Variation in students' experience of tutorials in religious education at Australian Catholic University

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Abstract

Purpose: To explore the variation that occurred in pre-service teachers' understanding and experiences of tutorials in religious education at Australian Catholic University.

Methodology: A convenient sample of ten 4th Year Bachelor of Education (Primary) pre-service teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide and asked about their understanding of the role of the tutorial in religious education.

Analysis: Phenomenographic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts of these ten pre-service teachers.

Findings: The analysis revealed five qualitatively different ways of understanding the role of the tutorial in religious education. These conceptions were related to each other by way of a hierarchical inclusive relationship. They were found to pertain to different student understandings in terms of the relationship of the tutorial to the lecture, the work undertaken in preparation for the tutorial, discerning implications of the tutorial content and activities for teaching in the classroom context, and the quality of learning expected to take place within the tutorial itself. A tentative implication for learning and teaching includes an evaluation of the ways in which tutorials in religious education are structured to include a greater focus on problem-based learning and critical thinking.

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While the scholarship of learning and teaching has contributed to improved learning outcomes for students in higher education generally (Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 2003), there appears to be a paucity of formal research conducted at the author's own institution, Australian Catholic University (ACU) in terms of the impact of tutorials on student learning, and of the perceptions students themselves have of the role of the tutorial in their own learning. Given that tutorials form a substantial component of learning and teaching in undergraduate courses at ACU, knowledge on the part of academic staff in relation to students' perceptions and understandings of the role and purpose of tutorials may lead to approaches being offered in which the learning of students can be improved.

The purpose of the small exploratory study reported in this paper was to investigate the variation which occurred in some Bachelor of Education (Primary) students' (referred to hereafter as pre-service teachers) understandings and experiences of tutorials in the discipline of religious education at ACU. The findings contribute to a growing body of literature on students' conceptions of their academic tasks, which suggests that these conceptions are related to the quality of their own learning (see for example, Ashwin 2005; Duarte 2007).

In the study reported in this paper, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are pre-service teachers' experiences of tutorials in religious education?
2. What do pre-service teachers understand to be the purpose of tutorials in religious education?
3. How do/do not pre-service teachers prepare for tutorials in religious education?

The focus was on ten pre-service teachers in their final year of the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course enrolled in EDRE 102 Religious Education 2 on the Melbourne campus of ACU (there are campuses also at Ballarat, Sydney, Canberra and Brisbane). This unit involves 3 hours of face-to-face contact – a one hour lecture, followed by a two hour tutorial, and is one of a sequence of units which prepares and accredits students to teach religious education in Catholic primary schools.

Tutorials at ACU

Since the term "tutorial" is used in slightly different ways within the higher education system, it is necessary to briefly describe the understanding of this term and its usage at ACU. There are three particular factors which are pertinent here. Firstly, tutorials at ACU are a part of a learning system which, at undergraduate level, consists of a lecture (one or two hours in length) generally delivered to the entire cohort of students enrolled in a particular subject, or unit, followed by smaller seminar-type groups, consisting generally of between 25 and 30 students (although in some circumstances up to 35 students), with a duration of between one and two hours. At ACU, these groups are known as tutorials. In the Bachelor of Education (Primary) program at ACU, full time pre-service teachers enroll in up to 4 units, each semester. Each of these would usually consist of both a lecture and tutorial in each week of the semester.

The second factor which is of relevance is the size of the tutorial groups at ACU. Unlike some universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge in England, where a tutorial is considered to consist generally of one student meeting with one tutor, that is, a "one-on-one" situation, tutorials at ACU generally comprise one tutor working with up to 30 (or sometimes more) students. Although common in much of Australian higher education, this conception differs greatly from practice in higher education elsewhere, where workshops with groups of students are known as seminars.

The third factor of significance concerns the expectation of preparation required for the tutorial. At universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, students would typically spend between 11 and 14 hours in preparation for a tutorial (Ashwin 2005). ACU does not prescribe a specific requirement for tutorial preparation. The expectation is that pre-service teachers should anticipate 150 hours of study for each entire unit, which includes class attendance (including lectures and tutorials), readings, engaging with online materials, and assignment preparation.

