to their own deep personal reflection, a most important element of any retreat program. A perusal of the Schedule of Sessions for the RLTP (Table Three) highlights a program organised around a myriad of activities. What had not been factored into the 2011 program were specific times of guided individual reflection. It is interesting to note that in earlier years, times for such reflection did exist. The authors are conscious of this omission. It is planned to factor in at least two 30-minute reflection opportunities into future programs. Participants will have occasion to pause and appraise experiences and feelings generated from morning or afternoon sessions. In particular, participants will be encouraged to use the reflection time to consider personal and professional implications. In particular, the authors would like to explore further the personal spiritual and religious insights pre-service teachers may acquire from the RLTP.

Table One highlighted the three components of formation for pre-service teachers involved in the Retreat Leaders Training Program. The feedback from the participants would suggest that, to a very large extent, the experiential components of the program assisted their personal and professional development. While all three components are necessary, the provision of a voluntary, purposeful activity like the RLTP contributes a heightened awareness of what they can do (competence) and reflection about their contribution to teaching, especially in religious education (self-efficacy). The most important ingredient in the formative process would seem to be those activities, both religious and spiritual, that promote experiential content knowledge (Figure One). Knowing what to do and how to do prayer or liturgy; or to develop trust and community are achieved better through the participants experiencing of what it feels like to be a part of a prayer, liturgy, trust walk or community. Spiwak and Sherrod (2012) have suggested that these “affective mechanisms” (p. 176) may be at the heart of the formation of young adults.



(After Spiewak & Sherrod, 2012)

Figure 1: Experiential Content Knowledge as the key ingredient in the RLTP

Conclusion

The Retreat Leaders Training Program has shown to be a viable formational tool in the development of pre-service teachers for religious education. As a model of experiential learning, the RLTP embraces the key components of experience, community building, outdoor location, experienced leaders and a focus on spiritual objectives. Participant responses indicate the value of actively doing as a key way of both experiencing a retreat and at the same time learning how to facilitate a retreat. Providing opportunities for experiential content knowledge as part of pre-service teacher formation in religious education enhances the identity and integrity of these teachers as faith witnesses to their students. In the future, the authors hope to explore the affective, spiritual and catechetical dimensions of the RLTP and its influence on the experiential content knowledge of pre-service teachers.

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ⁱ The term “religious education” in lower case refers to all activities that occur in a school that contribute to the religious and spiritual formation of a student. In Catholic schools in Western Australia, Religious Education is a specific learning area for the classroom, while outside the classroom there are “liturgies and other activities of catechesis” (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2004). These two aspects would be considered a part of the evangelisation role of the school.

PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR GRADUATE TEACHERS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER PRESERVICE EDUCATION

Abstract:

This paper reports on an initial part of a wider research study investigating professional teaching standards for teachers of Religious Education in Catholic schools in Victoria. Since the 1990s Australian education departments as well as a number of discipline specific associations such as Literacy, English, Music, ESL, and TESOL have developed and implemented professional teaching standards. Professional teaching standards have also been taken up by universities as they have integrated the various state and territory as well as subject specific professional standards into their preservice education courses. This paper presents initial findings of interviews conducted with graduate teachers of Religious Education across primary and secondary Catholic schools in two Victorian dioceses. These findings not only suggest tentative professional teaching standards for graduate Religious Education teachers but also raise a number of implications for preservice teacher education in the discipline of Religious Education.

Introduction

In this paper we introduce some initial and tentative findings from a research project which aims to articulate professional teaching standards for graduate (up to four years experience), accomplished (experienced in a range of schools and year levels) and leading teachers (those who have been given specific leadership roles in the curriculum) of Religious Education in Catholic schools. First the paper points to the development of general national teaching standards across Australia, before considering how these have been taken up in state documents and subject specific professional standards documents. A summary grid of this literature is provided in tables 1 and 2, before an argument is made for the development of professional teaching standards for teachers of Religious Education in Catholic schools. Next the research project and its aims are described along with the methodology of the research. Finally initial findings, which are the development of tentative professional standards for graduate teachers of Religious Education are proposed, as well as some implications these suggest for preservice education.

The authors of this paper are aware that not all educators are convinced of the necessity for professional standards for teaching, and the range of opinions about this is acknowledged. However it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue for or against the proposal of teaching standards, although this would be an interesting exercise, and perhaps the subject of new research after teaching standards have been in place for a time. It is a fact of Australian educational life that both federal and state governments are pursuing an excellence in education agenda that involves the setting of teaching standards, and it is against this background that the research described in this paper has proceeded. In addition despite views in the community that professional standards are either unnecessary or condescending to dedicated teachers, the fact remains that in Australian Religious Education there is all too much anecdotal evidence from teachers themselves, school leaders and students that teaching standards are often low. The proposing of standards offers a way for teacher education institutes, principals and employing bodies to seek to raise the educational value of this essential key learning area.

Background and context of the research


An important framework that directly influenced the development of professional teaching standards across Australia was *A National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching* (Ministerial Council on

Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2003). This framework provided a set of elements that were to serve as a starting point for Australian states and territories to develop their own “generic, specialist and subject-area specific professional standards” (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2003, p. 2). These elements were designed to enable and support the development of standards to “capture what it is that effective teachers know, do and value” (p. 3). They included: a) professional knowledge, b) professional practice, c) professional values, and d) professional relationships (p. 11). A further aspect of the framework was the recognition that the development of teacher knowledge, skills and practices occurs throughout teachers’ professional lives and is not a linear process. To this end, the framework suggested that the elements be developed at the appropriate level for each of four career dimensions: a) *Graduation*: At this level the graduate teacher “is not yet recognised as a competent and capable practitioner with full professional standing” (p. 10); b) *Competence*: This level signifies those teachers who have “formal and full entry to the profession” (p.10); c) *Accomplished*: Teachers at this level are “highly proficient and successful practitioners” (p. 10); and d) *Leadership*: This level acknowledges those teachers who have the capacity and the willingness to apply their professionalism in ways that are transformative for their profession” (p. 10).

Most of the Australian state and territory educational bodies have organised their own professional standards according to the career dimensions proposed by the *National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching* (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2003), that is, they distinguish between graduates, competent teachers, accomplished teachers and teachers as leaders.

The categories of professional standards and the career stages recognised by the state and territory documents that were developed from the National Framework are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Professional competences and career stages

CATEGORIES OF PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS	CAREER STAGES 			
	Graduate teacher	Competent teacher	Accomplished teacher	Leading teacher
Professional knowledge				
Professional practice				
Professional values				
Professional relationships				
Professional engagement				
Professional renewal				

In the primary documents on subject specific professional standards, which cover the teaching of Literacy, English, Music, ESL, TESOL, the following key categories occur: professional knowledgeⁱ, professional practiceⁱⁱ, professional engagementⁱⁱⁱ, professional relationships,^{iv} professional values^v, dispositions towards the subject^{vi}. Using the detailed descriptions provided under each of these competences we can now build the grid to its second stage.

Table 2: Professional competences and career stages (GT=graduate teacher; CT=competent teacher; AT=accomplished teacher; LT =leading teacher)

Categories and their standards	GT	CT	AT	LT
Professional knowledge <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Depth and complexity of content knowledge 2. Rationale for the subject 3. History of the subject 4. Knowledge of current curriculum policy and documents 5. Theory of the subject 				
Professional practice <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clear learning goals 2. Planning for effective learning 3. Knowledge of students cultural and educational backgrounds 4. Fostering a challenging, safe and supportive learning environment 5. Meaningful, regular assessment and reporting 6. Knowledge of diverse learning styles 7. Coherent, sequenced planning 8. Flexibility in planning 9. Use of a variety of resources and strategies including relevant technologies and community resources 10. Reflective practice and evaluation 11. Attention to students' backgrounds and prior knowledge 12. Active engagement of students 13. Interventions to encourage independent and critical thinking 14. Designing rich learning tasks 15. Keeping accurate and purposive records of students achievements 				
Professional relationships <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Constant, reflective collaboration with colleagues 2. Discussion of the effectiveness of their teaching with colleagues, students, parents, and caregivers 3. Collegiality in school and local communities 4. See themselves as part of a learning community 5. Utilise the resources of professional associations 6. Support and promote the professional growth of their colleagues 7. Able to work in a variety of learning contexts 				
Professional values <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultural respect in appropriation and acknowledgement 2. Value different cultural traditions 3. Celebrate the cultural diversity of their students 4. High professional ethics for self and others 5. Ethical interactions with students, peers, colleagues, and members of the community 6. Awareness of and adherence to copyright and privacy legislation. . Espouse the values of cultural inclusivity, multiculturalism, multilingualism, reconciliation and anti-racism 				
Professional engagement <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Commitment to teaching and to their subject 2. Ongoing learning 3. Active members of the professional and wider community 				

Since this research was conducted and this paper drafted, in June 2012 the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) accepted the recommendations of a review of standards for teachers which will be applicable from September 2012. These national standards focus on subject knowledge, managing behavior and teaching pupils with a variety of special needs. The recommendations of the review included a) improving the rigor of teaching standards and ensuring they focus more on the essential teaching skills required in the classroom; b) having a single set of standards for all teachers; c), replacing the duplication of different standards from different bodies and d) reducing the number and complexity of the previous standards. When completed the development of standards for teachers of Religious Education will be aligned with the categories of the agreed national standards which it is expected will be completed by the end of 2012.

The research: Professional teaching standards and Religious Education

Religious Education (RE) is acknowledged in Church documents and individual schools and diocesan mission statements as an essential key learning area in all Catholic schools, yet there has been no work to date that applies the considerable literature on professional teaching standards to Religious Education. Since Religious Education is largely the concern of religiously affiliated schools, we cannot expect state or federal attention to this issue. However, appropriately, the research described in the rest of this paper is being carried out in a partnership between the four Victorian Catholic dioceses and academics in Australian Catholic University under a funding arrangement with the Victorian Bishops' grant for excellence in Religious Education.

The overall aim of the project is to develop a list of professional standards for each of the three groups of graduate, accomplished and leading teachers of Religious Education in Catholic schools in Victoria. The data discussed and analysed in this paper was drawn from 41 interviews in 5 primary schools and 2 secondary schools in the diocese of Sandhurst, and two primary schools and 6 secondary schools in the diocese of Sale. The dioceses are two of the four in Victoria, and the data represent only half (approximately) of what the authors hope to gather. Therefore this description and analysis must be considered to be preliminary, representing work in progress. While earlier in this paper the authors defended the decision to work towards professional standards for Religious Education teachers, they are also aware that the rich data that are being collected from teachers may well point to other research on what Australian Religious Education teachers think about their work

In conducting the research to this stage, the first step was to develop a literature review on professional standards in teaching generally and in specific curriculum areas. The development of this literature review led to the general categories of: a) professional knowledge, b) professional practice, c) professional relationships, d) professional values and e) professional engagement. The literature review also identified four groups of teachers to whom professional standards could be applied, these being graduate, competent, accomplished and leading teachers. The sub-categories in each of the five categories of professional stands, and the four levels of teacher experience are shown in tables 1 and 2 of this paper. Since the literature recommends that professional standards be developed in conversation and close consultation with practitioners (Sachs, 2003), the second step was to seek the advice of the four diocesan Catholic Education Offices (CEOs) in Victoria about schools that were known by the CEOs to have high quality practice in Religious Education. We hoped that in the smaller regional dioceses, Ballarat, Sandhurst and Sale three primary schools and three secondary schools would be selected, and more in the larger region of the archdiocese of Melbourne. Up to this stage of the project (April, 2012) the data gathering has been completed in the dioceses of Sandhurst and Sale with the two remaining dioceses to be completed this year. The third step then was to approach each of the recommended schools, asking the Principal to identify an exemplary graduate teacher of Religious Education, an exemplary accomplished teacher of Religious Education and an exemplary leading teacher of Religious Education, and to give us permission to interview these teachers. As noted earlier in this paper, the National Framework identified four career stages these being *Graduation*, *Competence*, *Accomplished* and *Leadership*. For this research we settled on just the three categories of graduation, accomplished and leadership leaving out the "competent" category. The reason for this was that in the National framework "competence" is described as "formal and full entry

to the profession” (p.10) implying a level of postgraduate qualifications which it cannot be assumed Religious Education teachers have. To insist on this would have severely limited the number of teachers we could interview.

Sample

Since the contexts of the selected schools were quite different we chose not to provide criteria for the selection of the graduate, accomplished and leading teachers, but to rely on the wisdom and experience of the Principals to select them. Because of the availability and willingness of schools to be involved, always a variable in research, we gathered data in 5 primary schools and 2 secondary schools in the diocese of Sandhurst, and two primary schools and 6 secondary schools in the diocese of Sale. In all, to this stage of the research we have conducted 41 interviews, approximately one-third of these being graduate teachers, another third being accomplished teachers and the final third being leading teachers.

Research method

The rest of this paper concentrates on the research that we conducted with eleven graduate teachers across the two dioceses. Four of these were primary teachers and seven were secondary. We began with a general interview outline for each of the three groups of teachers, focusing on the categories identified in the literature, professional knowledge, professional practice, professional relationships, professional values and professional engagement, but we were prepared to be flexible and open to new categories that might emerge. We also chose to treat the interview outline flexibly and to give as much attention as possible to the real knowledge and experience of the teachers without being bound by the categories. Some examples of the questions we used are shown in Table 3, although the use of these would have varied among the three researchers.

Table 3: Interview questions

Professional knowledge	What content knowledge do you wish you had before you started to teach RE? From where did you gain content knowledge? What questions from students make you stop and think?
Professional practice	How do you use and apply the diocesan RE curriculum? How do you go about your programming and unit planning? What religious diversity is there among the students and how do you cater for that? How long does it take for you to plan your RE program? What process do you use in your RE planning? How do you think students learn best in RE? What successes have you had? What hasn't worked?
Professional relationships	What do you learn from other teachers? Describe a specific instance of collaboration with a colleague? Who has been a mentor for you in your RE teaching?
Professional values	What values does a good RE teacher need to have? What does it mean to you to be an ethical teacher in RE? What kind of RE teacher would you like to be in the future?
Professional engagement	What challenges do you face as an RE teacher? How do you know the students are engaged in RE? What makes you enthusiastic about being an RE teacher? What plans do you have to develop yourself as an RE teacher?

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and closely analysed using a qualitative approach by way of constant comparative data analysis (Creswell, 2008) wherein repeating ideas (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) in interviewees' comments were grouped into common topics and in turn, further clustered into categories.

From each of the collected responses in each category we were then able to distil a general finding which ultimately was translated into a professional standard.

The graduate teachers: Research findings

The categories and sub-categories we identified from the interviews with the graduate teachers are shown in table 4. In addition to the five categories we had previously identified from the literature, one more (professional learning) emerged, making six key categories which are now discussed.

Table 4: Categories and sub-categories from the interviews with the graduate teachers

Categories	Subcategories
Professional knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content knowledge • I have gained content knowledge from • Where I go for help with content knowledge • What I want the students to know • Challenging questions from students
Professional practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedagogical knowledge • How we plan • The diocesan curriculum • Strategies I use • Things that have worked • Mistakes I've made • How I know it's going well • Assessment • Evaluation
Professional relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking help from mentors
Professional values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why RE is really important • Personal attributes
Professional engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing leadership • Enthusiasm/passion for RE
Professional learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further study • Develop teaching skills • Get more experience

Preservice RE qualifications

Seven of the graduate teachers had studied RE method as part of their preservice training, others cited local diocesan accreditation, in one case general accreditation and two others accreditation to teach RE. Only one had no preservice qualifications for RE. Most cited a strong Catholic family life and Catholic education as important both in their choice of Catholic education as a career and in their content knowledge.

