Five Insights for Religion Teaching Revisited – June 2011

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We published the Five Insights for Religion Teaching article (Brennan and Ryan 1996) fifteen years ago last month. It is our shortest co-authored article - two pages in length. It is one of our most effective presentations in terms of constant feedback and continual usage in teacher development courses right up to today. Part of Its genesis was the summary session of a workshop on Generational Change and the Teaching of Religious Education given earlier at an international conference in Melbourne. The five insights “took off” in that setting and we saw a need to offer it to wider audiences in print form.

We decided, given the potential for lively and engaging discussion, to revisit the article via a Blog than a more traditional publication. We suggest that this is in keeping with contemporary modes of communication where dialogue and exchange are encouraged. We hope that a forum develops in which this and other insights might be discussed constructively and courteously.

The five insights then and now take the form of a metaphor, a principle, a paradox, a conviction and a reflection.

A Metaphor

We used the metaphor of, “teaching religion today is similar to teaching a second language”. This still holds true and is even timelier in our Australian context where there has been a decline in the number of students accessing second language learning in schools. This is largely caused by a decrease in competent language teachers. A parallel to a religion-teaching context looks like this.

The majority of students, their families and many adults are less engaged in formal religious practice than fifteen years ago. There are fewer numbers of active clergy, an ageing of them, and more twinning of Catholic parishes. There has been a very negative impact on the status of the Church caused by sexual abuse scandals. Women and men in consecrated religious life are older and there are fewer of them. Student engagement with clergy and religious is virtually non-existent and vice-versa.
There appears to be a polarisation of views held by many Catholics about the future directions of Church life. On the other hand there has been a growth in some areas of Catholic life through recognised ‘movements’ and through ‘events’ such as central Confirmation ceremonies and developments such as World Youth Day (WYD) and pre and post WYD gatherings. There appears to be some influx of people into Churches around key events such as Easter and Christmas.

There is another development to be added to the scenario of contemporary Catholic schools where fewer of the baptised Catholics have much familiarity with public expressions of Catholic life. There has been a gradual increase of non-Catholic enrolments in Catholic schools across Australia and not necessarily from those affiliated with regular religious practice in other faith communities. There is a plurality of faith expressions and none in most Catholic school religion classrooms today. While not a new phenomenon it is more so than in any previous era.

We wrote in 1996, “Today the religion teacher in a Catholic school faces the task of introducing a religious culture, tradition and world view to students who are largely unfamiliar with the territory. This territory includes religious language, symbols, icons, images, beliefs, practices and traditions. This unfamiliar territory for students needs to be approached in a similar way to teaching a second language. Just as non-native speakers need to be introduced to the meaning, nuances and culture of origin of the language they are learning, students in religion classes need to be introduced similarly to Catholicism”.

We also know that learning another language and its surrounding cultures is complex. Those who are proficient usually have a strong desire to master this complexity and often see a practical benefit – examples include future travel or future work opportunities. Language proficiency it not simply developed by exercises in conjugation and phonetics. There are also immersion experiences, opportunities for cultural exchanges, dialogue, encouragement and welcome. We also know that no matter the proficiency of the language learning there will be an antipodean accent and flavour that is distinguishable to the purist. Language and culture are never totally homogenous and less so in our highly mobile world.

Those who seek to introduce a monocultural Catholicism onto the young might find that antipodean nuances are required to build links with students whose lived experiences of Catholic life are largely non-existent. The religion students also require immersion experiences, opportunities for cultural exchanges, dialogue, encouragement and welcome, similar to language learners. And there are many students who are eager to learn.

A Principle

The principle we espoused fifteen years ago was, “Avoid language that is presumptive”.

We commented in 1996 that many of the texts and religious education publications of the time used language that was, “…presumptive of the learner’s association with the Catholic tradition”. We stated, “Students who are unfamiliar with the practices and beliefs of Catholicism have little feeling for Our or We. It is more effective to use language such as, ‘the Catholic Church teaches...’; ‘Catholics at Mass do...’”
This principle carries greater weight today, given the reality of changing enrolment patterns in the majority of Catholic schools, the cultural landscape in which formal religion is now expressed and perceived in Australia and the limited engagement in Church life of many of the baptised of school age.

Language also evolves to describe new understandings and experiences. Terms such as blogs, wikis, facebook and tweets were not used fifteen years ago. Their relatively recent evolution is indicative of huge developments in communication technologies and of how many young people connect by virtual communities.