Therefore, at ACU, a tutorial is considered as a part of the learning system in undergraduate programs, usually consisting of smaller groups of up to 30 students who meet together weekly with a tutor after the lecture has been delivered to the larger cohort of students enrolled in a particular unit. (Due to logistical constraints, there are instances in which tutorials are not always timetabled to occur after the lecture. Academic staff then manipulates the imposed timetable so that students engage with the lecture topic from the previous week.) The expectation is that students will prepare for their tutorials as a part of the 150 hours of study to be anticipated for the entire unit.

Select literature review

Students' conceptions of learning

There are a number of studies which have investigated academic staffs' perceptions and conceptions on student learning in higher education (see for example, Ashwin, 2006; Prosser, Martin, Trigwell, Ramsden & Luekenhausen, 2005; Stes, Gijbels & Van Petegem, 2008). There are also an increasing number of studies which have explored the ways in which students themselves understand various aspects of learning in higher education (Ginns, Prosser & Barrie, 2007; Robertson & Blacker, 2006; Phillips & Bond, 2004; Collier & Morgan, 2008). However, there are very few which explicitly explore students' perceptions of the role of the tutorial in their learning.

In terms of understandings of learning generally, Marton and Saljo (1976) identified two opposing conceptions of learning commonly held by students. The first is reproductive or quantitative learning, in which the activity of learning is viewed as a process of accumulating information in order to reproduce or apply it. The second is comprehensive or qualitative learning, whereby learning is viewed as pertaining to comprehension and the interpretation of meaning.

More recently, Duarte (2007) investigated Portuguese students' conceptions of learning and their approaches to learning. Although much of this investigation replicated many conceptions of learning which have been previously described in the body of literature exploring this field, for example Marton and Saljo's (1976) opposing conceptions of learning, and Biggs' (2003) notion of surface and deep approaches to learning, Duarte reported some new variants of known conceptions. These included learning occurring through exploratory practice, and motivation. As well, Duarte reported an apparently new conception described as learning as understanding and application. While Duarte's investigation offered valuable insight for the research reported in this paper, particularly the variant on known conceptions, the focus was on conceptions of learning generally, rather than on students' conceptions of the role of the tutorial in their learning.

Some studies have investigated higher education students' engagement and participation in classes. Through the development of a Student Engagement Survey, Ahlfeldt, Mehta and Sellnow (2005) found that students engaged in higher levels of thinking in classes in which there were fewer students, and in which problem-based learning methodologies were used with students. However, Ahlfeldt, Mehta and Sellnow's study suggests that students can best be engaged in their learning only when class sizes are small and when problem-based methodologies are employed. The growing reality in many higher educational institutions, including ACU, is that class sizes are of necessity increasing, rather than decreasing. Also, questions need to be raised in terms of problem-based learning approaches. While Ahlfeldt, Mehta and Sellnow's study demonstrates the usefulness of such methodologies, other approaches too could equally increase students' engagement in classes providing such approaches were appropriately implemented.

Students' conceptions of tutorials in their learning

The research literature outlined above has, for the most part, a focus on students' learning, and on students' perceptions of their own learning in higher education generally. The focus was not on students' perceptions of the role of the tutorial in their learning. One notable exception to this is Ashwin's (2005) study of students' conception of the role of the tutorial in their learning at the University of Oxford. The focus of that study was on the qualitative variation in the ways in which the students experienced their tutorials. After analysing the interview transcripts of 28 undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines and years of study, Ashwin derived four qualitatively different ways in which students understood the role of tutorials:

1. Tutorials as the tutor explaining to the student what the student does not understand;

2. Tutorials as the tutor showing the student how to see the subject in the way that the tutor does;

3. Tutorials as the tutor bringing things into relation to each other to help the student develop a new perspective in the wider context of the discipline;

4. Tutorials as the tutor and the student exchanging different points of view on the topic and both coming to a new understanding.

Each of these understandings formed a hierarchy, so that, for example, a student who adopted conception 4 would also be aware of the other three conceptions. Although highlighting the potential limitations of this study, including the uniqueness of the Oxford tutorial system, Ashwin (2005) nonetheless suggested that the variation in the ways students conceived tutorials may be applicable to a larger sample. If such variation in the ways that students experience tutorials can be related to the quality of their learning, then the approach can offer a way in which the learning of these students can be improved.