Professional knowledge

All of the graduate teachers recognised that their content knowledge was limited and that they needed to continue learning. The most important area that emerged was knowledge of Scripture, not only being more familiar with Scripture, but the ability to analyse the intention of the biblical author, place a text in context for themselves and their students, and the ability to help the students to analyse Scripture in an informed way. One teacher spoke of his relief when he was informed by the CEO RE person that it was "OK" to educate in the critical-historical approach to Scripture.

I think it would have been the start of my second year where I had that PD, where the person

giving the PD said, "It's okay to say that certain parts of the bible are story to help the message". (K3)

When giving examples of challenging questions from the students, two of the teachers demonstrated a very simplistic understanding of the context of a Scripture passage that had caused their responses to the students to be muddled and unconvincing. Here is one example:

I just got stumped today. I was talking about the Passover, the first Passover, and the plague that hit the Egyptians, and one of the students said, "Well, how can that be justified because God has basically said, 'do not kill'. How can he justify ... like there seems to be one standard for him and another for us." It was quite difficult ... and in a sense, their perception is correct because one of the Commandments is "Do not kill". I couldn't really answer that. All I said to him was God did warn and give them plenty of chances and threatening, in a sense, said to them some judgement thing will happen if you don't release my people (K6).

Having Grade Prep very interesting to try and get points across through Religious Education. I think some of the ideas are quite broad and a little bit too complex for kids to understand. We've just done the Easter unit last term and I found that quite hard to deal with, the question about Jesus' death, and where he goes, and what happens with his body, (M2)

Other topics where the teachers believed they needed more knowledge were the Eucharist, other religions, the liturgical year and Catholic ethical teaching.

Looking back, what I would wish for would be more particular knowledge, because we learnt general knowledge, and then once we have been offered a job in a specific school we then have to go back and put all this general knowledge into specific topics. All I knew was what I didn't know. (J2)

The teachers cited various sources from which they had gained content knowledge, with Catholic childhood and education being significant. Various professional learning activities, especially those provided by the local CEOs were identified as well as the assistance of other teachers. Five of the eleven went to the local RE curriculum document for help with content knowledge and five went directly to the Religious Education co-ordinator in the school. Others mentioned the school library, the CEO RE resource person, the school chaplain in one case and various internal and external textbook resources.

And I think having that Catholic knowledge (childhood and Catholic education) is really valuable. I think if you did not have that Catholic knowledge and you came in here, any Catholic school, I think it would be very scary. So me being brought up in this Catholic school and with all the Catholic values and Catholic morals, I think that really did help me, going into teaching RE. (K1)

Being a graduate teacher, I do tend to be involved in a lot of professional development, and that includes PD on the diocesan curriculum. I also had one on Godly Play; so being new to the teaching system is also very valuable and rewarding in that aspect that I am new and I get to be involved in a lot professional development. (K1)

The diocesan RE curriculum document has a great balance in that it has background reading and sometimes the theological understanding as well. So you can depth your knowledge there, without having to look everywhere. (K3).

When discussing what they especially wanted the students to know, the teachers tended to focus on the topic they were teaching at the time, for example "the liturgical year", "stories about Jesus" "God's world". Others however took a more reflective approach to the question: "I want them to know that they are unconditionally loved by God"; "Where the tradition has come from"; "What it means to be Catholic". Four spoke of challenging questions from the students, and the common question about the truth of the Bible was cited as well as personal questions directed at the teacher.

Professional practice

The eleven graduate teachers had been selected by their Principals and/or RECs as exemplary for their level of experience, and so it is not surprising that overall they were comfortable in the classroom. They were organised, generally relaxed when challenged by the students, welcomed students' questions and, with occasional exceptions as demonstrated in the in earlier section of this paper on Scriptural knowledge, handled them confidently. They were able to think on their feet, took a flexible approach to the movements in a lesson/unit and were able to use different approaches in different contexts. They knew that they could not assume background knowledge on the part of the students.

Well, I don't presume that anyone's gone to Mass. Because a lot of the things that we talk about in RE might have happened in Church that week, so I just assume that they have got a very basic understanding because there's only three or four in my class who do have that higher understanding. And I try and then get them to explain things to the class, so if they were there at Mass on Sunday and they went to children's liturgy, I might get them to explain what they've heard. Or I might then get them to tell us why we have the special colour for Lent and all those sorts of things. So I try and involve them and they feel like they're giving some of their knowledge. But I really try and keep it quite basic because I know that the vast majority of them don't go to Mass on a weekly basis or don't have a very good understanding. (K7)

They were also aware that their teaching in RE was an educational process not an exercise in sharing their own opinions and beliefs. Nevertheless, they were not afraid of sharing their own life experiences if the situation warranted this. "I find they like hearing about my life experience" (J2)

When talking about the planning of their Religious Education programme, it was clear that the planning was based on the local diocesan curriculum document, usually as the school had appropriated and interpreted it. It was also clear that the planning was, for the most part, collaboratively done in regular planning days, and/or year levels. Only one of the teachers said that she never had the opportunity to plan with others. Those who commented on this also said that they spent two or three hours a week in individual planning.

Well we use it (the diocesan RE curriculum document) in our planning, on our planning days. So on a planning day the Preps are actually separate from the Grade ones and twos, but the three Prep teachers will get together with the RE Co-ordinator, or with the CEO RE person and she will take us through the planning for the term. (K1)

I use it (the diocesan RE curriculum) it in every single RE lesson. So, we develop our plans from the curriculum document and we use the outcomes and assessment tools that are provided. A specific example would be taking a lesson from the proposed ones that they give you and developing that with the students. (M2)

If you go up to the school server, you can print off a break down, day by day, week by week. So I follow that and it has a list of the different handouts that they used, what needs to be taught in each class in terms of content and topic. So that's what I look at, that's probably the first thing that I go to and then I think about how using the resources that I have to use, how I can teach that effectively and interestingly. (K2)

When asked about the teaching strategies they used, the teachers mentioned 35 different strategies altogether, high on the list being visual activities, class discussions, and Godly Play cited by the junior primary teachers. All were at ease with using a wide range of different strategies, although two demonstrated lack of judgment and the lack of advice from the school RE leader in their use of particular inappropriate feature length films. Most had made mistakes and had learned from these. One had used a DVD that was too complex for the students, another had invited a guest speaker without realising that there was a list of school approved speakers, another had used an unsuitable disciplinary measure while another found that her role play activity made the students noisy and unfocused. However, in their work

with the students they were able to tell when the process was going well, in the engagement and interest of the students and their willingness to respond.

I think it depends on the students, because they like to talk so much I let them, so in discussions, they learn from each other.You can tell when they're learning something new. They'll ask some questions or they're sort of listening. (J1)

Just as teaching strategies varied, assessment protocols were also very varied, usually worked out alongside the school RE curriculum based on the diocesan curriculum document. Seventeen different kinds of tasks were mentioned. The teachers also regularly evaluated their work both formally and informally.

People say that I have a way with the kids where, I don't know how to describe it, but where they just listen, I don't know. I have a range of strategies, like I make sure that I'm not just talking all class. I've got visuals, I make sure that I've got PowerPoints and the brick testament, so looking at the Old Testament through Lego men, and so little things like that just to touch with them. It's just different ways to learn that, tactile ways as well. Laminated cards especially when it comes to parables, having them up on the board laminated in colour. (K5)

Professional relationships

Not surprisingly the professional relationship of the graduate teachers showed a high level of mentoring by school RE leaders as well as by more experienced teachers. For two of the teachers the CEO RE resource person had been a helpful mentor but others had called on colleagues at the school. All demonstrated not only willingness, but eagerness to learn from others and this attitude was summed up by one of the teachers in the advice: "Ask for help when you need it":

A lot of the time I won't know all of it (the content) but this year I thought along the same lines as someone else, so we both learnt it together. (J1)

Professional values

Two sub-categories emerged here, the first being the sense of why Religious Education was important and the second the personal attributes the teachers believed they needed to have to be an effective RE teachers. They argued that Religious Education was essential for different reasons with the most common being the belief that the students should have the opportunity to grow in their own religious tradition. Personal values were dedication, passion, and organisation, fondness for the students, compassion and kindness, good teaching skills, confidence in teaching content and believing what one teaches, and being there for "the right reason".

In Catholic schools its background and the kids need to have some sort of an understanding of why they belong to this community, why they come to a school that teaches Religious Education. (J1)

It's the base tradition but also parents have made the decision to send their children to a Catholic school and I think that's probably either to reinforce what they're learning at home or to instil the knowledge. (J2)

Being a Catholic school, the students are required to learn Religious Education as part of the heritage of the school and its part of the ethos and it underpins everything that we do at the school. (K2).

We have a pretty open classroom where kids are very well entitled to their opinion and the other day someone said, "What do we have to do RE for?" And I said, "Well, that's a decision that your parents made sending you here to a Catholic school." You know, there's no surprise that at a Catholic school you will do Religious Education. But they're generally pretty positive about it. And we had a good discussion then, "Well, why do we do it?" "Well, because we're a Catholic school." "Why else?" And they said, "Oh well, there's history there. There's ..." (K3)

Professional engagement

All but one of the graduate teachers expressed enthusiasm for their RE teaching because of their own Catholic background and education, their personal religious beliefs, their enjoyment of the students, and various other reasons. One of the teachers communicated a sense of being rather overwhelmed and interestingly this was the same teacher who said that he/she never had time to plan with other teachers.

We're not talking to each other and I find that really hard. There are no faculty meetings, it's very rare for any department and it's mainly because there's no time. We're tied up with meetings every night after school. It's very hard. (M1)

I think RE's really important, you have to be passionate with it, if it does get a bit boring or a bit dry you're not putting your heart and soul into it. And I personally really love teaching RE because I believe it's really quite important for the children. It's really quite life building. And so I think having my own passion and real love of teaching RE makes me a bit more motivated to do it and have the kids enjoy it as well. (K7)

Even in these early years of their careers four of the graduate teachers had demonstrated leadership in the RE curriculum, helping other teachers with ideas and planning, taking leadership in school liturgies, making resources for the use of other teachers, and one intended to take on a part of the REC's role in the following year.

I'm actually the junior coordinator this year for the curriculum of RE, just Years 7 and 8 and we've done a lot this year of building up resources because we have, well we have two teachers on call and 15 classes, and we have two of us that are trained to teach RE. So a lot of teacher are coming to me and asking me questions about, "What's the Catholic teaching on this?" Or, "What resource do we have?" Because the teachers don't have the historical background. (K7)

I did the Godly Play planning at the start of the year and a lot of people were worried that we didn't have the kits. It's not that hard just to use a bit of creative thinking, and you can soon make things. It's certainly not, I wouldn't say, "I'm not going to do that Godly Play because I don't have the things I need." So it's easy enough to make things. (K6)

I was actually a junior unit leader this year, half way through the year I became the junior unit leader. So we actually held a Mass last term, so that was, I was getting the Grade preps, one's and two's involved in that. So it was good, it was good for me to be able to have a part of Religious Education in the Grade one's and two's.

Professional learning

All of the graduate teachers expressed professional learning goals, some of these being formal study and others less formal plans. Four said that they wanted to do more study in RE; another wanted to complete the diocesan accreditation to teach RE. Other goals included "continually find new ways to teach"; "be a leader in RE"; "experience other Catholic schools"; "teach more RE classes to gain experience"; "make use of CEO professional learning activities".

There are a few things that I'm actually talking about with the Head of Teaching and Learning, to look at in the next couple of years, and I'm looking at different Masters units and things like that. (K6)

Professional teaching standards for graduate teachers of Religious Education

At this first stage of the research, mindful that we intend to interview graduate teachers from the remaining two dioceses during the rest of 2012, we tentatively propose this list of professional standards for graduate teachers of Religious Education in Victoria's Catholic schools in the understanding that they will be revisited and revised as the research continues.

Professional knowledge

1. Has an awareness of the need to continually learn;
2. Has an informed knowledge of contemporary Catholic approaches to understanding Scripture;
3. Is able to use knowledge of contemporary approaches to Scripture to answer students' questions in an informed way;
4. Actively seeks information from a variety of sources to develop content knowledge;
5. Uses diocesan curriculum documents for assistance with content;
6. Has a cognitively rich approach to content in RE;
7. Is aware that RE is not an exercise in talking about their own beliefs;
8. Has an overall view of the knowledge they want the students to gain;
9. Asks for assistance when it is needed.

Professional practice

1. Is confident in working with students in ways that are flexible and informed by relevant content and pedagogical content knowledge;
2. Has strategies for dealing with challenging questions from students;
3. Plans collaboratively and individually;
4. Uses diocesan curriculum to inform planning and teaching;
5. Has clear cognitively focused learning outcomes;
6. Uses a wide range of strategies to engage students;
7. Learns from successes as well as failures;
8. Is able to make judgments about appropriate resources to use including ICT, print, visual and digital media;
9. Is realistic about the level of student experience and knowledge of religion;
10. Is able to ascertain student interest and engagement and to adapt strategies accordingly;
11. Plans assessment collaboratively and uses a range of age appropriate strategies;
12. Evaluates RE teaching formally and informally, collaboratively and individually.

Professional relationships

1. Knows on who to call for assistance and support and is positive about doing this;
2. Plans collaboratively with other teachers.

Professional values

1. Believes in the value of the RE curriculum;
2. Has professional qualities of dedication, organisation, openness, kindness, tolerance, and is committed to the task of RE;
3. Knows appropriate ways of handling difficult situations.

Professional engagement

1. Takes initiative and shows leadership albeit in a limited way;
2. Faces up to challenges and seeks concrete ways of addressing them;
3. Enjoys teaching RE and is enthusiastic about it.

Professional learning

Has specific goals for professional learning in RE appropriate to stage of career.

Discussion: Implications for preservice teacher education

The above tentative teaching standards have important implications for preservice teacher education in Religious Education. The first implication concerns the two areas of professional knowledge and professional practice. The analysis of the data revealed two significant findings for preservice teacher education in terms of ensuring the provision of basic teacher content knowledge and effective pedagogical content knowledge. Many graduate teachers interviewed felt their own content knowledge was limited and further, that this limitation negatively affected their confidence and ability to respond informatively and

confidently to students' questions. It also affected their choice of appropriate and relevant resources to support their teaching and learning episodes. Such insights impel preservice Religious Education providers to pay close attention to the overall effects of their courses, ensuring that not only do they contain ample foundational knowledge which would support all key areas of diocesan curriculum documents, but also that this foundational knowledge is integrated with effective pedagogical content knowledge. Scripture was an area often named as challenging. Preservice teachers require basic knowledge and understanding of both scripture and scripture exegesis, but this knowledge needs to be integrated with how it informs, shapes and guides the teaching decision-making process with regards to effective pedagogy appropriate to the specific students being taught. Preservice teacher Religious Education courses need to ensure that all content units such as scripture, sacraments, Catholic social teaching and the like, be taught in conjunction with pedagogical content knowledge units. Preservice religious educators need to know and understand how the background/content knowledge of the various topics in curriculum is linked to *what* and *how* they teach that content. These two essential aspects of Religious Education courses should not be taught in isolation.

A second key insight gained from this study concerns professional relationships as a number of graduate teachers referred to key staff mentors as well as to CEO personnel who provided valuable professional assistance in their planning and implementation of Religious Education. This finding has two implications for both undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education. First at the undergraduate level, to ensure that an explicit course component includes a section on developing and promoting professional relationships with teaching partners, staff mentors and local diocesan education personnel. Second at the level of postgraduate teacher education, it would be important to ensure that teachers be made explicitly aware of their professional responsibilities to early career teachers. Often in the overall design of individual units in postgraduate courses emphasis is placed on the nature of a specific unit rather than how that unit might 'fit' within the whole course being offered. Whilst teachers gain deep and critical knowledge of such specific areas within the overall course, more particular aspects such as their professional responsibilities (for example their roles as mentors) can be lost.

