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## **MEMORY IN THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CLASSROOM (PART 1: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES, CONSTRUCTIVISM AND FOUNDATIONAL CONTENT)**

### **Abstract**

This paper is about memory, its place in the religious education classroom and the way it might inform the practice of religious education. The paper is in two parts. Part 2 will be published in a later issue of this journal in 2010.

In Part 1, the argument is put forward that memory and rote learning are under-utilised in the religious education classroom. Further, Part 1 appeals for a balance between constructivist educational models and models of teaching that incorporate memory and rote learning so that student knowledge of foundational content is enhanced. Part 2 will offer a perspective that the arts, namely music performance, may be a source of inspiration to religious educators for embracing memory.

### **Introduction**

This is the first part of a paper about memory, its place in the religious education classroom and the way it might inform the practice of religious education. Memory and rote learning are considered in historical context and in relation to constructivist educational models. Engagement with memory may offer ways to improve student knowledge of foundational content in religious education. Knowledge of foundational content is critical in educational design. Bloom's taxonomy suggests that foundational content knowledge needs to be addressed before other cognitive objectives. The second part of this paper (to be published in a later issue) will offer a discussion of the arts, namely music performance, as a source of inspiration to religious educators for embracing memory. For instance, in piano performance and in other disciplines that utilise motor skills, memory is applauded and approved. Memory should be met with similar approval in the religious education classroom.

### **Memory and Rote Learning**

Memory and one of its pedagogical derivatives, rote learning, continue to be under-utilised in religious education. Engaging memory in the classroom is considered unrefined, unimaginative and, simply, outdated (Kuhlthau, 2001, p. 27; Manning & Bucher, 2001, p. 162). It is rare for students in contemporary Australian religious education classrooms to be explicitly required to commit discipline content to memory. On the development of memory, Australian religious educator Maurice Ryan (2007) claims that "while later approaches to classroom religion teaching and learning abandoned this intellectual capacity, consideration of the desirability of memorisation has been lost in the reaction against, even revulsion towards, the over-reliance on memorisation and rote recall" (p. 50). A consequence of this is that religious education students tend to encounter learning activities that more frequently address higher order processing skills at the expense of activities that seek to develop declarative memory.

Likewise, rote learning is not utilised in the classroom as often as it once was. One of the reasons for this is discipline-historical. The nineteenth century catechism approach to religious education employed rote learning and is notorious for its crude and coercive pedagogy (O'Farrell, 1985, p. 146). That approach withstood well into the twentieth century but began to be seriously challenged in the 1960s. At that time, "many teachers were moving away from or had moved away from instructional learning in their other

teaching. Now they were doing it in religious education. Many were aware of the weaknesses in their own religious education, especially the drawbacks of rote learning and the lack of congruence that much [of it]...had with their own lives" (English, 2005, pp. 43-44). As the life experience catechesis approach to religious education flourished and developed, the use of rote learning decreased. Rymarz (2009) argues that by the mid to late-1970s "the old model of RE...was now well and truly abandoned" (p. 16). Rote learning in classroom religious education, it seems, was dead. Ryan (2007) has noted that rote recall has been "almost completely ignored in subsequent approaches [after the catechism approach] to religious education" (p. 31). Although many religious educators are not sure what exactly to do in their classroom, they do know not to adopt the question and answer method: "Who made the world? God made the world" is a no-no.

### **Bloom's Taxonomy and the Rise of Higher Order Processes**

Another reason why memory and rote learning continue to be under-utilised can be related to the reception of Bloom's (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* which is based on a process-content distinction. This taxonomy has received wide acceptance (Curtis, Edwards, Holbert, & Bishop, 2004, p. 21; McGrath & Noble, 2005, p. 22; Pasch, Langer, Gardner, Starko, & Moody, 1995, pp. 51-56), but not universal acceptance (Killen, 2005, pp. 180-181; Ormell, 1991, pp. 15, 35-36) since its publication in 1956. It has undergone revision (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) and has been adopted by many schools and school systems in Australia (Green, 2003; Maher, 2009; Slattery, 2004).