However, and as noted by Ashwin (2005) the Oxford tutorial system is quite unique to higher education. In this system, a tutorial consists of a tutor typically working with one student, although in some instances, a tutor may work with between one and six students. As discussed, this is a considerably smaller tutorial size when compared with those conducted at ACU, where, in the Faculty of Education, tutorial numbers consist typically of between 25 and 30 pre-service teachers (although as noted, tutorials can occasionally consist of up to 35 pre-service teachers). The second major difference is in the expectation of preparation required for the tutorial. Ashwin notes that at the University of Oxford, students usually have 3 tutorials per week, each of which is preceded by an intense period of preparation on the part of the student, usually of between 11 and 14 hours. The preparation could include the completion of an essay or problem sheet which then becomes the focus of the tutorial itself. As also previously discussed, at ACU the expectation is that students will prepare for their tutorials as a part of the 150 hours of study to be anticipated for the entire unit. Typically, undergraduate students at ACU would have 3 hours of face-to-face class contact with academic staff for each unit of study in which they enrolled. This includes both lectures and tutorials, and is considered to be included in the anticipated 150 hours of study for each unit in which they are enrolled.

Although these differences are significant, Ashwin (2005) argues that the variation in the ways students conceived tutorials, as identified in his study may be applicable to a larger sample. If such variation in the ways that students experience tutorials can be related to the quality of their learning, then the approach can offer a way in which the learning of these students can be improved. Therefore, the research reported here investigated some pre-service teachers' conceptions of the role of the tutorial in the discipline of religious education at ACU. From the findings, it was anticipated that means by which the learning of these pre-service teachers could be improved may be posited.

Methodology

A qualitative approach to this research was employed. After ethical clearance from ACU's Human Research Ethics Committee had been obtained, individual interviews with ten pre-service teachers in their final year of the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course enrolled in EDRE 102 Religious Education 2 were used to explore the qualitatively different ways in which they perceived and described the purpose of the tutorial in religious education. Pre-service teachers were selected from among those who responded to the invitation to participate in this study using a convenient sample. All participants were volunteers, having made the decision to participate based on informed consent.

The interview itself was semi-structured in nature, that is, an interview with an agenda, yet utilising open-ended questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). It lasted for approximately 20 minutes. During the interview, pre-service teachers were asked to describe a typical week of study in religious education with particular attention being paid to the way in which they described the tutorials they attended and their purpose. The interviews were audio-taped, and transcribed for analysis.

The analysis was conducted using a phenomenographic approach (Akerlind, 2005; Ashwin, 2005, 2006; Bowden, 1996; Marton & Booth, 1997). The core premise of phenomenography is the assumption that the different ways in which individuals experience a phenomenon, such as a tutorial, are related to one another, most often by way of hierarchical inclusive relationships. While Akerlind (2005) presented six types of variation in the ways in which the data of phenomenographic research might be managed, the aim of phenomenography, in essence, is to constitute not only a different set of meanings arising from the ways in which individuals experience a particular phenomenon, but a *logically* inclusive structure relating to those different meanings. Within such a context, variation refers to revealing and describing the different ways in which individuals see a particular phenomenon, such as a tutorial, and the hierarchical structure relating to those meanings (Akerlind, 2005).

The unit of analysis was the pre-service teachers' conceptions of their tutorials. The focus was thus on qualitative variation in the ways in which these pre-service teachers experienced tutorials in religious education at ACU. The different understandings of the tutorial were used to form categories of description. From these, a hierarchy of empirically grounded and logically consistent categories of description of the different ways in which these pre-service teachers experienced tutorials in religious education at ACU has been offered.

Findings

Phenomenographic analysis of the interviews revealed five qualitatively different ways of understanding the role of the tutorial:

1. Tutorials as consolidating the lecture material with no real onus on the pre-service teacher to prepare;
2. Tutorials as consolidating the lecture material with minimal onus on the pre-service teacher to prepare;
3. Tutorials as processing the lecture material with a view to highlighting classroom application;
4. Tutorials as integrating aspects of course material rather than leaving them as discrete lecture topics, and connecting these with classroom application;
5. Tutorials as critical analysis of the lecture material and discerning implications for the classroom context.

These five conceptions formed a layered hierarchy. This implies that a pre-service teacher adopting Conception 5 possessed an awareness of the previous four conceptions. However, it cannot necessarily be inferred that a pre-service teacher adopting Conception 1 would have had an awareness of Conceptions 2, 3, 4 and 5 (see Ashwin, 2005).

These qualitatively different understandings of the purpose of the tutorial were found to be related to different pre-service teacher understandings in terms of the relationship of the tutorial to the lecture (which generally precedes the tutorial), the work undertaken in preparation for the tutorial, discerning implications of the tutorial content and activities for teaching in the classroom context, and the quality of learning expected to take place within the tutorial itself. Each of these dimensions is included in the descriptions of each of the conceptions as outlined below.