A third implication for preservice Religious Education relates to ensuring that preservice teachers understand the notion of both professional values and engagement and their place in the life of the religious educator. Again these are areas that can be lost due to the emphasis of other course requirements and demands, but if preservice teachers are not explicitly acquainted with the value and engagement of Religious Education beyond the often stated "I do Religious Education because I need it to get a job into system", then their enthusiasm for and engagement with the subject is jeopardised.

Conclusion

This initial report of our wider study has highlighted a number of key insights into graduate teachers' approaches to their teaching of Religious Education. Not only has it made important links to the implementation of professional teaching standards generally, but more importantly it has raised significant aspects specific to Religious Education that have thus far not been articulated and therefore not explicitly contemplated. To document such standards will promote the discipline at two key levels: first, at the school level where the subject stands to gain greater status and emphasis, and also at the teacher education tertiary level where a wider view needs to be taken at the course provision levels.

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“ISN'T THERE A TOWN NAMED AFTER HIM?” CONTENT KNOWLEDGE AND TEACHER TRAINING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Abstract

This paper examines the need for content knowledge as a foundation for teacher training in religious education. It argues that in educational models of religious education, where the emphasis is on a strongly cognitive approach, either in secular or denominational contexts, significant demands are made on teachers. Without adequate content knowledge teachers find it difficult to teach in an engaging and informed way. Two illustrative Canadian examples are provided, which highlight the cognitive demands of religion courses in both Catholic and secular schools. In light of this some recommendations are made as how best to match the requirements of the formal curriculum with the content knowledge of teachers.

Key words: *Teacher training, religious education, content knowledge*

The cultural context for religious education teacher training

Before explicitly considering the issue of content knowledge and teacher training in religious education some brief comments about the current cultural context are appropriate. This arises out of a conviction that educational discourse occurs in a particular social reality and an acknowledgment of this strengthens subsequent analysis. In the later part of the paper some more specific contextualization of Canadian Catholic schools and education in Quebec will be presented. By way of introduction here, however, some general comments on the social experience of students entering teacher training programs in religion will be made.

One way of examining contemporary culture, which has clear implications for the discussion of the content knowledge of new religion teachers, is Modified Secularization Theory, (MST). This arises from a broad sociological literature on the place of religion in culture (Rymarz, 2010). This theory offers a contextualization of the culture which has become increasingly dominant in the experiential world of present and future religion teachers. From the secularization perspective the journey of younger adults is one that leads them inextricably away from what the religious tradition regards as being of fundamental importance. This is a religious worldview where the believer is part of a worshiping community, shares in and expresses communal beliefs, is in relationship with a personal God and where beliefs have sustaining and directive force. Secularisation sees the disengagement of younger adults from a religious worldview as a continuing, albeit gradual, process (Lambert, 2005). This does not eliminate religion from discourse but transforms it to a highly ameliorated, idiosyncratic form. In this view many younger adults are moving ever more away from a religious worldview to a highly personalized, eclectic range of beliefs that although hard to categorize share at least one unifying characteristic, that is, they are not life shaping and are indeed relatively inconsequential (Voas & Crockett 2005). Mason and his colleagues (2007) comment that many of these beliefs would be more accurately characterized as “inconsequential opinions on matters religious” (p. 56). Rather than engaging in a formative and purposeful spiritual quest many younger adults are becoming increasingly secularised and are unlikely to reconnect with the faith community in anything other than a superficial and, in some ways, self interested way (Chaves, 1994).

In terms of teacher training very few assumptions can be made about the level and degree of religious socialization of candidates who enrol in teaching training programs. Whilst in the past wider society may have provided a degree of religious enculturation, this capacity is now greatly diminished. If prospective teachers are to acquire background knowledge and specific content about religions, broadly speaking, they are now much more likely to receive this from dedicated and formal programs of instruction (Rymarz, 2005). Such instruction may be provided in a variety of ways but one strong method is specialized

undergraduate degree programs. This is not to imply that graduates of such programs are guaranteed to be effective religion teachers, especially in educational models. As always, there is still a place for the gifted and motivated autodidact. As a general rule, however, those most likely to teach religion in an informative, engaging and educationally sophisticated way are those who have made some formal study of the related disciplines.

Content knowledge and the teacher

There is a wide and growing literature that explores the importance of teacher training and development as a prerequisite for quality education (Denton, 1982; Amarel, 1989; Bramald et al., 1995; Hammerness et al., 2002; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). In the specific field of religious education there is a parallel movement which examines appropriate models for training and in servicing for religion teachers (English, 2002; Healy, 2006; Dowling, 2012). Skilled teaching requires a range of attributes. One of these is basic content knowledge in chosen teaching disciplines (Monk, 1994). This particular dimension of teacher training is one that can easily be neglected in the discussion on how best to prepare RE teachers for their role as classroom educators. Religion teachers often lack specific qualifications in the areas in which they teach (Rymarz & Engebretson, 2005; Cook, 2004; DeFiore et al., 2008). The following narrative illustrates this point further. This is not intended to be an empirical argument but it does illuminate a key principle. As such, it serves as what Higgins (2007) calls a “type of micro-narrative,” a brief story that is both dense and illustrative.

I have taught religion teacher preparation courses for over twenty years. Very few students who take these courses have either a major or minor in theology, scripture or other disciplines that encompass religious education. In my experience, the following narrative typifies the content knowledge of a majority of students that enroll for teacher preparation courses in religious education:

My particular topic this day was how to teach scripture in a Catholic junior high setting. The heart of the lesson was presenting a number of different approaches that could be used. To demonstrate how the various models worked in the classroom I gave, as an example, a series of lessons on St Paul and Pauline themes in the scriptures. As I was teaching I was aware that many of the students were not grasping the major theme. I stopped my presentation and asked what the problem was and what I could do to rectify the situation. After some probing it was clear that a major stumbling block was the lack of knowledge that the students had about Paul. This was not a deficiency in higher scriptural exegesis but rather a lack of knowledge about who Paul was, when he lived and what he is most famous for, namely, his teaching as contained in the epistles attributed to him in scripture. To encapsulate, when I asked a student who St Paul was, she replied, “I not sure but there is a town named after him.”

The contention here is that without foundational content knowledge, the ability of religious education teachers to engage their students in a manner consistent with other subject disciplines is compromised. This is especially evident in curriculum models in religious education which place significant cognitive demands on teachers as well as students in the form of specific and specialist content knowledge.

Shulman (1987) established a well known rationale for strong teacher content knowledge as a foundational principle in good teaching. For Shulman (1987) teaching, “begins with a teacher’s understanding of what is to be learned and what is to be taught” (p. 7). Fundamental to this process is the teacher’s understanding of the subject discipline that he/she is working in. This is the basis for the teacher’s capacity to assist students to appropriate new insights. The teacher’s task is to provide both a broad overview of the learning at hand and at the same time to give focused and practical assistance to learners who may be dealing with unfamiliar material. In this way the teacher acts like a learning architect who can both

construct and envisage what a high quality classroom learning environment will be. Central to the teacher's role is the ability to generate metaphors and other heuristic mechanisms that create an interface between students and what is to be studied. The efficacies of these techniques are dependent on the teacher's own content knowledge. In Shulman's view, teaching is a dynamic process, facilitated by ability of teachers to move easily from their deep content knowledge and into the cognitive world of the student. The antithesis of this view is where teachers only have a shallow grasp of content material and are, to use the common expression, "only a page ahead of the students". In this case the teacher is incapable of providing a strong learning environment because they cannot cultivate appropriate metaphors and actively frame student learning.

Empirical studies have also underlined the need for basic teacher content knowledge for good teaching practice (Nye et al., 2004; Hattie, 2009). Darling-Hammond (2006) in an influential study on exemplary teacher education programs drew attention to the foundational importance of content knowledge of teachers in such programs. She noted:

They understand that the subject matters. Rather than the generic notions of teaching techniques that dominated teacher education for much of the 1970s and '80s (and still characterize many programs today), these programs begin with the conviction that subject matter provides the foundation for teaching. This means that teaching strategies must be learned in the context of specific content. (pp. 81-82)

To illustrate what is assumed of background teacher content knowledge in the exemplary training programs that she analyzed, Darling-Hammond (2006) provides the following information from one of the most highly rated teacher preparation programs in the United States:

University of Virginia students who intend to teach mathematics must complete a major in mathematics that includes at least nine courses above the calculus sequence. Two of the nine courses must be graduate level. All candidates must also complete at least three credits of computer science and the credit of educational computing. (p. 91)

Content knowledge and the religion teacher in Catholic schools: The general case

One of the most significant developments in religious education in Catholic schools, in a variety of cultural contexts, in recent decades has been the movement toward what can broadly defined as educational paradigms (Rossiter 1982, 1988; Buchanan, 2005). One of the characteristic features of this approach is the religious education in Catholic schools should be a serious, rigorous and academic discipline. This is spelled out in Roman documents such as the *General Catechetical Directory*, produced by the Congregation for the Clergy (1997):

Religious instruction in schools [must] appear as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines. It must present the Christian message and the Christian event with the same seriousness and the same depth with which other disciplines present their knowledge. It should not be an accessory alongside of these disciplines, but rather it should engage in a necessary inter-disciplinary dialogue. This dialogue should take place above all at that level at which every discipline forms the personality of students. (para. 73)

In an educational model great emphasis is placed on increasing the understanding or knowledge of students as opposed to having a directly catechetical intent. To be sure religious education can assist or complement catechesis but its primary goal is an increase in knowledge. This is again in keeping with official Roman documents such as the *Religious Dimension of Education in the Catholic School* produced by the Congregation for Catholic Education (1988):

the relationship between religious instruction in schools and catechesis is one of distinction and complementarity: 'there is an absolute necessity to distinguish clearly between religious instruction and catechesis... (para. 68)

A study of teacher content knowledge: Religious education in Canadian Catholic schools

The curriculum used in Canadian Catholic schools is not clear and unambiguous and can often conflate catechetical and educational goals (Rymarz, 2011). The program of studies produced by the Canadian Conference of Catholic bishops does, however, make significant demands on students and teachers in terms of the level of cognitive content that is expected to be covered. This is evident in the textbooks used in the final years of high school. The Year 11 text, *World Religions: A Canadian Perspective* contains eleven chapters. It examines religious pluralism, Catholicism and Christianity, Canadian aboriginal spirituality, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. It concludes with chapters on modernity and religion and living faith today. The scope of this book is broad and the level of content knowledge required by teachers to be able to engage with the variety and complexity of topics covered is quite high. This is especially so if teachers are to move beyond acting as conduits of information and toward being architects of learning in the manner envisaged by Shulman. It seems reasonable to assume that for quality teaching and learning to occur in this program, teachers require some specialist background knowledge in world religions (Van Doorn-Harder, 2007; Locklin, et al., 2012). As with the Quebec curriculum model which will be discussed next, this requirement seems to be particularly important for teachers who wish to deal with aboriginal spirituality in their classrooms.

In a similar fashion the year 12 program, in Canadian Catholic schools, *In Search of the Good*, assumes a high level of content knowledge on the part of teachers. This course of study is devoted to what is called a Catholic understanding of moral living. Rather than give an overview of the course, a brief description of one chapter of the mandated text gives an illustrative sense of the content knowledge that is expected of teachers. Chapter Two of the text is headed, "You are what you do". It sets out to explore the nature of human action. It introduces concepts such as naturalism, logical positivism and free will. It surveys the thought of Wittgenstein, Ricoeur and Freud. Such content has a very strong philosophical foundation and teachers without background knowledge in modern philosophy will have difficulty in animating this content for students. Other chapters have a similarly deep philosophical grounding.

It is clear that in both a theoretical and practical sense religious education teachers in Catholic schools have significant expectations placed on them in terms of their own content knowledge. In Catholic schools in Canada and elsewhere religious education is offered in multiple places in the school curriculum and this necessitates large numbers of teachers to deliver the programs in the classroom. The official position, as set out in Roman documents, sees religious education in Catholic schools as a serious scholarly discipline that places on students and teachers the same demands as other subject disciplines. The examples provided here of religious education in Canadian Catholic high schools seems to exemplify this point (Rymarz, 2012).

The assumption made about the content knowledge of religion education teachers in Catholic schools can be extrapolated to other contexts as well. What are common in these situations are the high demands placed on teacher content knowledge without much consideration given to what preparation teachers need to meet these demands. Before making some recommendations on training of religion teachers, an example of religious education in a secular context will be given.

Content knowledge and the religion teacher in a secular context: The case of contemporary Quebec.

One lapidary theme in understanding contemporary Quebec is to recognize the seismic changes that have taken place there since the middle of the twentieth century. These changes, which have generated a wide literature, have been given the collective title the, Quiet Revolution (McRoberts, 1975; Posgate & McRoberts, 1976; Bibby, 2004). The key aspect of the Quiet Revolution was the sudden and precipitous decline in the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on wider Quebec culture and on the lives of

individual *Quebecois* (Bibby, 1993). In its place there evolved a robust secular mentality characterized by, amongst other things, a marginalization of religion to the periphery of personal and public life (Beyer, 1993). As is characteristic of fractured pillarized social structures that had heavily supported religious socialization, the collapse of Catholicism in Quebec was both unanticipated and tumultuous (Dekkar & Ester, 1996). The legacy of Catholic cultural hegemony, however, is evident throughout the province, perhaps most notably in the history of educational institutions which had for centuries been under the control of religious organizations (Boudreau, 1999; Dickinson, 2008). The sudden rupture with past practice, however, has produced successive generations who have very little knowledge or lived appreciation of Quebec's religious heritage. Previous models of religious education are no longer used as these were tailored for denominational schools. In Quebec schools are no longer funded along denominational lines and only secular schools now receive governmental support. A new approach to religious education in a secular context with no denominational affiliation has now been developed. This program, nonetheless, makes significant assumptions about the preexisting content knowledge of teachers.

A study of teacher content knowledge: The ethics and religious culture course in Quebec

In their 2005 document, *Establishment of an ethics and religious culture program*, the Quebec Ministry of Education acknowledged a type of phenomenological framework for the study of ethics and religious culture. One common pedagogical approach in this schema is to divide the field into a number of sub categories or types and then to study each in turn (Moore & Habel, 1982). This typological methodology intends to build up a diverse understanding as it allows for a range of areas to be examined (Rymarz, 2012B). The intention is to facilitate a communality of focus. This should emerge because the types of phenomena that are examined can be applied to a variety of religious positions or worldviews.

The new ethics and religious culture course in Quebec has at least three noteworthy features. Firstly, it is mandatory. No exemptions or alternatives for families who objected to the program are allowed. This ensures that large numbers of teachers will be required to teach the course. Secondly, the curriculum is stipulated for use in all schools in Quebec be they public or private. Lastly, the curriculum whilst non-confessional seeks to provide a comprehensive approach to ethics and religious education for all ethnic and religious groups in Quebec. This last feature, in particular, ensures that teachers will require a relatively high level of content knowledge to be to teach the courses effectively.

