RE Digital Resources Development - Research/Professional Learning Project … Article 2

> *Learner-centred approaches to technology-enabled learning can empower learners and leverage good learning experiences that would not otherwise have been possible. Technology also often offers valuable tools for other building blocks in effective learning environments, including personalisation, co-operative learning, managing formative assessment, and many inquiry-based methods.[1]*

(1) Recapping the aim of our research/learning project

Our aim is to assist the teaching/learning process by providing busy classroom RE teachers with resources that engage the learner. By providing theologically and educationally sound digital RE resources for the classroom we hope to increase the time teachers have to focus on the learning of their students.

In this way we seek to augment the mandated RE programme, available to teachers on Faith Alive, and make the learning process relevant and engaging for the 21st century classroom.

In attempting to achieve these aims we are committed to working with classroom RE teachers and Catholic school leaders to enhance daily RE teaching practice and daily RE student experience throughout the Diocese (and ultimately beyond the Diocese of Christchurch).

We believe our research/professional learning project is very much in support of that which the Congregation for Catholic Education notes, in its 2014 *Instrumentum Laboris*, "Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion", as a vital component in teaching as an instrument for education:

> *Nowadays, the "way" in which students learn seems to be more important than "what" they learn, just like the way of teaching seems to be more important than its contents. Teaching that only promotes repetitive learning, without favouring students' active participation or sparking their curiosity, is not sufficiently challenging to elicit motivation. Learning through research and problem-solving develops different and more significant cognitive and mental abilities, whereby students do more than just receiving information, while also stimulating teamwork. However, the value of learning contents must not be underestimated. If the way students learn is relevant, the same applies to what they learn: teachers must know how to select the essential elements of cultural heritage that has accumulated over time and how to present them to students. This approach also applies to the study of the major questions mankind is facing and has faced in the past. Otherwise, the risk could be to provide a kind of teaching that is only focused on what seems to be useful now, because it is being required by contingent economic or social demands, forgetting what is indispensable for the human person.[2]*

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[1] *The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice*, Innovative Learning Environments Project, OECD Publications, 2010 https://www.oecd.org/edu/ceri/50300814.pdf

[2] http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20140407_educare-oggi-e-domani_en.html

(2) Parameters of the project

The parameters of our research/professional learning project are as follows:

- we will attempt that which is achievable within the resources available;
- we will take 'baby' steps before we attempt to walk confidently;
- we will work with real teachers in real classrooms with real students;
- if this first phase points to the fact that we are at least on the right path then subsequent work must be sustainable;
- our resources will be provided with the aim of ensuring consistency in the delivery of the NZ Catholic Bishops' (NZCBC) mandated RE curriculum throughout all schools in the Diocese, whilst also providing space for individual school and student personalisation;
- our resources seek to support teachers and schools in their desire to develop the knowledge, understanding and application of faith for young people;
- our resources will seek to provide authentic learning/faith experiences for students in our Catholic schools.

(3) Initial outline plan for our project

The outline plan for the team's work, in the initial exploratory phase of our research/professional learning project, was as follows:

- provide online resources for the Church strand at Years 7 & 8;
- request, initially, a small selection of teachers to trial these resources in their classrooms and provide initial feedback and feedforward;
- use the flipped learning model to initiate and supplement teaching and content delivery;
- use the flipped learning model to demonstrate to students that questioning is a highly valued skill for the 21st century and that digging deeper, through questioning and challenging assumptions, is an important element of the RE classroom;
- incorporate SOLO Taxonomy (**S**tructure of **O**bserved **L**earning **O**utcomes)

Pre-Structural	Uni-Structural	Multi-Structural	Relational	Extended Abstract
I don't really know anything about this	I know one thing about this	I know three or more things but I'm not sure when or why to use it	I can do this and I know when and why I should use this	I am able to model or teach this to others; I can even use what I know in other contexts

- provide opportunities for teachers to create project and inquiry based learning opportunities whist ensuring appropriate achievement objectives and learning outcomes of the mandated RE curriculum are covered;
- seek to ensure that RE is the source that other curriculum areas spring from;
- provide, in the longer term, clarity on the relationship between RE and the wider concept of Catholic Special Character within a school.

(4) What feedback have we received?