Conception 1: Tutorials as consolidating the lecture material with no real onus on the pre-service teachers to prepare
Pre-service teachers adopting this particular conception understood the purpose of the tutorial as being to revise the key points of the lecture material which preceded the tutorial, and to ask questions in order to clarify aspects of the content presented in the lecture. Such a conception is consistent with reproductive or quantitative learning (Marton & Saljo, 1976) in which the activity of learning is viewed as a process of accumulating information. In such a conception, the pre-service teachers saw little need to prepare for the tutorial through attending to the set weekly reading, or by undertaking their own summaries and revision of material. They viewed the tutorial as the arena through which to summarise and clarify concepts and material which had been presented in the lecture. The following quotes from pre-service teachers illustrate these dimensions of this conception (the short quotations from the participants are excerpts taken from the larger interview transcripts).

"We have lectures and tutorials once a week. The purpose is to ask questions and to clarify things we aren't sure about in relation to the reading and the lecture. I wouldn't normally do anything to prepare for a tutorial, not even doing the weekly reading." (Pre-Service Teacher A)

"There is no real onus on us to prepare for the tutorial. And there is no expectation that students *have* to contribute to the tutorial. In RE, you know that the content of the tutorial is going to be based on the lecture, and you can participate if you want to." (Pre-Service Teacher B)

"The purpose of the tutorial is to expand on the lecture and to address any questions we might have. We have a discussion about the lecture and the tutor clarifies things." (Pre-Service Teacher D)

"I don't do any preparation at all. I don't study for them. I go to them and listen   and participate where I can. The tutorial recaps on the lecture and reinforces the content. I sometimes go home from the tutorial thinking, 'Wow, now I actually understand what was being said in the lecture.'" (Pre-Service Teacher C)

Pre-Service Teacher C also indicated a belief that the tutor should, ideally at least, spend far more time with individual students to help reinforce the content of the lecture topics. She stated:

"…initially in coming to uni I thought there would be more one-to-one with a tutor and a student, and you'd learn more – you'd clarify what you learned in the lecture, but it's not really like that at all!"

Conception 2: The tutorials as consolidating the lecture with minimal onus on the student to prepare

Although similar to the first conception, pre-service teachers adopting this notion understood that they had some responsibility, albeit minimal, to prepare for the tutorial in which they were about to participate. The following comment typifies this understanding:

"After the lecture (on my day off) I look over the readings and any annotation I have made, and sometimes I write short summaries of the readings before coming to the tutorial." (Pre-Service Teacher E)

Most of the pre-service teachers indicated that generally, a tutorial often included student presentations of one kind or another. Pre-service teachers who adopted this conception indicated that, while they did not necessarily prepare for each tutorial by attending to the required reading, they did prepare for the student presentation in which they were expected to participate, often begrudgingly as many felt that student presentations were used excessively in tutorials, and the activity had become tedious.

The following quotations are indicative of this idea:

"You go there [to the tutorial], you listen to a student presentation, you go home and if yours is up next week, you prepare for it. But many students don't put much effort into them…they're pointless." (Pre-Service Teacher C)

"I generally don't prepare for the tutorial. I tend to chill out and ask questions during it to clarify anything from the lecture I didn't understand. But if my student presentation is coming up, I will get ready for it. I will read up on the topic of the presentation and maybe get materials ready. But the tutes are dominated by student presentations. We do them all the time, and most of us don't really pay much attention because we are sick of them." (Pre-Service Teacher G)

One particular pre-service teacher indicated in the interview that the student presentations often encroached upon the time that could be spent during the tutorial in expanding upon the lecture material. This student expressed some resentment about this, maintaining that:

"In RE I have wanted the tutorials to expand upon the lecture a lot more than they have, but they are dominated by presentations…People would be happier to be there if they thought they were learning more of the lecture content." (Pre-Service Teacher D)

Conception 3: Tutorials as processing the lecture material with a view to highlighting classroom application
Pre-service teachers who adopted this conception understood the purpose of the tutorial to be more than consolidating material presented in the lecture. Rather, the purpose was viewed as being one in which the lecture material was further developed, processed, and considered carefully, specifically with a view to highlighting the application of the theoretical concepts of the lecture material to primary school classroom practice. This has parallels with one of Duarte's (2007) conceptions of learning which described an awareness of learning as understanding and application. The following quotations from students are indicative of this conception:

> "The purpose of the tutorial is putting the lecture material into practice. It looks at how you might actually use the idea of, say, *Multiple Intelligences* or *Bloom's Taxonomy* in the classroom." (Pre-Service Teacher B)

> "The purpose should be to have students implementing ideas from the lecture into classroom practice. In some other subject areas, tutorials are so tedious and you cannot relate their content to the classroom situation. Tutors expect you to relate their content to a classroom situation, but you just can't apply what has been presented. Tutorials need to be able to apply the lecture material to the classroom context." (Pre-Service Teacher C)

Pre-Service Teacher C went on to say that she had acquired many of her learning and teaching ideas in RE through being able to discern the application of the lecture content during the tutorial. She stated that:

> "A lot of my teaching ideas and skills have come RE by relating the theory presented in the lecture to the classroom. Tutorials in other subject areas do not do this."

It is interesting to note here that both Pre-Service Teachers B and C quoted above were also quoted in relation to earlier conceptions – Pre-Service Teacher B in relation to conception 1 and Pre-Service Teacher C in relation to conception 2. However, with some further probing through the researcher's questions during the interview, both of these participants were able to develop and articulate their thinking. This suggests that both of these pre-service teachers who adopted this particular conception also possessed an awareness of the previous two conceptions.

Conception 4: Tutorials as integrating aspects of course material rather than leaving them as discrete lecture topics, and connecting these with classroom application
There were only two pre-service teachers who adopted this particular conception. They indicated an understanding of the purpose of the tutorial to be one which brings together and integrates the various aspects of material presented in both previous lectures and tutorials, rather than leaving these as discrete and isolated lecture topics. Further, these pre-services teachers suggested that the aim in doing this was to highlight the application of such material for teaching in the primary classroom context. The notion of considering discrete study topics and being able to integrate these into a coherent study path reflects Biggs' (2003) conception of deep approaches to learning, whereby knowledge is functional rather than declarative, and students focus at a high conceptual level, which requires that a well-structured knowledge base. The two pre-service teachers who adopted this conception indicated that they were able to work conceptually rather than with unrelated details, and their intention in the tutorial was to engage in particular tasks in a meaningful and purposeful way. The following quotations are indicative of this conception:

> "The purpose of the tutorial is to bring together the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning in order to process ideas from the lecture…it should try to integrate course material, and enable students to make connections between the theory and their own experiences of teaching RE in primary school classrooms." (Pre-Service Teacher F)

> "The tutorials should enable us to make connections between the different parts of the course. It should allow us to engage with activities that bear some resemblance to what happens in classrooms…these should come from the ideas that have been introduced in the lectures." (Pre-Service Teacher H)
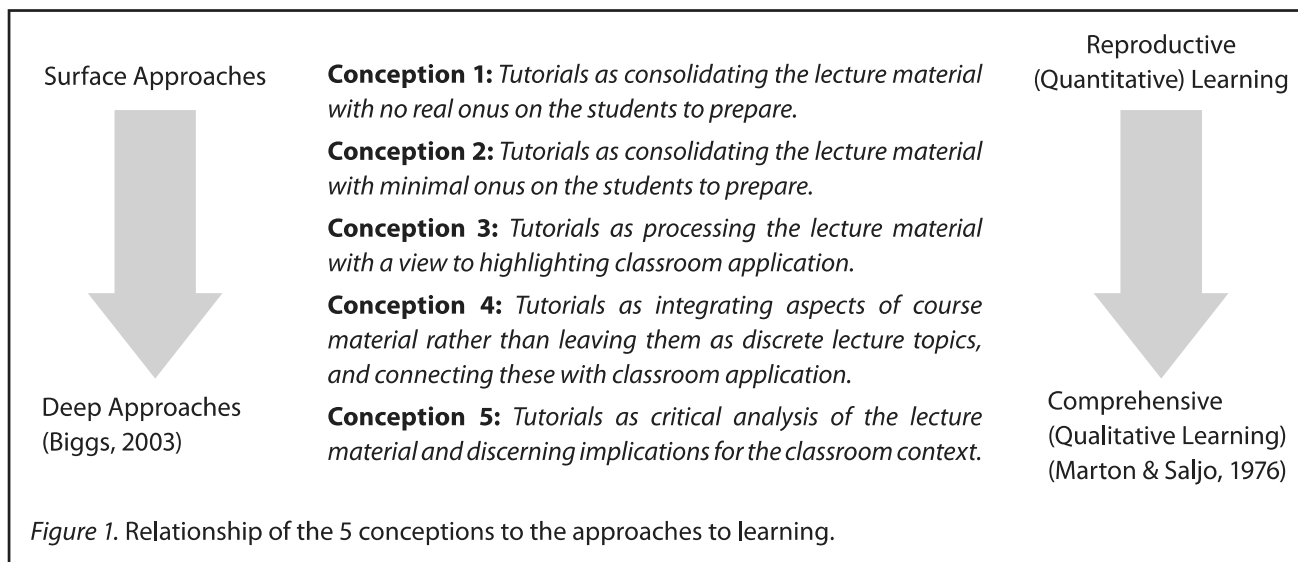
Conception 5: Tutorials as critical analysis of the lecture material and discerning implications for the classroom context