One prominent aspect of the new Quebec curriculum is the bold educational goals that it sets itself. Students are expected to understand religious beliefs, values and attitudes across a variety of cultural contexts. This poses significant challenges for teachers (Morris, Bouchard & DeSilva, 2011; Van der Wee, 2011). In the Quebec model there is an explicit understanding that students will study a number of religious traditions as well as giving considerable time to the home tradition which in this case is the historical example of Catholicism in Quebec. This later focus presents some very contemporary challenges that are germane to a secular context. What is being studied is not so much a lived reality but a chain of memory, albeit modified from the concept developed by Hervieu Leger (2000). In approaching the study of Catholicism, therefore, teachers must be aware of the new cultural reality in Quebec and teach not only the traditional, or perhaps classical, Catholic beliefs but also how these have been supplanted by a new secular worldview amongst most Quebecers. Add to this the complexity of teaching about other world religions and you have very serious demands being made on teachers and students who take this course. Any world religion brings with it a diverse and complex range of beliefs, practices and internal culture as well as a range of historical expressions (Berling, 2004). Take for example the complexity inherent in teaching about Judaism. The Quebec curriculum sets for itself the task of helping students understand the cultural diversity of modern Québec. This would include Orthodox and Hasidic expressions of Judaism which are relatively easy to engage with. There are visible minorities of Orthodox Jews in major cities especially Montréal but in addition there are larger numbers of much more secular Jews who are not easily described in the categories that apply to the Orthodox. The curriculum must address this intrareligious diversity if it is to be true to its aims.

A serious concern in the Quebec context is what is to be made of the religious and ethical beliefs of the significant number of indigenous groups in the province? The arguments put forward about the complexity of world religions apply in greater force to indigenous groups, which in Quebec span Inuit groups in the north to Algonquin communities along the St Lawrence (Richards, 2011). To do justice to these groups much attention must be placed on teaching about indigenous beliefs in terms that the local communities find acceptable (Bell, 2004; Sarra, 2011). There is a strong tendency in teaching on indigenous religious beliefs, practices and culture to present these in Eurocentric terms and to try to transpose them into a standard model when the content itself actually defies easily categorization (McPherson, 2011). This is not to say that this is a hopeless task but rather that it requires special attention and considerable planning and adequate ongoing support. All of these issues place considerable demands on all involved in the successful implementation of the curriculum.

A key question here, is whether teachers adequately trained and properly supported to be able to deal with the complex content knowledge that is implicit in the study design? At present there are no specific background requirements for either teachers working in schools or teachers who are being trained to teach the new religion and ethics courses. Wright (2007) has commented on the significant demands on teachers in the United Kingdom who teach with a typological or phenomenological framework. They need quite sophisticated knowledge of not only a range of religions but also of religion as a sociological phenomenon. These concerns seem equally valid when applied to the Quebec approach as the religion curriculum is based on similar foundations

Training Religion Teachers: Some Recommendations

The need for large numbers of religion teachers to run the mandatory religious culture and ethics courses in Quebec and the high school program in Canadian Catholics raise fundamental issues about the likely utility of these programs. The implications of this discussion have relevance, however, for any curricula models in religious education, broadly understood, which assume high levels of content knowledge amongst teachers. In dealing with these demands it seems that a number of options, not necessarily completely mutually exclusive, suggest themselves.

One course of action is to raise the expectations and requirements of teachers entering training programs. A number of European countries follow a curriculum that allows for a broad study of religion and ethics that have some similarities with the new Quebec curriculum (Meijer, et al., 2009). These countries, however, place significant expectations on teachers who enter training programs to teach these courses (Willaime, 2007). In Finland, for instance, religion teachers are expected to have at least a master's degree in a relevant discipline before they are allowed to teach about religion or ethics (Mikkola, 2001; Tirri, 2009). Following on from this argument, in religion courses processes need to be put in place to ensure that teachers entering the profession have the background and capacity to deal with the significant curriculum demands placed on them. This is not just a question of content knowledge but without a sufficient background it is unlikely that teachers will be in a position to develop the pedagogical and other skills that educational models place on them. To reiterate, requirement of teachers to have strong formal qualifications in religion based courses does not negate the need for specialist training both in teacher preparation programs and also once they are working in schools

Programs could also be modified to lessen demand on teachers. For instance, in the Year 12 curriculum in Canadian Catholic high schools the philosophical edge of the program requires teachers to be familiar with modern existential philosophy as personified by Ricœur. This part of the course could be modified so as not to expect teachers to have this specialist knowledge. Such amelioration would make the content knowledge demands on teachers less onerous but would, at the same time, change the intent and outcomes of the course of study. The curricula goals would be less ambitious in their scope but they allow for greater clarity about what students are really doing in class. For instance, if students are not going to rigorously engage with the thought of existentialist philosophers more thought can be given to what actually will be covered in the curriculum and appropriate plans made. In the case of Quebec, for instance, is it realistic to expect teachers to engage students about the complex interface between religion and

secularity if the teachers themselves do not have specialist knowledge in this area? This is not, of course, an argument against a strongly cognitive approach to religion. It is, however, recognition that without specialist background as a foundation, teachers will be challenged by the curricula demands of these courses and it may be more productive to modify demands in the first instance.

A final, more strategic option, which does not lessen the cognitive scope of courses, is to alter the mandatory status of many religion courses. In both Canadian Catholic schools and public schools in Quebec, severe systemic demands are made because the obligatory nature of religion courses ensures that large numbers of teachers are required to teach these courses. If courses were made optional then this would very likely reduce the number of students taking them. This in turn would require fewer teachers and because of the reduced number more concentrated efforts could be made in recruiting and training religion teachers. In this approach, to be sure, fewer students would take religion course but at the same time it is much more likely that the stated lofty goals and objectives of religion programs would be met. In addition, as with the previous option, some more thought could be given to developing alternative, more general, religion programs which are not premised on high expectations of teacher content knowledge. .

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DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE? THE CASE OF THE QUANTITATIVE CHANGES IN FINNISH RE STUDENT TEACHERS' VIEWS OF COMPETENCE DURING THEIR PEDAGOGICAL PROGRAM

Abstract

This article describes the general quantitative changes in the perceptions of competence among RE student teachers ($N = 86$) during their one-year pedagogical program at the University of Helsinki, Finland. The data were gathered with two-part questionnaires at the beginning and end of the pedagogical program and included quantified qualitative and quantitative analysis. The study found the following trends among the students. First when summarised the student teachers' views leaned toward an educational professionalist emphasis. Second, a pattern of decrease in the intra-personal and psychological domains could be identified. Third, with the exception of learning-in-action, the students seemed to place less emphasis on life-long learning at the end of the pedagogical year than at the beginning. Fourth the RE student teachers viewed themselves as being more competent at the end of their pedagogical education than at the beginning.

Key words: *Religious Education, teacher Education, student teachers, competence*

Introduction

This article describes the general quantitative changes in the perceptions of competence among religious education student teachers during their one-year pedagogical program. Interest in the professional development of religious education student teachers has increased globally since the turn of the Millennium (Sikes & Everington, 2003; Sikes & Everington, 2004; Buchanan & Stern, 2012). Even so there are still only a few studies investigating pre-service teachers' perceptions of competence (Huntly, 2008; Ubani, 2009; 2011).

In Finland, religious education is generally taught by subject teachers from grade 7 (14-year-old pupils) onward. In principle the required qualification for the RE subject teacher is a master's degree in Theology and Teacher Education. The Teacher Education for subject teachers is 60 credits and the course lasts one year. The program includes studies such as Educational Psychology, Special Education, Didactics in RE and Teacher Practices. Like the teaching profession in general, the profession of RE the teacher is popular among students (Kallioniemi & Ubani, 2012). At the University of Helsinki only one quarter of the students who apply are selected for the subject teacher program.

The students in this article are student teachers participating in Lutheran (Protestant) religious education ($N = 86$). Similar to most European countries, RE is a compulsory subject in Finnish schools. Uniquely, the state education includes 13 different RE subjects based on different religions and Ethics for the religiously unaffiliated. However, the majority of the students (90 percent) participate in Lutheran RE. The instruction is 'weak confessional' as the content emphasises the respective religions but the instruction does not include catechetical and devotional elements. In addition, the teacher's qualification is exclusively academic (Kallioniemi & Ubani, 2012).

The purpose of this article is to describe how perceptions of competence among RE student teachers ($N = 86$) change from the beginning to the end of their one-year pedagogical program. This research uses the triangulative approach (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003) as it includes both qualitative and quantitative data on the perceptions of competence of RE student teachers. The research questions in this article are:

1. How do the perceptions of a competent RE teacher change?
2. How do the perceptions of personal competence change?

Religious education teachers and student teachers in Finland

Consistent with other countries the past decades have witnessed an increase in research into teacher education and RE teacher professionalism in Finland. Earlier studies of Finnish RE teachers describe them as a separate profession within the Theology profession. They consider themselves as teachers of cultural heritage, theological experts and as colleagues of the other teachers in their schools and not so much as spiritual ministers (Kallioniemi, 1997). Usually, they perceive their calling as 'earthly' in contrast to the theologians who decided to become ministers in the Church who commonly have a 'spiritual' calling (Niemi, 1999).

Recently, Finnish RE teachers ($N = 163$) were studied as part of Teaching Religious Education in a Multicultural European Society –project (TRES) in 2006-2008 that covered over 3400 RE teachers from 16 European countries. According to the study, almost all of the teachers (99.6 percent) agreed that teaching about religion was the most important goal of religious education. At the same time two-thirds (62.7 percent) of these very same teachers agreed also on the importance of teaching religion in religious education (Räsänen & Ubani, 2008). The Finnish RE teachers perceive the position of Religious Education in school as good and emphasize the significance of religion to Finnish culture and society in their professional orientation. In addition, when compared to other European countries, the Finnish teachers seem to use diverse methods based on the pedagogical needs of their students and are very open toward multiculturalism and other religions. Conclusively, the Finnish RE teacher was defined as a 'modern traditionalist' (Räsänen, Ubani, Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009; Räsänen & Ubani, 2008).

Previous studies of Finnish RE student teachers have produced the following results. In a qualitative study of 44 RE student teachers' perceptions of a competent teacher at the beginning of their pedagogical year the student teachers named both task-competencies, especially mastery of subject matter, and person-competencies, especially empathy and interaction skills, as constituents of RE teachers' competence (Ubani, 2012a). However, these perceptions did not often mention elements such as experience and motivation. This was in clear contrast to previous literature on expertise in teaching (Berliner, 1991). When the same 44 students were studied at the end of their pedagogical year, the emphasis on pedagogical elements of teaching, collaborative networks of expertise and cooperation and a student-centred orientation to teaching had increased. On the other hand, empathy and knowledge distribution was emphasized less (Ubani, 2011). A quantitative study showed statistically significant differences between beginning female students and male students in three areas of competence at the .05 level. The female students emphasized knowledge of people ($U = 88.0, p < .05$), situational knowledge ($U = 98.5, p < .05$) and contextual knowledge ($U = 105.0, p < .05$) more than the male students (Ubani, 2009). In a qualitative case study, three male students with careers in RE teaching as a second choice were interviewed at the beginning, the middle and the end of their one-year pedagogical program. The study showed some patterns in the student teachers' reflections concerning developmental aims, professionalism, and conviction during the year. During the year the students reflected on some key issues tied to the contextual situation, such as religion as debated by the public and on some personal issues such as faith and personal calling and often these issues were intertwined in the process (Ubani, 2012b).

Recently, Tirri and Ubani (2012) studied student teachers' reflections on the educational purposefulness of teaching all school subjects ($N = 270$). The qualitative study was conducted at the beginning of their one-year pedagogical program. It included 47 RE student teachers. All the student teachers emphasized some general purposes in teaching. They perceived themselves as responsible professionals, their task was to teach the students the basic knowledge of their subject, and they considered themselves responsible for the personal and ethical development of the students regardless of the subject. In addition, the RE student teachers viewed religion as an especially delicate subject that required different kinds of personal reflection than most other subjects in schools in order to help the students construe their identities.

Professional development and teacher education

In educational studies, the term competence refers to a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes that actualise problem-solving tasks in a pedagogical practice (Baartman, Bastiaens, Kirscher & van der Vleuten, 2007). In this study we used Eraut's (1994) conceptualisation of competence to write the quantitative questionnaire. According to Eraut, competence is "the ability to perform the tasks and roles required by the expected standards" (Eraut, 2003, p. 117). He approaches teachers' competence in terms of knowledge from the constructivist viewpoint. Eraut has discerned six areas of competence:

- (1) knowledge of people (e.g., pupils as individuals, diverse learners),
- (2) situational knowledge (e.g., awareness of classroom situation),
- (3) knowledge of educational practice (e.g., diverse methods, pedagogical understanding),
- (4) propositional knowledge (e.g., discipline based theories and concepts),
- (5) process knowledge (e.g., elaborated decision-making, organising practice) and
- (6) control knowledge (e.g., metacognition, self-regulation).

Research has linked the difference between experts and novices to their levels of experience and motivation (Berliner, 1991; cf. Pikers & Paas, 2005). The development of expertise demands long-term commitment to the professional practice. According to Berliner (1991), both motivation and experience seem to be pre-requisites for the "development of functional, sophisticated, and efficient ways of recognising, organising, recalling, and processing information" (p. 145). He refers to research that has confirmed that pedagogical expertise resembles other areas of expertise as it is a sophisticated form of knowledge that requires conscious effort to gain and master (Berliner, 1991, pp. 145-146).

In teacher education this 'conscious effort' is materialised as pedagogical thinking and reflection. The role of reflection in teacher development has been acknowledged for some time in the literature (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Schön, 1987). Teacher reflection covers all aspects relevant for the practice of teaching. According to Zeichner and Liston (1996), a reflective practitioner "examines, frames, and attempts to solve the dilemmas of classroom practice; is aware of and questions the assumptions and values he or she brings to teaching; is attentive to the institutional and cultural contexts in which he or she teaches; takes part in curriculum development and is involved in school change efforts; and takes responsibility for his or her own professional development" (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 6; see also Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). It can be seen that the range of topics in reflection is vast. Novices are quite likely to have a fragmented and limited understanding of the teaching profession (Berliner, 2001). The student teachers in the pedagogical program studied were just entering the conscious process of reflective practice.

There is a general consensus on the impact of teacher education on the student teachers' development. At the same time many researchers have reminded us of the importance of prior knowledge in teachers' learning and the dominance of preconceptions among both pre-service and in-service teachers (Korthagen, 2010). The importance of prior knowledge means that there is at least some consistency in the conceptions of teaching between the pre-service and in-service phases. Arguably the development from a novice to a competent teacher takes approximately 5 years of pedagogical studies or teaching experience (Berliner, 2001). This means that the changes in the pedagogical outlook of subject student teachers during their one-year pedagogical program would not be drastic. In this light, it is indeed interesting to note that research into pre-service teachers' perceptions for ideal teachers and teachers' competence seem to show that the student teachers have a reasonable idea of a teacher's professional characteristics and requirements especially in the classroom setting (Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Korthagen, 2010). For instance, in her phenomenographic study of pre-service teachers' perceptions of competence, Huntly (2008) recognised six categories of competence that are already quite comprehensive:

- (1) being "well prepared" that is, doing comprehensive planning and classroom organisation;
- (2) having a sound "knowledge base" that is, employing a profound knowledge base to facilitate learning;

- (3) "being in control", that is, utilising appropriate behaviour management strategies to govern and regulate the learning environment;
- (4) "creating networks and partnerships", that is, maintaining effective communication with the whole school community;
- (5) "becoming a professional", that is, exercising professionalism in practice; and
- (6) "becoming self-aware" of oneself as a person and teacher (pp. 131-132).

As has been described, student teachers already have knowledge and experience of schools and especially classroom practices because of their personal histories. Therefore, it is important to consider what other kinds of impact such as self-efficacy and perceptions of competence teacher education may have on the students. Self-efficacy refers to the amount of confidence the individual has in his/her ability to carry out a given course of action or to achieve a desired outcome and has been verified as an important element in effective teaching (Bandura 1982; 1997; 1995). Therefore, in this study an item concerning perceived self-competence was included in the questionnaire.