Bloom claimed in 1956 that "many teachers and educators prize knowledge to some extent because of the simplicity with which it can be taught or learned" (p. 34). Further, he claimed that "the layman frequently regards knowledge and education as being synonymous. The great emphasis on radio quiz programs and tests of either historical or contemporary information which appear in newspapers and magazines further reflects (sic) the status of knowledge in our culture" (p. 34). In 1956 Western education was dominated by the pursuit of knowledge and a lack of emphasis on what has come to be known as the higher order processes. Bloom and his colleagues saw their *taxonomy* as one means in which educational objectives (predominantly in schools) could be refined and explored. They sought to further refine the understanding of the development of cognitive (and affective and psychomotor) skills and appropriate pedagogies to match.

Subsequently, contemporary educators, including religious educators, have become more concerned, and sometimes preoccupied, with the higher order processes at the expense of foundational and formative content. Memory and foundational content have much less credence in the contemporary classroom than do the behavioural processes of creating, evaluating and analysing. Bloom and his colleagues published the taxonomy, in part, to break the dominance of raw knowledge in the curriculum. To a large extent, they succeeded. In Australian schools these days the pursuit of the higher order thinking skills is common fare. Rossiter (1999) made this point at the 1998 *National Symposium on Critical Issues in Religious Education and Ministry* identifying two factors, amongst others, that have had a shaping influence on Catholic religious education in Australia since the 1950s: an emphasis on process by contrast with content, and the rise of critical education which has seen "more emphasis on analysis, evaluation and interpretation rather than on learning facts" (p. 7). These days, it seems that assessment has less validity if students are not synthesising or evaluating. To ask students to simply recall information in a test does not cut the educational mustard.

This paper is not proposing that contemporary religious educators return wholesale to the Penny Catechism (Archbishops and Bishops of Australia, n.d.) and the nineteenth century pedagogy that accompanied it. However, it does suggest that there is benefit in developing students' declarative memory and that rote learning may have a place in the contemporary religious education classroom. The development of students' declarative memory and the use of rote learning need not be crude or coercive. Nor do they need to shame the student or the teacher (Moran, 1997, p. 26). And, of course, it must be noted that rote learning is not the only way to develop student memory. In early childhood, for example, "games like peek-a-boo, search and find, and hide and seek nurture abilities to retrieve information from memory" (Roskos & Christie, 2007, p. 96).

There is, however, some resistance to the idea that memory and rote learning might have a place in contemporary schooling. This resistance deserves to be challenged. To do so requires consideration of the constructivist context of schooling in Australia. On face value, rote learning is the antithesis of constructivist educational models. But, as I suggest later in this paper, they need not be mutually exclusive.

## Constructivism and Schooling

At times, teachers are told what their job will be like in the future. They have been told that they will have to change their ways because their new-generation clients are from a different planet. Teachers have been reminded about the world of their students: their students don't know a world without the internet, without ATMs, without mobile phones, without laptops. Students don't know what a typewriter is, they have never seen a 33rpm record and they have never posted a letter in an envelope. Many education-futurists have forged a niche-market in being the grim reaper to the modern teacher. Religious educators have not been immune from the warnings.

Noted educationalist, Hedley Beare (2001, pp. 11-17) offered an insight into the future of schooling in his book *Creating the Future School*. He imagined Angelica, a five year old beginning school in 2001. Angelica offers a narrative about her life ahead and, in particular, her schooling. She is the future's child.

Much of what Beare's Angelica has to say seems reasonable or has come to pass. Angelica expects to live until she is over 80 (p. 11), in secondary school she will study the effect of human activity on the environment (p. 12), the sea will concern her generation (p. 14), she will have more than one employer in her lifetime (p. 15) and there is a greater-than-50-per-cent chance that her mother will work full-time (p. 16). This is reasonable enough, but hardly mind-blowing revelation even by the standards of 2001.

However, Beare makes a significant point that warrants some reflection-in-hindsight. Angelica says "Words like 'subjects', 'classes', 'grades' and 'promotion' do not make much sense to me. Schools will not be organized that way by the time I leave primary education" (p. 16). Nine years on in 2010, Angelica is 14 and she left primary school a few years ago. Virtually all primary schools in Australia continue to organise themselves around subjects, classes, grades and promotion. And there is little to indicate that this will soon change.

