

Professional Reading for APRES and Campus Ministers—No. 3

Five Insights For Religion Teaching An Overview of Teachers' Responses

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During 1994 we worked with classroom teachers in the development, writing and trialing of the Keystones Primary Religion Series. Our aim was to provide quality Australian resources for religion teachers in Catholic primary schools. Five insights about religion teaching emerged during this project. Throughout 1995, we presented these insights in many settings, from national and state gatherings of Catholic educators to small groups of classroom teachers in schools. On each occasion people found them to be helpful, irrespective of whether they were primary, secondary, tertiary teachers or Catholic Education Office consultants. These five insights take the form of a metaphor, a principle, a paradox, a conviction and a reflection.

A METAPHOR

Teaching religion today is similar to teaching a second language.

The contemporary Catholic classroom comprises at least two groups of students: those who have some familiarity with the Catholic Church, and those who have little. The latter group is by far the larger. This is not due to the failure of Catholic schools. It is a result of cultural and societal shifts that have occurred in Australia and the inability of other agencies of the Church, particularly parishes, to deal with these changes in creative ways. Today, the religion teacher in a Catholic school faces the task of introducing a particular 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. Moreover, there can be no presumption that the parents of students in today's classrooms have much familiarity with this religious tradition and language.

A PRINCIPLE

Avoid language that is presumptive.

Documents concerned with the classroom teaching of religion commonly use language that is presumptive of the learner's association with the Catholic tradition. Words such as 'Our Story', 'We Believe', 'We are Called', are peppered throughout different texts in a manner that suggests the audience is familiar with and identifies with the territory. Presumptive language is dismissive of the reality of today's classroom and is insensitive to the readiness of students for the subject matter. Our own observations indicate that such language is counter productive and alienating for both teacher and student. Students who are unfamiliar with the practices and beliefs of Catholicism have little feeling of Our or We. It is more effective to use language such as, 'the Catholic Church teaches ...'; 'Catholics at Mass do ...'; 'Catholics believe ...'. Students who can readily identify themselves as Catholics are affirmed by this approach. The teacher can introduce the territory in a way that provides the student with freedom to respond and does not assume a programmed response. Our observation is that when students are presented with material in this way, Catholicism becomes interesting to them — even with very young students. Teachers report that in teaching this way, they find that students want to find out more. Eventually they may come to a stage where they can comfortably say *Our* or *We*.

A PARADOX

Students in religion classes are capable of a lot more and a lot less.

We believe that a paradox is at the heart of religion teaching today. Teachers know that most of their students have not been socialised into religious practice by families in the way that earlier generations are perceived to have been. Yet, these same students can use CD-ROMs, know something of events on the other side

of the globe, and are aware of social issues because of their access to and use of electronic media. Students are capable of a lot less because the territory of religion, and religious language itself, are unfamiliar to most of them. But they are capable of a lot more, even in the primary classroom. We introduced into the Keystones teachers' books extension activities for students. Our concern was that many students in religion classes can be extended much further than the dictates of current practice. Senior secondary teachers who teach credentialled religion courses attest to this. 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. We may be orientating our efforts to the lowest common denominator. We may lack specificity about what we are trying to achieve in our teaching outcomes, or do not examine seriously enough the range of abilities in the religion class. We need to ask how we can stretch students in our religion class — their imagination, their knowledge, their skills, their creativity. At the same time, we have to be conscious of their capabilities and readiness to engage in the religion class because of their unfamiliarity with the territory.

A CONVICTION

The Catholic tradition is accessible through good teaching.

The major difficulties associated with religion teaching can be mistakenly interpreted as having a theological, doctrinal or scriptural basis. We contend a more significant factor is teachers' lack of confidence to teach the subject matter using the creativity that they bring to other learning areas. It is largely a problem of teaching, not one of content. Teachers need to be affirmed that they can teach: that is what they are employed to do. Each teacher possesses a "pedagogical signature" (Eisner, 1991, p.79), a unique, individual way of classroom teaching. This is the starting point for responding to the challenges of contemporary religion teaching, not a focus upon teachers' deficiencies. Much teacher inservice and professional development starts from a deficit model, rather than building upon the strengths of teachers. In the short time that Keystones has been in Australian Catholic primary schools, we have been encouraged by the number of teachers who have contacted us to share stories of how they have adapted creatively the ideas offered in the series. They have been affirmed in their primary role as classroom teachers. They are pleased to be able to share with their colleagues ways in which they have taught the Catholic tradition creatively. As the Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School reminds us, "the aim of

the school is knowledge". The acquisition of knowledge is based upon good teaching and learning processes. This is no less the case in the religion class.

A REFLECTION

Be attentive to and intelligent about your local setting.

Theologian, Bernard Lonergan, provided a way of theologising that his contemporaries saw as exciting. Two of the things that he emphasised related to attentiveness and intelligence. In simple terms, he argued that the person on the spot has the insights. People need to be attentive to what is happening around them, and, intelligent about it. Our review of religious education in Australia over the last twenty years is that much work has gone into the attentive side of the equation. But we wonder how intelligent some solutions have been. There has been a plethora of religious education guidelines produced, enormous energy expended on the development of individual school based curriculums, a range of accreditation policies produced, agreement in some quarters about the purposes of religious education and polarisation in others. Any evaluation has to state it has been a mixed bag.

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 the 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 the twelve years of schooling is normally not 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.

References:

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