Research procedures

This study is part of a research project that examines the professional development among RE student teachers during their pedagogical education. The whole research project includes (1) a survey with a quantitative questionnaire and qualitative open-ended descriptions of competence for the whole sample collected at the beginning and the end of their pedagogical program and (2) a set of three interviews of eight selected students at the beginning, middle and the end of their pedagogical program. This article focuses on the data gathered with the survey that included the quantitative questionnaire and qualitative open-ended questions.

The participants of the research project were all RE student teachers from the University of Helsinki, Finland ($N = 86$) in 2007-2009. The data were gathered at the beginning and at the end of their pedagogical studies. There were 64 female participants and 22 male participants aged between 20 and 43 years.

The survey data were gathered with a two-part form at the beginning and at the end of the pedagogical program. The first part of the form had open-ended questions and provided the qualitative data. In the qualitative part the open-ended question was: "Please name five of the most important areas of competence for a RE teacher (in order of importance)". The data focusing on the five most important areas of competence were analysed with qualitative content analysis (Bos & Tarnai, 1999). The use of Eraut's theory deductively in the qualitative analysis was ruled out because the participants did not reflect on the question of competence from a constructivist viewpoint or as 'knowing' individuals (Eraut, 1994).

Recently, Hsieh and Shannon (2005) have termed qualitative analysis characterised by counting and comparison of content as summative content analysis. They place it beside directive (theory-guided) and conventional (inductive) approaches (ibid.). In the analysis for this article the different meanings were grouped and the frequencies counted, the meanings grouped into 15 sub-categories, and then the sub-categories combined into three categories. Some qualitative questionnaire results have been reported from the 2007-2008 sample's views at the beginning of their studies (Ubani, 2012a). After the increment of the 2008-2009 sample the whole qualitative questionnaire data were re-analysed. The new analysis gave more clarity to the results reported and produced three categories instead of five (Ubani, 2012a).

The second part of the survey was the quantitative questionnaire with 64 items. The questionnaire included 56 statements (5-point Likert: 1 = fully disagree, 5 = fully agree). The items concerning the competent RE teacher were operationalized from Eraut's (1994) constructivist theory of professional development and competence. The claims began with a statement: 'A competent RE teacher...'. The competence area called (1) *knowledge of people* was measured with claims such as: 'prop_2_Recognizes differences in the abilities and skills mastered by the students'. The competence area (2) *situational knowledge* included claims such as: 'situ_1_While teaching discerns the situational characteristics and

demands quickly'. The third competence area was called (3) *knowledge of educational practice*. To this area belonged claims such as: 'edpr_5_Knows various different teaching methods'. The fourth competence area was called (4) *propositional knowledge* and it included claims such as: 'prop_1_Knows the integral learning theories and concepts'. The next area of competence from Eraut's theory was (5) *process knowledge*, which was represented by claims such as: 'proc_2_Is able to critically evaluate the knowledge gained'. The sixth area was called (6) *control knowledge* and included claims such as: 'ctrl_3_Analyses the grounds for his/her own teacherhood'.

As Eraut's theory focuses on the general processes present in teaching practice, it does not address particular areas of competence for specific school subjects. For this article other areas of competence were discerned that were included in the questionnaire. *Theological content knowledge* (7) was being studied with claims such as: 'theo_1_Knows the fundamental theological concepts'. The eighth area of competence was *content specific psychological knowledge* (8) and was measured with claims such as: 'psyc_2_Is aware of the demands of the developmental phase of student's personality'. The final added area of competence was called (9) *knowledge of context*. This area was studied with claims including: 'cnxt_6_Recognizes the unique character of the role of the RE teacher with regards to the rest of the school community'. In addition the self-rated competence was measured with the item: 'self_comp_Please evaluate your personal competence at this moment' (Likert 1-5).

Generally, the quantitative analysis was done with t-test analysis (SPSS). However, the MEAN-variables of each area of competence (Table 1) and self-rated competence –variable were not normally distributed (*Kolmogorov-Smirnov* = .95, $p > .05$) so non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney) were used where appropriate. In general, all areas of competence scored relatively high which is quite likely due to the fact that the study focused on ideals. The statements also included negative claims. These were coded conversely (1 = 5, 2 = 4, etc.)

Results

Differences in the beginning and at the end of pedagogical program in the qualitative data

In total, the student teachers gave 336 meanings at the beginning and 352 meanings at the end of their training for describing the competence of an RE teacher. The meanings given by the RE student teachers could be divided into three categories (Figure 1). Each category is represented by a bar in Figure 1. The bar values represent the frequencies of meanings associated with each bar. The categories were called *Virtuous Personality*, *Skilful Practice* and *Expert Knowledge*. Each of these categories consisted of three or four sub-categories. The sub-categories in *Virtuous Personality* were virtuous educator, empathy and caring, life-long learner and a mature personality. These sub-categories referred to the person and attitudes of the RE teacher. The second category referred to the professional practice of the RE teacher and was called *Skilful Practice*. The sub-categories were called pedagogical skills, professional cooperation, Social Communication. The final category was called *Expert Knowledge* and referred to knowledge of different relevant areas of teaching. The sub-categories in this category were called knowledge of educational theories, mastery of subject matter, general knowledge and psychological knowledge.

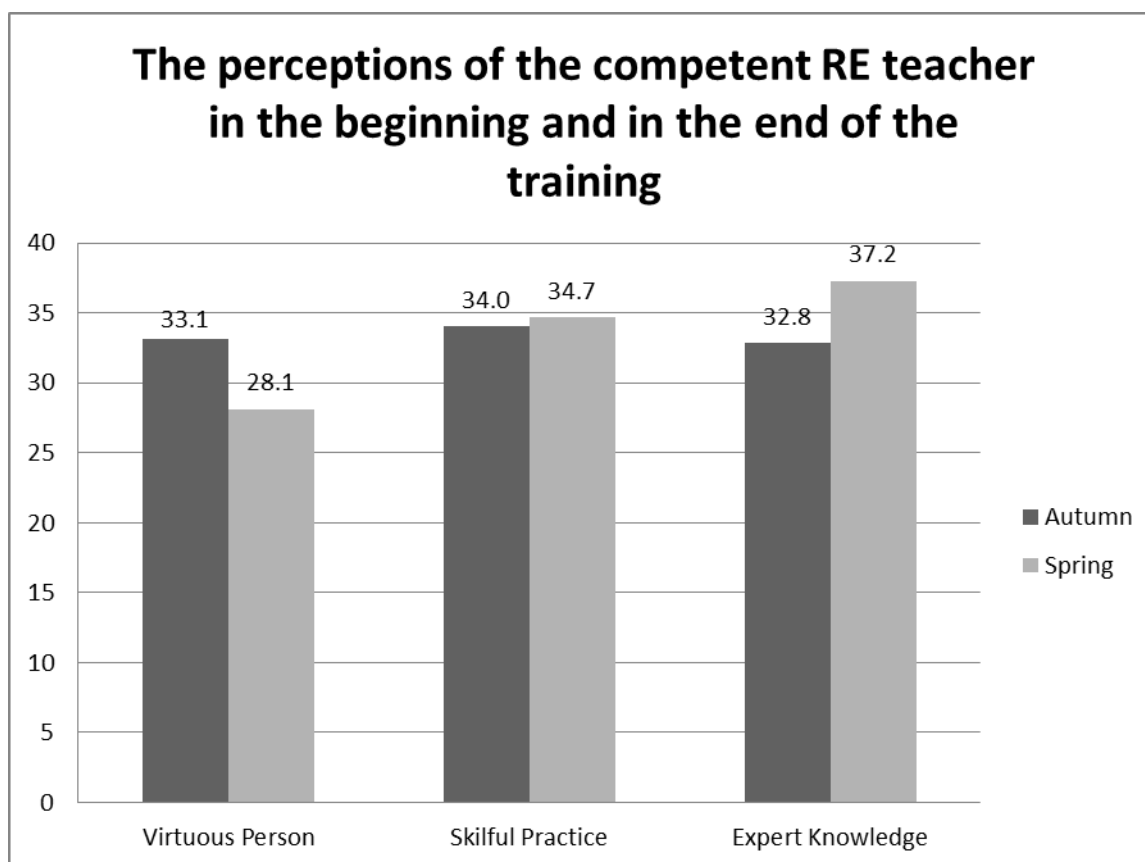


Figure1: The perceptions of the competent RE teacher at the beginning and at the end of the training

The three categories in the perceptions of competence among RE student teachers were called Virtuous Person, Skilful Practice and Expert Knowledge (Figure 1). All three categories were of relatively similar size including about 1/3 of the meanings. Figure 1 shows the percentage distribution of meanings given in the beginning (autumn) and the end of the pedagogical program (spring). The figure includes the percentages. As figure 1 shows, the emphasis on Virtues Person became less in spring (33.1% - 28.1%) and the emphasis on Expert knowledge increased in spring (32.8% - 37.2%). The students' views on Skilful Practice remained relatively stable in size (34.0% - 34.7%).

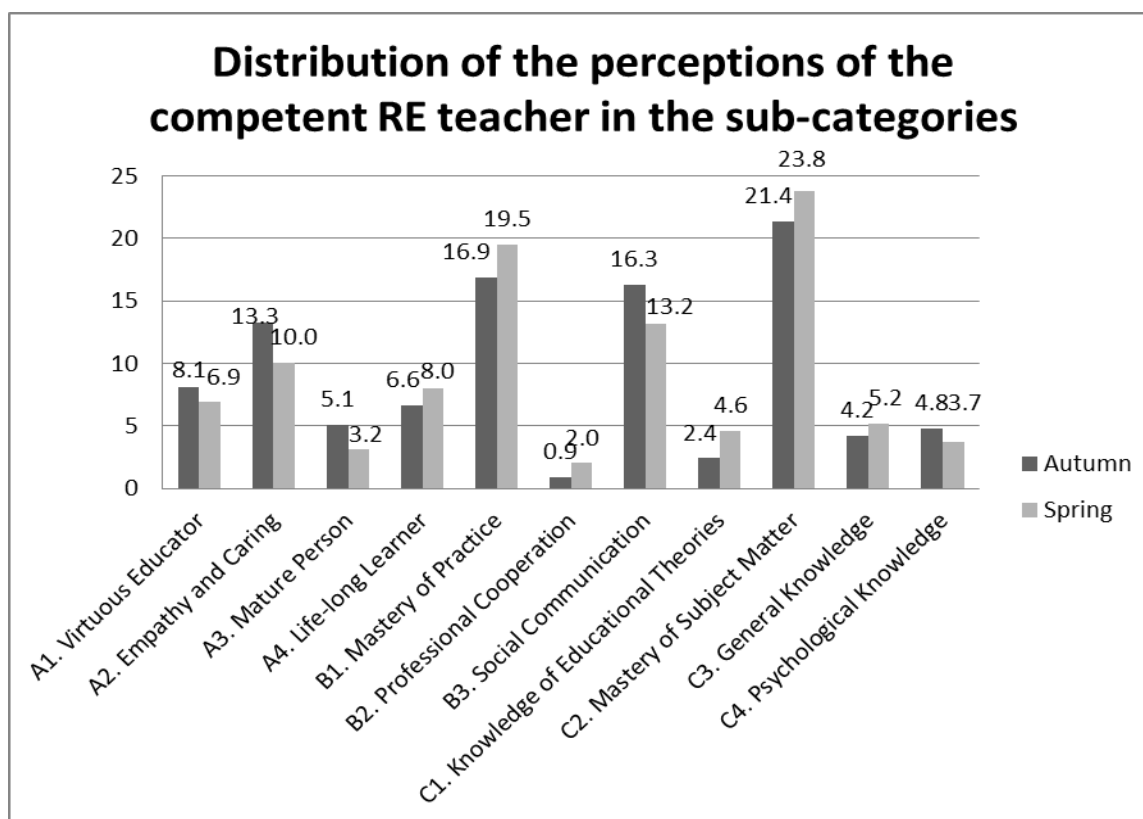


Figure 2: Distribution of the perceptions of the competent RE teacher in the sub-categories

Figure 2 shows the distribution of meanings given by the RE student teachers in the sub-categories of the three categories. The subcategories *virtuous educator*, *empathy and caring*, *mature person* and *life-long learner* (A1-A4) are the sub-categories in Virtuous Person. The category Skilful Practice included the subcategories (B1-B3) *mastery of practice*, *professional cooperation* and *social communication*. The third category was called Expert Knowledge. It consisted of the sub-categories (C1-C4) *knowledge of educational theories*, *mastery of subject matter*, *general knowledge* and *psychological knowledge*.

The RE student teachers emphasized similar things during the year. The largest sub-categories were *mastery of subject matter* (C2), *mastery of practice* (B1), *social communication* (B3) and *empathy and caring* (A2). As has been stated, the size of the sub-categories remained relatively stable. Among other things, the comparison shows some decline in *empathy and caring* (13.3% - 10.0%) and *social communication* (16.3% - 13.2%) while *mastery of subject matter* (21.4% - 23.8%) and *mastery of practice* (16.9% - 19.5%) was emphasized more at the end of the pedagogical year than at the beginning.

Differences at the beginning and at the end of pedagogical program in the quantitative data

The areas of competence

Next, the quantitative survey data were explored. Table 1 represents the means and standard deviations of the competence areas at the beginning (autumn) and at the end (spring) of their pedagogical studies. The RE student teachers appreciated both at the beginning and at the end the following: process knowledge ($M1 = 4.2$, $SD = .31$ – $M2 = 4.2$, $SD = .35$), situational knowledge ($M1 = 4.1$, $SD = .26$ – $M2 = 4.3$, $SD = .42$), content specific psychological knowledge ($M1 = 4.1$, $SD = .29$ – $M2 = 3.9$, $SD = .46$) and contextual knowledge ($M1 = 4.1$, $SD = .26$ – $M2 = 3.9$, $SD = .44$). Interestingly the standard deviation at the end of the studies was higher generally than at the beginning perhaps implying some differentiation of perceptions during the pedagogical training among RE student teachers.

Table 1: The means and standard deviations of the competence areas at the beginning and end of the pedagogical year (5-point Likert).

	Term					
	Autumn			Spring		
	Mean	N	Std Deviation	Mean	N	Std Deviation
Self-rated competence	1,810	79	,7351	2,673	78	,8290
Process_MEAN	3,58	79	,281	3,50	78	,440
Process_MEAN	4,21	79	,318	4,24	78	,351
People_MEAN	3,60	79	,370	3,61	78	,479
Situational_MEAN	4,11	79	,255	4,25	78	,419
EducationalPractice_MEAN	3,85	79	,308	3,82	78	,428
Control_MEAN	3,73	79	,269	3,59	78	,445
Theological_MEAN	3,55	79	,330	3,59	78	,488
Psychological_MEAN	4,09	79	,287	3,93	78	,456
Contextual_MEAN	4,09	79	,260	3,92	78	,441
TOTAL MEAN	3,87	79	,173	3,83	78	,268

The Mann-Whitney U-test that was used for comparing means revealed statistically significant differences in four areas of competence. The statistical analysis rejected the null hypothesis in these cases. The RE student teachers emphasised two competence areas more at the end of their pedagogical year than when they began their studies. These areas of competence were contextual knowledge ($U = 2.16, p. < .01$) and control knowledge ($U = 2.40, p. < .05$). In other words, the student teachers seemed to increasingly value a comprehensive understanding of religious education in schools and society and long-term planning in pedagogical practice.