Whether teachers (or students) breathe a sigh of relief or not about this story is not important for this paper. The story of how Angelica's primary education panned out is important here because it provides a snapshot of constructivist approaches to education. We were warned that Angelica would build her own world, her own knowledge. Her teachers were warned to get with her program or get out of her way. Warner (2006) suggests that "Professor Beare's Angelica would argue, at the age of five, that she is starting school without the need for dependence on teachers, but with a desire to have teachers work with her to explore her world. She also does not want them controlling her or her search for her world view..." (p. 30). Angelica and her generation would revolutionise education. It appears though, in hindsight, that Angelica and her friends progressed from Year 1 to Year 2 to Year 3 and so on. They progressed this way doing Maths, English, Science and, if they were in Catholic schools, Religious Education. Just as their teachers did when they were in school. The future, in schooling at least, may not be that much different from the past.

Constructivist models and Bloom's taxonomy are evident in Rees' (2006) view of contemporary education: "Today's curriculum actively engages students in higher level processes through a carefully planned curriculum which melds content and process" (p. 12). In the new educational order, Rees goes on to say, "power and responsibility is [sic] returned to the students" because they are "empowered to explore different perspectives and develop their own perceptions, beliefs and attitudes" (p. 12). This allows students to "take advantage of their awareness and often challenge the statements, values and thinking processes of their teachers" (p. 12). One could be excused for thinking that this is the curriculum that Angelica had in mind for herself at the age of five. It is not unreasonable though, to ask what foundational content students are exposed to before they head off on these explorations and challenges. In this view of education one may even question the value of having the teacher in the room at all.

There is something odd about this return of power to students in their schooling years. Most credible texts on parenting to toddlers and infants extol the value and importance of setting boundaries. Yet, when young people enter the school gates the boundaries seem to be removed for a new order of free-wheeling power, exploration and challenge. The teacher seems to be more a hindrance than a help. On the contrary, the role of the teacher need not be obliterated or reduced to equal status with the student; the teacher has a distinct and critical role to play in the classroom (Moran, 1997, p. 162). In riposte to the constructivist idea that teachers be *facilitators* of learning, Hattie (in Lebihan, 2009, p. 30) has suggested that teachers be *activators* of learning. “Activators help children learn by giving extensive feedback, setting challenging goals, using direct instruction and helping them learn powerful strategies such as self-verbalisation and self-questioning” (Lebihan, 2009, p. 30).

There is certainly a place for the constructivist paradigm in schooling. Amongst other benefits, it promotes an active involvement in education, real-world contextual learning and an assent to the social nature of learning (Gordon, 1998, p. 391; Phillips, 1995, p. 11). However, when it is elevated to such a status that it disregards the important role of the teacher and dismisses the value of conventions it can result in an educational imbalance. For example, constructivist “educ-pop”, as Hattie (2005, p. 14) calls it, may not always best suit the task of improving student knowledge. It might even be stifling and detrimental because it has not been developed with “good consideration of the human mind” (Lebihan, 2009, p. 30) or, specifically, with consideration for the working memory capacities of young people (Woolfolk, 2004, pp. 258-259).

### Reclaiming Foundational Content

In an opinion piece in the Australian press, Lebihan (2009) notes a “sea-change” (p. 30) against the constructivist approach to education. She suggests that the constructivist approach has resulted in an imbalance in contemporary classroom teaching. The imbalance consists of an over-emphasis on process and an under-emphasis on content. In the language of Bloom’s taxonomy, classroom educators have focused on analytical and evaluative processes to the detriment of foundational content.

In contemporary classrooms, there has been too much concern with what students can do and not enough concern with what they know. This point was also made as early as 1981 by Furst who argued that “by following a wholly process-oriented approach to the objectives of education, we have supposedly lost the essential characteristics of an educated person: that he or she possess a rational, connected view of the world. This is also to say that content is under-represented in the taxonomy” (p. 446). Constructivist approaches to education may not be the most effective approaches for improving student knowledge. Lebihan (2009) suggests that “one concept that goes against the grain of popular thinking is the idea that ‘discovery learning’ – discovering answers by working through problems for oneself – is counter-productive for novices because it overloads ‘working memory’, or short-term memory” (p. 30).