There was only one pre-service teacher who appeared to adopt this particular conception. This participant suggested that the purpose of the tutorial was to engage critically with the material presented in the lecture, and to explore the implications of this critical engagement for classroom practice. This pre-service teacher also indicated that, in order for this to happen, students need to come to tutorials having undertaken some preparation. This conception has parallels with the work of Ahlfeldt, Mehta and Sellnow (2005), who found that students engaged in higher levels of thinking when they are engaged in tasks which reflect the reality of their chosen profession – problem-based learning. This conception also reflects the work of Phillips and Bond (2004) and their investigation into undergraduate students' experiences of critical thinking. The following quotation is indicative of this conception:

> "The tutorial should engage us in a critical analysis of the lecture content and its implications for teaching. It should get us to think critically, but people don't always contribute, as there doesn't seem to be a real onus on students to prepare." (Pre-Service Teacher E)

Discussion

Each of the five qualitatively different ways of understanding the role of the tutorial, that is, each of the five conceptions, reflect key aspects of the literature explored earlier in this paper. In particular, they reflect the approaches to learning proposed by Marton and Saljo (1976) from reproductive (quantitative) learning to comprehensive (qualitative) learning, and by Biggs (2003) in relation to surface and deep approaches to learning. The conceptions identified in this present study at the bottom of the hierarchy (Conceptions 1 and 2) reflect the surface and reproductive approaches, while those at the top of the hierarchy (Conceptions 4 and 5 particularly) reflect the deep and comprehensive approaches to learning. Figure 1 below is an attempt to represent the relationship of each of the five conceptions identified in this present research to these approaches.

Surface Approaches → Deep Approaches (Biggs, 2003)

Reproductive (Quantitative) Learning → Comprehensive (Qualitative Learning) (Marton & Saljo, 1976)

Conception 1: *Tutorials as consolidating the lecture material with no real onus on the students to prepare.*

Conception 2: *Tutorials as consolidating the lecture material with minimal onus on the students to prepare.*

Conception 3: *Tutorials as processing the lecture material with a view to highlighting classroom application.*

Conception 4: *Tutorials as integrating aspects of course material rather than leaving them as discrete lecture topics, and connecting these with classroom application.*

Conception 5: *Tutorials as critical analysis of the lecture material and discerning implications for the classroom context.*

Figure 1. Relationship of the 5 conceptions to the approaches to learning.

In other words, the analysis of the interview transcripts of the pre-service teachers who participated in this research suggests that both surface and deep approaches/reproductive and comprehensive approaches to learning are drawn upon by pre-service teachers in religious education at ACU. However, it will be recalled that only two of the interviewed pre-service teachers adopted Conception 4, while only one adopted Conception 5, both of which would be considered to align with deep or comprehensive approaches to learning. The challenge herein lies in devising means by which to encourage pre-service teachers who typically employ surfaces approaches to learning in the tutorials (those who

adopted Conceptions 1 and 2 only) to adopt deeper or more comprehensive approaches to their learning in their tutorials. While Biggs' (2003) notion of conceptual alignment of the course more generally may provide one possible way forward, the ways in which the actual tutorials themselves are structured may need to be evaluated. For example, student presentations were found by many of the interviewed pre-service teachers to be tedious because they were encountering them in most tutorials in most subjects, and this may actually be encouraging surface approaches to learning. As the data in this study revealed, many pre-service teachers prepared for their tutorial in religious education only when they were directly involved in the presentation. Other ways in which to engage pre-service teachers in tutorials may need to be investigated.