Interestingly, the study replicated the pattern of decrease in intra-personal perceptions. The analysis showed a decrease in emphasis of situational knowledge ($U = 3.84, p. < .01$) and content specific psychological knowledge ($U = 2.45, p. < .05$) during the course of the year. This finding echoes the open-ended qualitative results reported above where the RE student teachers emphasised at the end of their pedagogical studies fewer elements referring to the category *Virtuous Personality* and to its sub-category *empathy and caring* along with the sub-category *psychological knowledge* from the *Expert Knowledge* - category than at the beginning of their studies (Figure 2).

The single items of competences and self-rated competence

The item-by-item t-test analysis give some insight into the patterns recognized earlier (tables displaying the item-by-item t-test are available from the author directly). In short, the student teachers of RE increasingly emphasised educational theories, personal professional reflection and some RE specific topics. There were 7 items with statistically significant differences between the beginning and the end of pedagogical education. There was a statistically significant increase in one item from propositional competence,

namely: '*prop_1_Knows the integral learning theories and concepts*' ($t(154) = 4.22, p < .001$). In other words, during the course of the year the relevance of educational theories had increased in the perceptions of the competent RE teacher. This change can be understood in terms of moving away from intra-personal qualities and perhaps also toward a more academic view of teaching in general.

In addition, a few items referring to personal professional reflection were emphasised more at the end of the year than at the beginning. The items in this group with a statistically significant difference that belonged to control knowledge were: *ctrl_1_'Elaborates constantly the foundations and assumptions of one's own teaching'* ($t(155) = 2.96, p < .05$) and: *ctrl_2_'Makes plans for the development of one's professional skills'* ($t(155) = 3.27, p < .01$). A reflective emphasis was also seen in an item from the knowledge of educational practice competence area with a statistically significant difference during the year called: *edpr_6_'Is aware of the curricular objectives while teaching'* ($t(155) = 2.05, p < .05$).

There were also three RE specific items that had a statistically significant difference so that the items scored higher at the end of the pedagogical year. The RE specific aims concentrated on the contextual elements and on the psychological elements connected to the RE pedagogical practice. There was a statistically significant increase in two items from the knowledge of context competence area: '*cnxt_6_Recognizes the unique character of the role of the RE teacher with regards to the rest of the school community*' ($t(155) = 2.33, p < .05$) and '*cnxt_2_Follows discussions in the media concerning RE*' ($t(149) = 2.60, p < .05$). The item from content specific psychological knowledge with a statistically significant difference was: '*psyc_3_Knows the developmental phases of religious thinking of children and youth*' ($t(153) = 3.45, p < .01$). The increase in the content specific psychological knowledge of the development of religious thinking is interesting in light of the general trend toward less emphasis on psychological and intra-personal elements in the perceptions of competence among RE student teachers.

There was a statistically significant difference for two items towards less emphasis during the year. Both of these items belonged to the competence called knowledge of educational practice and seemed to conflict with the ideal of life-long learning. These items were: '*edpr_1_Follows the educational discussion in praxis*' ($t(155) = -4.11, p < .001$) and a negative claim that was coded positively for the analysis: '*edpr_4_neg:'Is able to gain sufficient competence for one's career during education*' ($t(152) = -2.08, p < .05$). In short, the analysis implies that the student teachers became more convinced during the year that a competent RE teacher should become fully equipped for work during the pedagogical studies.

The student teachers viewed themselves as more competent RE teachers after their pedagogical studies. The Mann-Whitney U-test showed a statistically significant increase in perceived self-competence ($U = 4.77, p < .001$) from the beginning ($M = 1.8, SD = .74$) to the end ($M = 2.6, SD = .83$) of the pedagogical year among the RE teachers. While 72.7 per cent of the RE teacher students rated themselves to have low competence at the beginning (Likert points 1-2) at the end of their studies 80 per cent rated themselves as competent (Likert points 3-4) at the end of their studies. None of the students rated themselves as high in competence in either situation (5-point Likert).

Concluding remarks

This article describes the general quantitative changes in the perceptions of a competent RE teacher among student teachers during their one-year pedagogical program. The study showed the following trends among the students. First, when summarised the student teachers views leaned toward an educational professionalist emphasis. This included broadening their views towards a more comprehensive view of religious education in school and society and emphasising the importance of pedagogical practice and its long-term planning. Also, educational theories and the role of aims in pedagogical practice became more relevant during the course of the year. It is likely that the pedagogical year has offered the students a possibility to reflect on the peculiarities and challenges of RE teachers' professions especially when compared to their peers in other subjects. This can be connected to the fact that about one third of the pedagogical studies are completed in contact with student teachers of all other school subjects after

studying mostly in subject-specific groups in their faculties and that the pedagogical studies include content that focus on this issue.

Second, a pattern could be identified of a decrease in the intra-personal and psychological domains. Concretely, this element which refers to empathy and pro-social interaction, was emphasised to a lesser degree at the end of the pedagogical program than at the beginning. There are different ways to interpret this pattern. But a creative interpretation could be that the student teachers already in the beginning of the year viewed the intra-personal and student-centred elements as being very important but during the course of the year the demands of the practice either brings a more realist picture to the possibilities within the practice or shock related to the impossibility of meeting 'soft' ideals and aims in classroom practice. However, as psychology related to religion was emphasised more after the pedagogical year this is one area that merits more research.

Third, the students seemed to place less emphasis on life-long learning at the end of the pedagogical year than at the beginning with the exception of learning-in-action. The student teachers' evaluation of the program has constantly highlighted the valuing of teaching practice for its personal professional development during the pedagogical year (Hotti, 2012). It is possible that this line of thought continues because of the learning in-practice approach to professional development. As was stated, the item-by-item analysis showed that the student teachers also valued knowledge of educational theories more at the end of their pedagogical year. This implies that the student teachers thought that while it is important to know educational theories, the pedagogical year offers sufficient knowledge about them and the relevant professional learning after the pedagogical year is mainly concrete in-practice learning.

Fourth is the increase feeling of personal competence. The fact that the RE student teachers viewed themselves as more competent at the end of the pedagogical program implies that also other areas besides competences are processed during the year. Teacher education of RE teachers should include elements that go beyond competencies, but are relevant to their professional development. Scholars such as Korthagen (2004) have questioned whether it is even reasonable to describe the characteristics of a good teacher in terms of competencies as the profession and the practice of the teacher includes aspects such as beliefs, identity and mission that do not really translate into competencies (Korthagen, 2004). According to Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), teacher education seems to be the ideal starting point for enhancing an awareness of the need to develop a teacher's identity, but also a strong sense of the changes that will occur in that identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). As Beauchamp and Thomas suggest, the exploration of one's identity within teacher education programs may not always be intentional. In addition, identity may not always be an explicit part of the curriculum in the programs (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). In addition, to self-efficacy and perceptions of competence, future studies should include areas such as professionalism and vocation, and examine in more detail qualitative changes in our understanding of teacher competence.

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Advance Notice

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A reflection on teaching and learning in higher education for over thirty-five years

Graham Rossiter*

THE *REAL* vs THE *VIRTUAL* UNIVERSITY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHER: An interpretation of contrasts in participant engagement in learning between face-to-face and fully online teaching

Abstract

This article is about learning and teaching in postgraduate courses and professional development programs. Much has been written about how children and adolescents might learn in religion classes, and about how religious education might contribute to their spiritual and moral development. But there is not so much about religion teachers' own religious education and professional development, particularly from the perspective of those whose role is to educate them religiously (English, 2002). The article reflects on 35 years' experience in the field. It is like an educational 'reverse engineering' – putting what was judged to be best practice into theory. It will propose an 8 level framework of participant engagement in study of RE that has been found to be useful for interpreting differences in contexts, participants, and course structure. It results from insights and intuitions drawn from experience, and as yet is not related to the literature of adult learning. But it might become a starting point for research on issues related to the professional development of religion teachers. The focus is on educating professionals in religious education and not on their theological education; nevertheless, the pedagogical principles that are developed may well prove to be relevant to any tertiary postgraduate or professional development program. The estimates of teaching, engagement and learning proposed here may be contested; nevertheless, they raise issues that warrant further consideration in relation to policy and priorities in the development of postgraduate religious education programs.

Introduction

Australian Catholic University, like other universities, has extensive fully online unit offerings where there is a *virtual* lecturer/teacher. The students do not usually meet the lecturers or hear their voices; they may have no interaction with lecturers other than through receipt of assessment marks, rubric performance grids. and perhaps brief comments for some, but probably not all, of their written work (Note: this does include the use of a program like Adobe Connect where lecturers and students can see and hear each other in an online, classroom-like situation). Fully online units have complemented, and in some instances, replaced the traditional teaching of face-to-face units where by contrast there is a *real* teacher. Various reasons for having fully online units include:- flexibility, needs of students at distance, 'electronic' learning, economy of large over small class sizes, range of units available, profitability, casualisation of staff. This article develops a conceptual scheme in terms of *student engagement in learning* for two purposes: Firstly, to interpret the variety of ways in which students might engage in learning in postgraduate study; and secondly, to compare and contrast the profiles of engagement in learning in face-to-face and fully online

units. This sort of investigation is a prerequisite for interpreting the learning potential of different teaching formats and for informing priorities and policy in program development. Also it can be a useful starting point for empirical investigation of students' perceptions of postgraduate religious education.

A model of participant engagement in learning about RE at tertiary level

An eight level scheme has been devised for analysing the processes of teaching and student/participant engagement. Engagement, a construct now commonly regarded as a key element of learning (Churchill, 2011; Clouder, 2012), will in simple terms be considered as:- the mental activity of participants in thinking about the content being presented; it may include understanding the content or having difficulty in working out what it means, as well as some emotional response and some thoughts about how the content relates to professional experience; it may involve a new insight or it may confirm or challenge previously held ideas. Engagement may or may not be expressed in verbal comment or question, and/or in written notes or material for forthcoming assessment tasks. The expressions of engagement, in addition to their value for participants, can also be helpful for the lecturer as indicators of participants' understanding. The eight points of engagement explained below have been identified in the teaching of face-to-face units in postgraduate programs. The profile of engagement tends to be different in fully online units and in school-based professional development events.

Point of learning engagement	Brief description
E1	Initial presentation of content
E2	First active signal of comprehension
E3	Sustained class discussion and exchange of views
E4	Informal participant discussion
E5	Follow up study of unit materials
E6	Completing the assessment tasks: Written assignments, group projects, etc.
E7	Lecturer assessment feedback to students
E8	Active participant response to lecturer assessment feedback

Engagement E1. Initial presentation of content. This is where the participant makes first contact with the content. In the face-to-face situation this will be through the lecturer's verbal presentation, supplemented variously with written handouts, overhead transparencies, powerpoints and audiovisual and Internet resources.

It is not enough for a lecturer to 'cover the territory' in the content. Just re-cycling what they know about the topic from the vantage point of knowing more about it than the students is not adequate. Good lecturing will present a *wise 'take', slant or particular interpretation* of the content – with its own bias. This can help participants get an idea of the 'topography' of the content and issues from the lecturer's considered viewpoint. This helps them see more easily, clearly and vividly the main points in contrast with the lesser points. It gives them an accessible, ready-made 'handle' on the content, something that is very difficult for the new student to acquire just from reading, because they are not familiar enough with the academic literature to readily discern what is valuable and useful from what is not. Everything in a published academic article or book can appear infallible to them at this stage. In a sense they can vicariously use the lecturer's position on particular content to develop a coherent, evaluative, integrating perspective on the issues being considered. It is important for the lecturers to explain the reasons for their stance or bias so that eventually the participants can articulate their own professional view. And this can be consistent with, or in disagreement with that initially proposed as a pedagogical aid by the lecturer.

Using this approach to content can be helpful in proposing critical thinking as an important aim of postgraduate education. A lecturer without a well thought through take on content does not yet know the field well enough. And this handicaps the students because initially they can be overwhelmed by descriptions of content making it more difficult for them to develop their own critical interpretation.

This approach can not only alert participants to key points in content, including hints about what to look for, it can help protect them from spending too much time on writings and ideas that the lecturer thinks are problematic and not so useful. This approach can valuably enhance the efficiency of students' ongoing study of the academic literature and helps ensure that they are not swamped with too many ideas, some of which can be confusing; this helps them learn how to decide quickly what reading may be relevant for them and what may be irrelevant. But because the lecturer's slant has been explained to them, they are not being seduced or indoctrinated into it; and they will have to test its value for themselves. While they may be somewhat dependent on the lecturer's interpretation initially, as they grow in self-confidence and experience, they become more independent in their thinking. Experience and student feedback suggest that this is a helpful way of promoting critical, independent thinking about the content.

In the face-to-face class, the lecturer can make use of audiovisual presentations and the Internet in creative and effective ways. In addition, a unit website can be set up that follows up, and further resources participants' engagement with the unit. It has been found helpful to put audio and/or video files of the lectures on the site, together with all audiovisual presentations and handouts, as well as additional readings, so that participants can 'replay' the parts they want to; and this also provides a way of helping those who of necessity missed any of the program to catch up by listening to the lectures and submitting notes as evidence of their engagement with the content covered while they were absent.

Engagement E2. First active signal of comprehension. Participants can signal first comprehension of the ideas just presented in a number of ways. In their own minds, they can consciously agree or disagree with what has been presented, together with the thinking that supports their judgment. This can be expressed through a confirmatory or dissenting statement to the lecturer and class group – and at times through comments made under their breath or to the person beside them. Or it could be evident in a question of clarification, an example of professional experience, or in comments about related issues. This comprehension is also signalled in the writing or typing of notes.

Lecturers (and teachers generally) will commonly use participant comments and questions to gauge the level of immediate comprehension of their presentation. But more than this, they can be attuned to appraising comprehension in a relatively subconscious way. While continuing their presentation, almost by second nature, without consciously thinking about it, they will scan the expressions on the faces before them; they pick up quickly on nods and any other expressions of acceptance or the faintest signs of disagreement or puzzlement. Quickly they will sense if the group is interested and if things are going over well. This does not mean just noting group agreement, because they know that on some issues their presentation will be bound to be contrary to the views of some and challenging for others. Comprehension and understanding of the issues is the priority, and not that participants should agree with the lecturer's interpretation. Nevertheless, it is valuable for the lecturer to get some idea of whether the group accepts and agrees with what is being said, or whether they are contesting it.

Through this scanning, even if there is no student comment, a lecturer/teacher can often tell if their explanations are being understood or not. Their group comprehension 'antennae' are always working in the background. If they detect a problem, they can adjust to address it immediately. They can refer to other ideas and perhaps anecdotes to make their point more clear. They can ask the class questions like "Are you following this argument? Is that point clear? Does it require further explanation?" Another OHP might be introduced to the presentation to help clarify the argument – powerpoints are not so flexible. E2 sensitivity on the part of the lecturer can be important for adjusting and fine tuning the content and pedagogy during the course of a presentation.

Perhaps only a few participants will voice comments in E2, but others can still identify with or distance themselves from what is said. Students can participate in a type of group comprehension process. E2 is an active, cognitive step beyond their first contact with the content. This point of engagement can be very important, perhaps even having a *pivotal position in the participants' learning*.

E2 is not only crucial for the students/participants; it is *a key point of learning for the lecturers/presenters*. Indicators of positive group comprehension can confirm the value of proposed interpretations and explanations. If there is not good comprehension of their ideas, then they may have to 'go back to the drawing boards'. They are always being educated in the views that participants have of the issues; much is learned from their experience and ideas. This helps lecturers maintain relevance. It can keep them in touch with what the practitioners are thinking about the profession.

As noted later, the use of a virtual classroom program like *Adobe Connect* changes the engagement dynamics for a fully online unit because it allows students and teachers to see and hear each other. Currently, use of this approach is more the exception than the rule in fully online units, even though the situation is changing in various universities.