The Years 7 & 8 students from our four "initial" initial trial schools …

- St Mary's School, Hokitika (Teacher: **Rachel King**)

- Our Lady of the Assumption School, Hoon Hay (Teachers: **Amanda Campbell** & **Jared Hopkins**)
- Catholic Cathedral College, Christchurch (Teachers: **Lillian Lever** & **Chris Houghton**)
- St Joseph's School, Timaru (Teacher: **Melanie Thatcher**)

… kindly provided the following perceptive feedback and feedforward on their experience of the process and their engagement with the initial resources we produced for the Church strand:

Student video feedback and feedforward
- Slow the video down
- Start with a "new words" activity – definitions, spelling (religious literacy)
- Explain the meaning of all specific Church language/words
- Provide breaks/pauses in the video for reflection questions
- Have pauses within the video for thinking/discussion time
- Allow students to take notes or have time for discussion
- The teacher should actively guide the process
- A blended approach was most preferred – face-to-face with the teacher and online activities
- The teacher must engage with students as they undertake the learning tasks
- It was good being able to go back and recap what the answers were on the video
- Being able to watch the videos as many times as I want instead of asking the teacher all the time is helpful

Student activity feedback and feedforward
- Teacher directs students at the beginning and then students self-regulate
- Provide for a blog reflection during an activity to create a portfolio the teacher and parents can view
- Explain the tasks in detail – this can be through video or written instruction (a variety of explanatory methods is good)
- Provide exemplars or rubrics for activities so students can see what success looks like
- Introduce games, drama, movie production opportunities (content creation) to demonstrate content knowledge (once knowledge activities have been mastered) – this enables learning to be visible to parents
- Add labels to the tasks
- Provide quizzes to revise content from the video
- Provide quizzes for formative feedback for students
- Provide a variety of individual tasks and collaborative group tasks

In addition to the above, the teachers provided the following feedback and feedforward:

Additional teacher video feedback and feedforward
- Provide "must do" and "can do" (or compulsory and optional tasks) activity options to cater for differentiation and student selection/agency
- It would be good to have a baseline knowledge test at the beginning of the unit so that students could be placed/guided into an appropriate starting point based upon their current knowledge and stage of understanding
- Reduce marking workload through rubric provision and peer marking
- Allow opportunities for whole class instruction

(5) To flip or not to flip; that is the question!
Our research project started with the digital pedagogy of flipped learning philosophy at its heart.

The feedback from our students was clear; they wanted a blended approach.

Whilst students very much appreciated being able to return to the videos to capture the expert input that might have been forgotten or misunderstood, and students were happy to sometimes meet the expert input and start to a section of work digitally at home (*assuming they had access to a digital device at home*), for most of the time students wanted to view the initial input with their teacher ☺ and to be able to pause and reflect and discuss its understandings and implications as a group and then they felt better empowered to begin the tasks and activities.

This is a very affirming insight from the Year 7 & 8 students in our trial. For these students are acutely aware that the identity of the classroom hinges on the relationship between the student and teacher; in other words, these students are aware that the human person is at the heart of a successful classroom.

Social presence and feeling that each student belongs in the classroom are keys to learning.

It is through positive, caring and inclusive human relationships that a RE teacher gives witness to Jesus and provides, in the confines a classroom, an encounter with the living Christ. The students in our trial schools understand this ☺

So our tentative answer to the "flip or not to flip" question would be, in its purest form, "only sometimes".

Perhaps for the majority of the time the video, rather than being used as a pure flipped learning input option at home, could be used as an additional "virtual" teacher in the classroom to provide input with the "real" teacher being the mentor and guide to group discussion around the input & director of the attendant tasks/activities to consolidate student knowledge acquisition and learning.

It would appear that our students, so adept and immersed in social media, intuitively know and hunger for conversation and community.

They understand what Pope Francis means when he says:

> The great challenge facing us today is to learn once again to talk to one another, not simply how to generate and consume information. The latter is a tendency which our important and influential modern communications media can encourage. Information is important, but it is not enough[3].

In her book entitled *Reclaiming Conversation*: *the power of talk in a digital age*, Sherry Turkle echoes the words of Pope Francis (above) where she writes:

> Research tells us that being comfortable with our vulnerabilities is central to our happiness, our creativity, and even our productivity. We are drawn to this message, weary, it would seem, of our culture of continual performance. Yet life on social media encourages us to show ourselves as "invulnerable or with as little vulnerability as possible." Torn between our desire to express an authentic self and the pressure to show our best selves online, it is not surprising that frequent use of social media leads to feelings of depression and social anxiety.