The findings of Ahlfeldt, Mehta and Sellnow (2005) have relevance here. Although they advocate problem-based learning as one means by which to engage students in their learning, similar approaches could equally be employed. For example, pre-service teachers in each tutorial could be placed into smaller "Professional Action Learning Teams (PA-LTs)" (Healy, Hyde & Rymarz, 2004; see also Box, 2005) for the duration of the semester. In these PA-LTs pre-service teachers could be given a topic within the primary school religious education curriculum, based upon the lecture material presented each week to develop. In the Catholic primary school context, PA-LTs are an effective form of professional development where a group of teachers focus on real, work-based problems, helping and supporting each other through developing a common approach to solving a given problem (Healy, Hyde & Rymarz, 2004). PA-LTs in tutorials may then involve pre-service teachers investigating an issue such as assessment in religious education, or teaching about Sacraments in religious education. Based upon the material delivered in the lecture and upon course reading (which would be required to be read *before* the tutorial) pre-service teachers in their PA-LTs would be given a specific task to explore in relation to classroom/curriculum issues associated with the lecture material, such as:

- Planning elements of a staff meeting on assessment in religious education;
- Investigating concepts which could be included in Sacramental education for pre-school/kindergarten children;
- Planning a unit of work using diocesan religious education guidelines and the *multiple intelligences* framework, focusing on a particular Sacrament.

Similarly, the findings of Phillips and Bond (2004) have relevance here. In their research, they found that undergraduate students' experience with critical thinking in university settings was often limited. These findings are echoed in this present research, in which only one pre-service teacher adopted Conception 5, which understood the role of the tutorial as involving criticality. In order to encourage deep approaches to learning on the part of the pre-service teachers, elements of critical thinking may need to be consciously incorporated into the structure of tutorials in religious education. This is not to suggest that tutorials in religious education currently do not involve opportunities for criticality. However, the skills involved in critical thinking may need to be more systematically introduced, taught and practised in the undergraduate units in religious education in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) course.

Conclusion

The research reported in this paper, although small and exploratory in nature, indicated that there is variation in the way that pre-service teachers experience and understand the role of tutorials in religious education at ACU. This variation existed specifically in terms of pre-service teachers' experiences of tutorials in religious education, their understanding of the purpose of tutorials in religious education, and in their preparation for tutorials in religious education.

If an understanding of the variation in the ways in which these particular pre-service teachers conceived tutorials can be gleaned from this present research, and these can be related to the quality of their learning, then academics may be in a position to devise approaches in which pre-service teachers' learning may be improved.

There are two tentative recommendations which can be posited in the light of this research. Firstly, tutorials in religious education need to be structured in ways which encourage deep rather than surface approaches to learning on the part of the pre-service teachers. Specifically this would entail a critical examination of the place of student presentations in tutorials, given the apparent excessive use of this strategy in tutorials in other courses and subjects. As indicated, one suggestion could be to divide the tutorial group into PA-LTs, which are then given a specific issue to address in the tutorial related to the lecture and course readings. Such a strategy may encourage deep approaches to learning since PA-LTs reflect the actual work of teachers in school situations, where there is a focus on real, work-based problems or issues, and of teachers (pre-service teachers in the case of tutorials) helping and supporting each other through developing a common approach to solving a given problem. This recommendation could also be applied to the structuring of tutorials in other higher education institutions, particularly those in Australia whose understanding of tutorials is similar to that of ACU.

Secondly, and given the small number of pre-service teachers who indicated the importance of criticality in tutorials, skills involved in critical thinking may need to be consciously and systematically incorporated into the structure of tutorials in religious education. This could be achieved over the course of a semester by, for example, requiring students to come to each tutorial having prepared two questions that arise for them as the result of engaging with the required reading for each week. Time in the tutorial would then be set aside for the exploration of these, possibly by using a think-pair-share strategy in which pre-service teachers firstly consider their questions individually, and then share their thinking with a partner, followed by an opportunity to share ideas with the tutorial group.

One of the limitations of this present study was its sample size. While it makes an initial contribution to the understanding of some ACU pre-service teachers' conceptions of tutorials in their learning, the sample was limited to ten participants on the Melbourne campus. Further research is necessary, involving a larger sample of pre-service teachers across a number of campus locations in order to gain greater insight into the conceptions of tutorials held by pre-service teachers so that approaches may be devised which aim at improving student learning.

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