Engagement E3. Sustained class discussion and exchange of views. Either in a segment structured by the lecturer or as may emerge spontaneously from participant contributions, a higher level of sustained discussion and exchange of views between students and lecturer indicates a new kind of engagement. This sort of *creative forum* goes beyond the comprehension and clarification signalled in E2. This is where participants are extending, synthesising and applying their new learning, relating it to their professional experience, and commenting on issues and potential implications. At times there can be personal disclosures that are emotive.

Where this forum goes well, it helps develop a sense of group identity, cohesion and consensus on key purposes and issues in the content. Where it does not work out – E.g. where one or two dominate to the annoyance of the group, or where there is belligerence and defensiveness, it is better to conclude this segment quickly because it will add little to productive engagement and learning. And it could breed discontent in the group.

E3 is also a valuable point of ongoing learning for the lecturer. At times it may lead to adjustment of the content and pedagogy in the unit. Wisdom is needed to judge whether the direction in a forum is consistent with the content just covered, a new but valuable tangent, or a tangent that is not relevant to the unit and something of a waste of time. Skill is needed in managing and contributing to such forums creatively and productively; the lecturer needs to be sensitive to, and respectful of participants, and affirming of their contributions; but at the same time they have to be ready to intervene and cut short individuals who appear to be undermining or 'vandalising' the learning environment. Sometimes it only takes one or two discordant individuals to sabotage what would otherwise be an informative and enjoyable forum – and in turn this can have a negative influence on sense of group identity.

E3 is easier to manage with a small group. It becomes more difficult with a large group but can still work if the comments are good and the discussion is well managed. Participants can join in vicariously through identification with the comments of the few speakers.

Breaking up the class into discussion groups is said to be an opportunity for 'processing' content and for expressing feedback. It gives participants a more active role; and it is considered to provide a helpful break from the lecturing mode. But as long as there is sufficient scope for feedback and discussion in the main group, even if limited, it can be a waste of valuable time that could be better spent on teaching. It should not be a substitute for teaching or a 'pit stop' for the lecturer. Hence my preference is never or rarely to break up for group discussion for a long period followed by group feedback. If used, I would set a group task that should be an integral part of the lecture sequence. Much the same could be said about the strategy of getting the class to stop and read an article (Note: this is not the same as the useful pedagogy of 'walking' a group through printed handouts that have detailed information which can be followed up in the students' own time.)

Engagement E4. Informal participant discussion. Sometimes a significant learning from a unit crystallises in participants' minds as they leave the room for a break. More of engagement E3 can occur informally in conversations during breaks. Some may use this opportunity to follow up questions with the lecturer.

Participation in a face-to-face unit is a social event. People can make new friends and renew old acquaintances. It is an opportunity for both social and professional networking. Informal social as well as professional exchanges help build up group identity and sense of consensus. This can generate feelings of enjoyment of the experience. This is not unlike what Durkheim called 'collective effervescence', when he referred to the euphoria that can develop in an assembly that shared activities, values and rituals (Schilling & Mellor, 1998). This is evident when participants talk about how much they are enjoying the experience. The group good feelings help affirm people's professional commitments. It is encouraging to be with a group that is enthusiastic and interested in the profession. And in turn this can enhance the group's focus on the work in hand, as well as serve as a new level of confirmation/reinforcement of the value of what is being studied. Where a group is together for a number of units, for example in a diocesan cohort, E4 can be even further enhanced.

In fully online units, online forums, blogs, wikis and chats are intended to achieve something in the direction of E3 and E4, but they tend to be poor substitutes.

Engagement E5. Follow up study of unit materials. Usually during the delivery of face-to-face units, the focus is on content and issues, with minimal but relevant attention to explaining the assessment tasks. After the teaching segments are completed, the students then start to address the assessment tasks. Here there is a new point of engagement in following up the lecture notes, handouts and provided readings, as well as new research (through library and or Internet), all directed specifically towards completing the assessment tasks. This is where a well-stocked unit website can be helpful in resourcing the students' study.

Because the lecturer knows that the group has experienced all the content in E1, the assessment tasks do not have to cover *all* the unit content, as long as unit objectives are met. The assessment questions can address issues raised in the unit that warrant further study. This question is also pertinent for assessment in fully online units where the tasks may sometimes have an additional role in trying to make sure that participants actually cover all the unit content.

Engagement E6. Completing the assessment tasks: Written assignments, group projects, etc. This is a point in the whole postgraduate educative process to which students devote a lot of attention and energy – it is like the focal point of their learning for the unit. They have to express themselves, demonstrating their understandings of content and issues, their capacities for critical interpretation and evaluation, and their structuring of sustained arguments. And this has to be done within the academic conventions of indicating evidence and references.

It is paramount that the *assessment process should be an important, integral part of the student's learning*. Ensuring that assessment questions are oriented to prompt further learning is therefore crucial. Above all, the assessment needs to be perceived as a valuable opportunity for students to consolidate, organise, synthesise, and integrate what they have learnt in their study of this unit, helping them get a wiser, panoramic perspective on the topic. Lecturers need to emphasise these constructive purposes in the assessment tasks. But the effectiveness of learning through assessment tasks also needs another essential element – *systematic, relevant and helpful feedback from the lecturer*, as considered in E7.

Engagement E7. Lecturer assessment feedback to students. After the move away from norm referenced to criterion referenced assessment, the time-consuming development of complex assessment rubrics has become more prominent. The rubrics help identify the intended outcomes in terms of multi-level performance indicators. In the assessment of student work, they help profile student achievement across a grid of performance indicators (E.g. a 16 x 6 table). Student comments to me about their experience of this aspect of assessment have not been favourable. While the purposes and values of extensive assessment rubrics may be explained, and while they may help students become more aware of desired levels of performance, they are not always regarded as very helpful when it comes to interpreting what an assessment report means and in suggesting how they might improve their work next time. Some have

likened their 'rubric report' to getting medical results from multiple health scans without any wise interpretation of what it all means by their doctor. Hence they may be inclined to see the emphasis on rubrics as an exercise in useless complexity; it tends to be more judgmental than constructively diagnostic – the latter quality in feedback seems to be essential if students are to derive full learning potential both from lecturer comments as well as from the assessment task as a whole.

Increasingly, it appears to me that the detailed assessment rubric in schools as well as universities is being regarded by teachers, students and parents more as a bureaucratic instrument of centralised quality control than one that is geared to enhance student learning. Coupled with the emphasis on assessment rubrics and moderation, is a university pressure on lecturers to spend less time on assessment feedback because of larger workloads and increased productivity requirements. This combination of factors tends to undermine the actual quality of lecturer assessment feedback with negative consequences for student learning. Moderation of the results of assessment is important for checking grading levels between lecturers; the relationship between work standard and grades allocated needs to be consistent across postgraduate units. But the moderation usually never looks at or evaluates the written responses that lecturers give to their students.

My preferred approach is not to make the rubric the main focus of assessment feedback; to do this can tend to sabotage further student learning from their lecturer's feedback. I find a more helpful and productive approach in providing a *diagnostic, conversational feedback that is an ongoing and integral part of the students' learning process*. It draws attention to specific aspects of their work, depending on its quality. Comments are focused directly and constructively on the main points of strength and weakness in their work. The following summarises characteristics of assessment feedback that have usefully informed what is said to students, helping make the assessment process consistent with, and subservient to the educational purposes of the unit.

- **Diagnostic.** Lecturer assessment feedback needs to be focused and constructive, and not vague and general. The aim is to 'diagnose' student contributions, confirming valuable insights, identifying both strengths and weaknesses in their arguments. There may be suggestions about further issues and implications that could be considered. Problems or inconsistencies in thinking and interpretation of material are pointed out and at times explained, showing what an example of critical thinking on this topic looks like. This approach encourages students to make their own 'professional diagnosis' of educational situations, issues and problems.
- **Affirming.** Whatever can be affirmed in students' work should be. Affirmation and confirmation of their ideas can be very important in helping them measure progress in both their learning and writing. Lack of self confidence is a perennial problem with students.
- **Learning.** Comments are tailored to the learning needs of the student that tend to show up in their work. For example, in some instances they will be directed towards improving the student's writing – grammar, sentence and paragraph construction, topic sentences, developing an argument, making use of headings. At other times, comments will explain a point that the student has misunderstood. Follow up positive responses can be made to promising student insights. Above all, the assessment feedback should confirm and extend the participants' learning.
- **Interactive and dialogical.** Where lecturer comments are offered in the vein of 'continuing the conversation', many students come to experience the assessment process as interactive. Some students who may be new to postgraduate study or lacking in confidence take up the option of submitting a draft essay plan for review, to see if 'they are on the right track'; not many do this; but for those who do, it is helpful for their progress and particularly for their growing self-confidence. A small number phone in for help with problems they are experiencing with the assessment tasks; this is time saving and usually solves problems more quickly than through email communication. Others appreciate the constructive feedback and new ideas for further consideration; this is particularly evident when students send further communication as a response to the feedback they were given on their assignments.
- **Extending.** Feedback often *extends* participants' knowledge and understanding of the topic.

- **Criterion referenced.** While ultimately a numerical grade for a student's assessment task is given, the interactive emphasis in the assessment feedback that is concerned with trying to achieve the *stated purposes* of the unit helps students come away with a more balanced appreciation of the whole process. They have experienced that it is more about their learning than with putting them in a particular grade box.
- **Critical.** The assessment feedback needs to be seen by students not as mere criticism of their work. It has to be an informed critique that encourages them to become more critical and evaluative in their thinking about the topics under consideration. It can help them become more discerning, not only about the topic, but also about their own writing, arguments and expression.
- **Creativity.** Assessment tasks are intended to encourage creativity in thinking and in expression. And so should lecturer feedback – especially in applauding where this has been demonstrated. Even to respond to insights that are interesting and useful can be helpful. Occasionally, a novel or creative direction might be suggested for the student to take.
- **Engagement.** Through all of the above aspects in feedback, hopefully the assessment process can be made engaging for the students – something they can value and look forward to rather than dread. Both completing the assessment task and the lecturer feedback should try to *engage* the student further with the content and issues in the unit. That means seriously addressing, thinking about and evaluating what has been put before them as content, and discussing this in an insightful way. Making the *study relevant to professional practice is a valuable element in this engagement*. But participants need to be alerted to the situation where just 'describing your own experience' is not really engaging with the content because it can be a shallow substitute for engagement because a lot of assessment time and space can be wasted describing experience that is not relevant to a serious evaluation of the issues raised in the content. Reference to one's own experience needs to be an integral part of serious engagement with unit content; such engagement will probably give the best insights and the most usable and practical of implications.
- **Pastoral.** What is often a key element in the teacher-participant relationship, as well as in participants' learning, is attentiveness to what could be called their 'personal wellbeing context'. Some will seek consideration from the lecturer because of stress and/or trauma in their professional and/or personal lives. This may often take the form of a time extension; giving them a longer, less stressful, less anxious period for completing assessment usually results in better and more extensive learning, as well as being beneficial personally. Also at times, components of alternative assessment, like oral assessment, can be used.

Needless to say, E7 is a key point for lecturer learning, showing what the students appear to have learned from the unit. This is useful for ongoing revision of the ideas and materials that will be used. It is also a valuable window into the thinking of contemporary practitioners.

Many unsolicited emails from students after the completion of units testify to the importance they associated with systematic, constructive assessment feedback. It is the most common recurring theme in such emails. This was taken as affirmation of the value of the approach considered above, as well as confirmation that the overall assessment process can be one of the key areas of engagement and learning in a postgraduate unit.

A relatively unacknowledged problem in university assessment has been the 'farming out' of student assignments to outside personnel who act as *markers* – a term that does not incline one to think of constructive and educative feedback to promote student learning. This practice appears to be another result of excessive lecturer workloads which are then said to be alleviated by 'getting them out of marking'. It seems to be removing lecturer's responsibility for a fundamentally important part of student learning; it tends to inhibit the professional relationship that should develop between lecturer and students; it cuts off lecturers from contributing to student engagement and learning through E7 and leaves them with little direct insight into how their students are completing E6 – that is, how they are comprehending the content and otherwise achieving the purposes set for the unit.

Engagement E8. Active participant response to lecturer assessment feedback. Sometimes the lecturer assessment feedback to students is not the final chapter in the ongoing learning conversation. On their own initiative, some students will communicate further, talking about the issues that were raised in the appraisal of their work. This is like a further, optional extension of the engagement in E7. How much further this conversation about topics and issues goes depends on the students. As a response, the lecturer may send them further reading or links that may be relevant. Sometimes it is the students who send in documents, segments of writing, links, downloaded presentations and even song performances that they think the lecturer may find interesting and useful. Some pertinent and useful materials have been acquired in this way.

A number of students send an appreciative email when they have completed the unit. This is like a 'signing off', confirming that they have found the work insightful and helpful for them professionally. This is a positive evaluation of their learning, and an affirmation of the tracks taken in the unit presentations and assessment.

School-based professional development programs in Religious Education

While the main focus of this paper is postgraduate university courses, it is pertinent to consider how the engagement scheme may apply to learning in school professional development programs. The one-off, school-based or diocesan professional development program is different from the postgraduate unit in that it may have E1 to E4, but usually nothing beyond that. Preparation of a PD website that has audio/video files of the talks, similar to resource websites for postgraduate units (as noted earlier), can help consolidate and extend learning from the day, or at least provide resources that may be used by teachers later. But the extent to which such sites are used has not been determined. Usually there is some evaluation sheet completed that informs the school authorities and the lecturer how the program has been perceived by the participants.

PD events for religion teachers are similar to postgraduate RE units in that they have the same clientele. However, when there is an event on say Catholic identity and mission of the school, or on young people's spirituality, there is a significant difference when it includes the whole school staff and where the majority of teachers present may not be involved in religious education. This can be problematic from their perspective – they may feel that their contribution to the school lies mainly in their secular subject teaching, and apart from agreeing to support the Catholic ethos of the school, they can feel little affinity with the school's religious mission. They are often supportive, but sometimes individuals will sit at the edge of the group registering disinterest. More rarely they will be mildly disapproving and disruptive.

In this whole staff group situation, it has been found helpful to give special attention to the situation of the non religion teachers. For example: It can be pointed out that Catholic schools are not exclusively Church institutions (like seminaries and theological colleges), even though much of the discourse about Catholic identity seems to presume this; they are semi-state, publicly funded schools where there is accountability to the wider Australian community to show how they contribute to the common good, as well as to the 'handing on' of the Catholic tradition (Rossiter, 2010, p. 16). This viewpoint also makes sense in Catholic schools where the proportion of students and staff who are Catholic is not high – E.g. in some instances it is below 50%. An appeal can be made to the agreed national aims for Australian schools (Australian Education Council and MYCEETYA, 1989, 1999, 2008) that include the promotion of young people's spiritual and moral development as a "responsibility of *all* teachers across *all* curriculum areas" (Metherell, NSW Government, 1990, p.2). No matter what the religious affiliation of staff, all have a professional responsibility to understand how the whole school organisation and curriculum can contribute to young people's spiritual and moral development. This responsibility would apply to staff whether they were in any type of religious school – Catholic, Anglican, Jewish, Greek Orthodox, Muslim etc. Appealing to this professional responsibility has been a good way of engaging staff who are not involved in religious education.

Contrasting the patterns of student engagement in fully online units and face-to-face units

This section begins with the presumption that the face-to-face (FTF) teaching/learning mode is superior to that of a fully online unit because it has maximised the points of learning engagement for students. By contrasting the two formats in the light of the 8 point engagement framework, some of the inherent difficulties faced in fully online units can be better identified and appreciated; and this analysis can in turn inform efforts to maximise their value for students. This discussion can also have a bearing on policy as to whether the priority should be on increasing FTF unit offerings or fully online units.