There are challenges and opportunities for religious educators to use this evolving language and the extraordinary range of associated technical and web-based tools and resources to introduce students to religious understandings of life and religious beliefs.

There are challenges for faith traditions to invite and engage people in virtual communities when their emphasis and strategies for so long have been on gathered physical community presence.

It is unwise to assume that contemporary school students come to understand a faith tradition or align with its practices in the manner of earlier generations. There is now so much access to a range of cultures, religious practices and beliefs via web-based technologies. Catholicism is seen for many as one option among a vast range.

Students can experience presumptive language as alienating and judgemental. It is preferable to use language that is invitational and educational to better engage students in religious education.

A Paradox

We said then that, “Students in religion classes are capable of a lot more and a lot less”.

We observed that, “Students are capable of a lot less because the territory of religion, and religious education itself, are unfamiliar to most of them”. We also commented, “Students are capable of much more in terms of content and learning processes, especially in primary classes. Often, students are not extended or challenged in religion to the extent that they are in other learning areas”.

In the past fifteen years there has been a tremendous growth in the resourcing of religious education teaching in Australia. There have also been consistent efforts by most Catholic educational authorities to align developments in the religious education curriculum with those of other curricula that are accredited by state authorities. This is noted especially in the senior secondary area.

Across schools there have also been developments in areas such as understanding individual learning styles, brain development and better use of diagnostic skills to assist in differentiating learning programs for individuals or groups of students.

The distribution of these developments into religious education planning and implementation by schools remains uneven. For example, there is little evidence of extension programs for students who are diagnosed as talented or especially interested in religious education.
There are certainly many pleasing developments in terms of diocesan and school based religious education programs and associated standards and expectations of classroom learning in religious education. We contend that there is room for further diagnosis of students’ religious education capacities as they commence in a school and as they progress on their educational journey.

Students are still capable of a lot more.

A Conviction

We claimed in 1996 that, “The Catholic tradition is accessible through good teaching”.

We discussed teacher confidence to teach the subject matter, “…using the creativity that they bring to other learning areas”. We also noted, “Much teacher in-service and professional development starts from a deficit model, rather than building upon the strengths of teachers”.

Catholic education authorities are to be congratulated for the on-going commitment to and the resourcing of teacher professional development in religious education. This is often a large annual budget item and in more recent times includes a broader range of spiritual formation opportunities for school staff as well as dealing with curriculum practicalities. Often this resourcing correlates to accreditation policies and requirements for teachers to maintain certain standards.

In the general curriculum area there have been significant developments and resourcing in areas associated with pedagogy. Much of this has championed skilling in information and communication technologies, use of digital resources and student portfolios and implementation of smart boards. These are examples of the ways in which pedagogy is evolving. Many of these developments have impacted upon religion teaching.

These are very positive developments and are to be encouraged, especially where the confidence and competencies of teachers are enhanced so that they can teach more creatively and engagingly.

Authorities and schools are encouraged to resource quality digital and web-based resources for students and teachers so that good teaching can make the Catholic tradition more accessible.

A Reflection

We proposed that people needed to, “Be attentive and intelligent about your local setting”.

It is important to be both attentive to and intelligent about what is happening in religious education, whether that is in your classroom, your school, region or diocese. There is little use in doing one without the other. Solutions need to be intelligent responses to what is discerned from attentiveness. Being attentive requires full focus and the ridding of distractions – this is a challenge in today’s climate of smart phones, emails, texts and tweets! But it must be done.

Religious Education demands the priority attention in Catholic systems and schools: in resourcing, in professional development, in staffing, in timetabling. It is often the glue that holds the show together so it needs to be of high quality. It requires attentiveness.

We conclude by restating our final paragraph from 1996. It remains pertinent fifteen years later.
“Our argument is simple. Stick to what you know. Look at your local setting, your own school and your own class. Scrutinise your efforts in the teaching of religion. Ask yourself what your students will understand, appreciate and will have experienced of Catholicism by the end of their time in your class or school. What do they need to know, given that twelve years of schooling is not normally the whole of life? Articulate the skills that you see them developing during this time. Nominate the values that underpin all of this. And then, intelligently and attentively establish some short term and long term achievable goals to improve upon this. Remember, it is primarily about teaching and learning. You are on the spot. You have the insights”.