The importance of knowledge as a foundational objective is made by Bloom (1956) himself:

Such information (knowledge) represents the elements that the specialist must use in communicating about his [sic] field, in understanding it, and in organizing it systematically...[These specifics] become the basic elements the student or learner must know if he is to be acquainted with the field or to solve any of the problems in it. (p. 63)

In contemporary religious education terms, knowledge constitutes the elements that the student must use to communicate with religious literacy. That is, to develop a student’s religious literacy the religious educator must give consideration to the basic knowledge that a student will need to possess in order to process that knowledge in intellectual, creative and generative ways. Students will need to encounter this knowledge before they are able to critique it. Helping students construct this knowledge may lack efficacy and efficiency; there may be times when teachers have to rely on the traditional transmission approach in order to improve student knowledge. This transmission approach might include rote learning and other strategies that engage explicitly with memory.

Eisner (1995) advocates for the importance of the higher order skills in the classroom. But he also notes the importance of foundational content and the traditional ways in which it can be gained:

There are, we must acknowledge, a number of important tasks that students must learn in school in which innovation is not useful. Learning how to spell correctly means knowing how to replicate the known. The same holds true for much of what is taught in early arithmetic and in the language arts. There are many important tasks and skills that students need to learn – ie. conventions – that are necessary for doing more important work that educational programs should help them learn. (p. 762)

With some ease, most religious educators could generate a long list of the foundational content that they would like their students to know at the end of each unit, the end of each academic year or upon graduation. In all probability, this content is already documented in their school work programs and their systemic syllabuses. Eisner (2002) talks of the use of technical skills in the arts and arts education as “not the mindless application of routine habits” (p. 109). At first, it may appear that there is no correlative set of technical skills in religious education as there is in any of the arts. However, a little thought can generate a substantial list:

- Referencing books, chapters and verses in the Bible.
- Accessing data in an atlas of religions.
- Producing a list of popes in chronological order.
- Accessing a particular paragraph in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.
- Naming the vessels, vestments and design features of a Church.
- Reading and recognising the Greek or Hebrew alphabet.
- Learning prayers, poems and biblical passages by heart.
- Remembering the names of the four gospels, the books of the Pentateuch or indeed, the books of the Old and/or New Testaments
- Knowing correct spelling of key names
- Sketching a map of the Holy Land and labelling it with places, waterways and geographical features.
- Recalling key dates in church history

Any task in this list does not need to be mindless either. For example, a sound grasp of the places, waterways and features of the Holy Land will better assist students in comprehending the geographical theology in Mark’s gospel (Painter, 1996, pp. 7-8). Likewise, before students can engage in textual criticism and understand the ambiguity in the meaning of a particular Greek text in the New Testament, they will need to be able to recognise (at least) some key Greek words. In order to recognise some key Greek words they will need to be familiar with the Greek alphabet. Recognising, remembering, knowing and applying the letters of the Greek alphabet require not mindless engagement, but focused, concentrating and mindful engagement.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the teaching of foundational content can be informed by constructivist ideas. Vygotskian theory of scientific concepts suggests that young people will better grasp external foundational content if it is exposed to them via familiar or known concepts (Panofsky, John-Steiner, & Blackwell, 1990, pp. 252-253). This idea aligns itself with the task of making religious education personal and relevant for students. Constructivist educational models and models of teaching that incorporate memory and rote learning need not be mutually exclusive. They can work together to enhance the educational experience.

## Conclusion

It has been argued here that memory and rote learning have been under-utilised in contemporary religious education. They have been under-utilised for historical reasons and because they do not fit hand-in-glove with a constructivist view of knowledge. However, our contention is memory and rote learning may have a role to play in terms of students’ knowing and understanding foundational content. It is not uncommon for

religious educators, of any school year level, to have moments of despair or rueful reflection about their students' knowledge before, during or after a unit of work. Politically incorrect though they may be, engagement with memory and rote learning may offer the religious educator some sound educational alternatives for improving student knowledge.

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