For lecturers delivering an FTF unit, they know from E1 – E4 that their students have at least heard and engaged with all the content in some initial and basic way; and they can get a fair idea of how it is being comprehended; and they can adjust their presentations and resources if needed in the light of E2 and E3. They know that the students will then come at the content again in E5 and E6 – like a second major incursion as they study and complete the assessment tasks. Also, as noted earlier, because the lecturers know that students have covered all the content in E1, the assessment tasks do not need to cover all unit content; they can follow up particular issues with some flexibility.

By contrast with school classrooms and face-to-face university units, where creative use of the internet can be integrated into teaching and learning, the common version of the fully online postgraduate unit has less scope for multiple forms of student engagement. As noted in the introduction, here, the student will probably never meet the lecturer, never hear his/her voice, or talk with him/her on the phone. How a lecturer-student professional relationship builds up, if at all, will be different. This is not the same as a unit where there is some FTF teaching and some online work. The students' only interaction with the lecturer may be through what they write specifically for assessment tasks – and in some cases they may not get feedback on all their written contributions. However, in fully online units that make use of the *Adobe Connect* program (or the like), the situation is different – the teacher is 'less virtual'. And this makes up a new category of online unit which is like a classroom where students can see and hear the lecturer and they in turn can be seen and heard; this changes the pattern of engagement. While no consideration will be given here to this option, it is judged that this format would be superior in learning potential to the version of fully online unit described earlier.

In the fully online unit, initial engagement with content in E1 may be exclusively through reading. A number of online units, like some predecessor print-based, distance education materials, look like a large selection of academic articles or book chapters aggregated together with minimal connecting links and some focus questions. Better structured units have a systematic and coherent story-line that runs across all the unit modules, carrying most of the content, with links to some supporting resources/readings. Audio and video files, together with PowerPoint presentations can give variety to the content presentation so that the student is not left with just reading 'large slabs of text'.

What is often a key learning ingredient that is missing in the fully online unit is the particular perspective or take of the lecturer discussed above in E1. Without this facilitating and guiding perspective, students can find it difficult to negotiate a large new range of academic articles that do not seem to hang together; they cannot initially see the connections. They have no sense of any 'topography' to the content; what they need most here is the helpful perspective of a lecturer to get the mass of material into manageable and comprehensible perspective. A lecturer's organic take on content is not as easy to inject into an online unit as it is in an FTF one where ongoing comments can repeatedly put new content and readings into perspective. Including introductory audio files at appropriate points across the online unit modules can help provide this lecturer perspective.

By contrast with the two major differentiated incursions into content in the FTF unit, the fully online student may end up with only one – a conflation of E1, E5 and E6, where the student works on content only once while preparing assessment tasks. The natural FTF sequence of 'covering the content and then addressing the assessment tasks' will not necessarily be followed. Here, the assessment task requirements may dominate the student's online study from the start, because the student can be focused strongly and

exclusively on only doing work that contributes to 'marks'. Not all online students are like this; but not to acknowledge the potential problem would be unrealistic. If parts of unit content are not assessable, then there is a natural temptation for the participants – busy educators – to skip them. This becomes a concern for lecturers when they realise that they have no guarantee that their online students will even read all the content; this also raises concerns about the educative value of a unit exclusively in this format and about whether or not most students will satisfy its knowledge/understanding objectives, because the usual form of assessment questions will not be able to verify this.

In trying to address these issues, the online lecturer may see a need to review the role of assessment tasks, especially since this is the only point of contact they may have with students. For example, if it is acknowledged that students will be naturally reluctant to attend to any of the unit materials that will not be assessed, then the assessment tasks may have to take on an additional role of trying to ensure that the students do actually cover all the content – at least once. This means having assessment that covers all the modules in the unit. This could take the form of requiring a short written response to each module (say around 800 words) with the assessment questions phrased in such a way that a participant could not answer them adequately without reading most if not all of the content of the modules. In effect, this would segment the assessment tasks, moving away from reliance on the traditional sizeable academic essays.

There appears to me to be no substantial reason why some units should not have 9 or so short assessment tasks in place of longer essays. Academic standards and critical thinking are apparently not compromised when this is done. The better short responses demonstrate the same sort of critical evaluative thinking as do the better long essays. This approach is like embedding a level of study 'insurance policy' within shorter assessment tasks to help ensure that students engage with all the content in the online unit modules – a priority worth having; but it is argued that this can be done without skewing the assessment in an undesirable direction. In addition, this approach can help make study of an online unit more flexible, module by module; and flexibility is appropriate for fully online delivery.

In some online units, lecturers have students write journal entries (like a personal blog or solo wiki) to function like E2, and many if not all of these do not count for assessment purposes. Postgraduate students tend to regard such exercises as a waste of time; understandably, they are reluctant to write contributions that no one is going to read and for which there is no assessment component. Sometimes, under the same workload pressures as noted earlier in section E7, lecturers may cut back on the demands of reading student work by requiring that they submit only what they consider their best two journal entries to be counted for assessment. But this is not good motivation for completing the other, non-assessable journal entries. Also there is a problem if the journalling is more a note on feelings and impressions rather than the critical thinking and evaluation proposed for short responses in the previous paragraph.

Conclusion

This reflection on experience with teaching and learning processes in postgraduate and professional development programs has provided a way of interpreting how differences in context and pedagogy can affect student learning, particularly in contrasts between face-to-face teaching and fully online units. In turn, this can inform further debate about the structuring, teaching and assessment of units, and empirical research, as well as policy and priorities about unit development and availability – all directed towards developing programs in both formats that are as helpful and as relevant as possible in promoting postgraduate professional development in Australian Catholic religious education.

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BOOK REVIEWS



Inna Semetsky. (2011). *Re-symbolization of the self: Human development and Tarot hermeneutic*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers. ISBN 978-94-6091-4195-9000 189 pp. Paperback.

The author, Dr. Inna Semetsky, a Research Academic, from The University of Newcastle, Australia offers readers transformative views on human development and understanding self. Drawing on her research on Tarot, Dr Semetsky has skillfully explored the life stories and journeys of 15 people. Her specific focus is centered on understanding individual human experiences from the unconscious and the importance of re-symbolizing views on self.

Convincing arguments on the need for this book: specifically, the ways that cross disciplinary approaches within Education, Counseling and Psychology can ground understanding of human development are put forth from the first chapter. Dr Semetsky's theoretical influences are predominantly derived from Jungian Psychology and the philosophers, Deluze, Noddings and Buber. Deluze's views on the unconscious are most significant to her theoretical position and the practical application of Tarot.

Following the introductory chapter, the author in next five chapters, has put forward each theoretical position, consciously advocating for the importance of their inclusion towards understanding human development, self-education and Tarot hermeneutic. This has culminated in revealing this importance of the symbolization of Tarot in chapter 7, and subsequently, the emergent re-symbolization of self evidenced by the participant stories 'lives tell' in chapter 8. Chapter 8 elucidated within each story, the importance of understanding the theoretical and practical aspects of the Tarot hermeneutic and as such, what was previously known in self, and embedded soul and spiritual development. Following the human revelations within each story, Dr Semetsky addressed the importance of cultural pedagogy and finally argued for readers to consider the contribution that Tarot has towards a new science.

As the focus of her book is on human development and the interwoven education and therapy, the main audience undoubtedly will be scholars and students in education and health and human sciences. This book will challenge traditional views of scholars and students alike as 'the rigid boundaries between ... disciplines of education and therapy become blurred: both are orientated to creating meanings for our experience that includes the realm of the yet unknown and unconscious' (p. 4).

There are several strengths within this book. The theoretical explication of cross- disciplinary views and its relevance to practical application of Tarot needs to be particularly highlighted. Drawing on the psychological and philosophical theoretical underpinnings, the author has strongly grounded her arguments for the reconstruction of self and spiritual views.

Because of the theoretical/practical nexus, introduced with the notion of Bricolage in chapter 2, Tarot now can be perceived as a human development tool and/or practice of considerable value in our understanding of self. I would concur with the author when she claimed that this book demonstrates that the practice of 'Tarot, as an existing, albeit marginal, cultural practice traditionally located at the "low" end of popular

culture, plays a significant role in the process of self-formation construction of human subjectivity, thus the concept of "re-symbolization" of the Self ' (p.5.). In this regard, its strength lies within offering the process of Tarot hermeneutics as transformative in understanding self and altering previously held beliefs on the possibilities for human development. Therefore, this book has great relevance for self-growth, understanding self and more broadly, spirituality.

Some readers may perceive there to be shortcomings. For instance, Tarot is often marginalized in both academic and popular cultures therefore this book may be inaccurately perceived as having limited value to readers. Yet, the strong and sustained epistemological and ontological positions argued by the author strengthen and re-frame previously held views on Tarot as just a self-development tool.

Furthermore, while this book does not explicitly address religion, scholars and students in religious studies need to aware this does make an enormous contribution to views and understandings of spirituality. It is unquestionable that religious studies are contingent on gaining a comprehensive understanding of the many facets of spiritual development for individuals.

In summary, this book is extremely well written and offers a refreshing approach to our knowledge of human development, psychology and education. I would strongly urge scholars interested in self, health and human sciences, religious studies and education to read this book as it contributes to the broader scholarship in these areas.

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Christian Smith with Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson and Patricia Snell Herzog. (2011). *Lost in Transition: The dark side of emerging adulthood*. New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978 0 19 982802 9, 284 pages.

I am an unabashed fan of the work of Professor Christian Smith, who has recently moved to the University of Notre Dame, and can confess a certain sense of excitement when a new book of his appears. This work does not disappoint and is an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the views, beliefs, practices and culture of young adults. To be sure it is an examination of emerging adults in the United States but I think the conclusions that the authors draw also have relevance for more secular countries. Smith's work, over many years, exemplifies the best in the American approach to the sociology of religion with its strong empirical emphasis. This study is based primarily on 230 in-depth interviews drawn from the third wave of data collection deriving from a national investigation that began in 2001. He couples this with a strong conceptual framework and an acknowledgment that the best sociology lays in not just presenting data but in providing a nuanced analysis of this. In this regard Smith sits comfortably within the European sociological tradition. His current work explores an emerging construct in the literature, that of, the emerging adult. This is the population cohort between high school and the completion of graduate studies and commencement of, if not career orientated employment then more long term work. The exact parameters of emerging adulthood are a topic of some debate but I think the concept is well grounded without the need to be rigorously defined in terms of years. The usual definition of emerging adulthood is 18 to 29 but Smith and his colleagues base their study on 18-23 year olds only.

In his previous work, *Souls in Transition* Smith and Snell have described many emerging adults as having "graduated" from religion in the sense that they have gained from it all that they need and have now moved on, not in a definitive sense but more in keeping with a loosening of religious affiliation. This graduation from religion is part of a movement into adulthood and as such is the subject of this current book, the title of which is quite indicative: *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. Smith and his colleagues here contribute to a growing body of literature that points to emerging adulthood as a difficult time, with significant challenges. For many young adults this is a period where they receive little

support from the wider culture. This point has also been powerfully made by such eminent thinkers as Robert Wuthnow. Amongst the key challenges facing younger people are a general disengagement with society, confused reasoning, especially on moral issues, habitual intoxication, materialistic and unrealizable life goals and damaging sexual experiences that are soon regretted.

In particular, the researchers noted that a feature of emerging adulthood is the superficial and shallow moral reasoning that many in this cohort exhibit. This is not a characteristic of young people or due to a failing on their part but is rather seen as a condition that the wider culture nurtures. Such cultural pressure, however, leaves young people in a very vulnerable position as they are not well equipped to deal with the problems of adult life. The authors noted; “Emerging adults resort to a variety of explanations about what makes anything good or bad, wrong or right – many of which reflect weak thinking and provide a fragile basis upon which to build robust moral positions of thought and living”, (p.60). There is food for thought here for religious educators. Much is often made of the impact that religious education in schools has on the values of students. Smith’s work points out that the values and associated moral reasoning of many young Americans is poorly grounded. They go on to point out:

We are letting them down, sending many, and probably most, of them out into the world without the basic intellectual tools and most basic formation needed to think and express even the most elementary of reasonably defensible moral thoughts and claims. And that itself, we think, is morally wrong. (p.61).

The quote above makes a very strong point about the need, or rather the obligation, of the great institutions of society to do a much better job in forming young people. This would include, of course, schools be they denominational or secular public schools. A particular question is, what role should schools play in overcoming the moral and ethical underdevelopment that Smith and his colleagues have exposed? For religiously affiliated schools the comments made by Smith in other recent work seem to be pertinent. Smith has noted, in his view, a remarkable reluctance of religious groups in contemporary culture to teach young people about what it means to be a member of that tradition. In the public domain how do educational institutions address moral and ethical education in their curriculums? This is a question well worth exploring.

This book is highly recommended.

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Rachel Hackenberg. (2011). *Writing to God: Kids edition*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press. ISBN 978 1 61261 107, 76 pages

This is a follow up, written for children, to the author’s well known *Writing to God*. The goal of the book is to encourage children to enter into and sustain a relationship with God through prayer. In a welcomed child focus, the author seeks to encourage children to write to God in their own words, to express their feelings and, importantly, to realize that their questions are valuable. Implicit in Hackenberg’s approach is the well-founded notion that children have a natural openness to the transcendent and this should not be hampered by too much emphasis on formality or adult constructs. She encourages children to be themselves and to be aware that God loves them despite their imperfections, faulty expression and whether or not they are happy or sad, good or bad or lonely or engaged. See here the assumption that prayer – writing to God – is not something that needs to be imposed on children. Rather, it emerges and needs to be nurtured and acknowledged.

The methodology the author adopts is simple, practical and almost universal. By using their imaginations, a writing implement and some paper children are encouraged, in their own words, to share with God thoughts, feelings, frustrations and hopes. To be sure the book assumes basic literacy but the emphasis here is not on the quality of writing but rather the thoughts and feelings behind it. The book is centred on a number of ideas that facilitate communication with God. Idea 5 for instance is on writing to God about ordinary things in your life. Under this heading, Hackenburg provides a series of prompts, such as telling God about a journey that you have been on, or what is going on in school or what you feel like when you wake up in the morning. Other idea clusters are: writing prayers that use the five senses; writing to God about your feelings; writing prayers using Bible verses; writing to God about nature; trying new words and picture for God and, finally, saying thank you. The style of writing is very accessible and child friendly. A typical example is one of the ideas about expressing your feelings to God. It begins with a simple, brief account of telling God about something you shouldn't have done or something you should have done but didn't do. It suggests starting with, "I'm sorry". This is then followed by a short narrative about being sorry for getting angry with a friend and this is followed by an "I'm sorry prayer" from a 7 year old named Logan.

A very welcome feature of the book is the lay out. Its engagingly illustrations, in particular, certainly add to its overall child friendly feel. The book could be used in a variety of catechetical setting from elementary schools to parish based educational programs. Those working in these settings will find this a very practical and helpful resource.

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Articles on the following are welcomed:

- religious education in various contexts;
- the religious needs of young adults in the immediate post-school period;
- various models of faith communities in which evangelisation and catechesis may take place besides the Catholic school;
- religious education of children and adolescents;
- continuing religious education for adults;
- family ministry and youth ministry.

Submissions

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- Any tables should be attached separately but there should be a clear indication in the manuscript as to their placement within the article.
- A **COVER** sheet should contain the title of the paper, author's name, brief biographical details, institutional affiliation, postal address, phone, fax, email address, where available.
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