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[3] https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20150123_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html

And trouble with empathy. Research shows that those who use social media the most have difficulty reading human emotions, including their own. But the same research gives cause for optimism: We are resilient. Face-to-face conversation leads to greater self-esteem and an improved ability to deal with others, Again, conversation cures.[4]

The intuitive desire of the students in our trial to experience a classroom environment in which they are able to learn and converse face-to-face and experience human closeness as well as being able to learn and converse in the digital space, which offers a different and complementary space for encounter and solidarity, is clear.

This is affirming for us as RE teachers for such respect for the dignity of each human person lies at the very heart of a Catholic education; and this is something the Years 7 & 8 students in our trial have come to understand.

(6) Student feedback and academic research findings

The quality of the feedback and feedforward we received from the Years 7 & 8 students in our trial schools is mirrored in the findings of the collaborative project entitled *Help or hindrance*: *Blended approaches and student engagement* led by Dr Lynn Jeffrey from Massey University.

This work provides a framework of strategies for considering student engagement in a blended environment. This framework illustrates three key types of student engagement strategies. Please note these strategies are not listed in order of priority but rather in relation to the framework.

Whilst the research[5] of Jeffrey, Milne, Suddaby & Higgins has been conducted in the tertiary teaching sector its relevance to teaching and learning in the compulsory education sector is clear.

You will see that the insightful and perceptive feedback and feedforward we received from the Years 7 & 8 students in our trial schools is reflected in this academic framework.

Blended Learning
Top 10 engagement strategies[6]

Getting students engaged at the start of the course/lesson
- Primers for getting student attention: curiosity, relevance
- Social presence and belonging: teacher knowledge and enthusiasm, immediacy and inclusive environment
- Clear content structure

Maintaining student engagement during the course/lesson
- Clear unambiguous instructions and guidelines
- Challenging tasks
- Authentic tasks
- Timely feedback
- Elaborated feedback

Re-engaging students who procrastinate or stop engaging
- Monitor for early identification
- Personal contact with student and the provision of appropriate support and conditions for re-engagement

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[4] Turkle, S. (2015) *Reclaiming conversation*: *the power of talk in a digital age*. New York. Penguin

[5] Jeffrey, L. M., Milne, J., Suddaby, G., & Higgins, A. (2012) *Strategies for engaging students*: *Helps and hindrances in a blended learning environment*. Wellington: Ako Aotearoa

[6] www.akoaotearoa.ac.nz/blended-approaches-learner-engagement

We have been truly blessed to have received such perceptive student guidance for the next steps in our project; guidance that mirrors the academic findings of research conducted with tertiary students. Our students are simply fabulous ☺

(7) Where to from here?
In the light of the feedback and feedforward we have received, Rory, Jeremy and Cushla will gather together in weeks 4 & 5 of Term 4 (2016) to revise and refine our videos and activities & tasks.

We will place these resources on the Moodle learning management system we are currently developing. This will provide a professional and tidy platform for hosting resources that schools would be able to download and push out to students in whichever way and whichever IT platform they use in the school and classroom.

We hope to have this in place in early 2017 (if not before).

All schools, teachers and students in Years 7 & 8 will then be invited to trial our draft resources for the Church strand and provide us with further feedback and feedforward to help strengthen and add to the most promising new directions our research project might uncover.

If there is evidence that this process and these types of online resources provide an option that assists student learning in RE, and we are at least heading in the right direction, albeit that we need to continually learn from the classroom feedback and refine and add to the bank of digital resources and online approaches, we would continue with our research/professional learning project.

If we do continue we would look to crowd source other voices and faces from teachers and students (and priests) throughout the Diocese to be the voices and faces of our knowledge/content input videos.

If we do continue we would definitely be sharing our learning and this process with the National Centre for Religious Studies (NCRS), and The Catholic Institute (TCI), and the NZCBC. In this way, if our process proves to have validity and "legs" we could crowd source from throughout New Zealand and thus relatively quickly provide such online resources to augment the teaching of our NZCBC mandated RE curriculum.

At least that's our big dream and vision … reality might suggest otherwise!

Nevertheless, nothing great was ever produced by dreaming small; albeit that small steps are required to achieve big dreams!

Conclusion
Our research/professional learning project aims to work with teachers and assist teachers in the creation of rich RE classroom learning environments.

This time of great change is, however, the only time we have to live in.

Teaching today is no easy task! In "Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion", the Congregation for Catholic Education writers note the complexity of the teaching/learning process in this 21st century and great time demands upon teachers:

Professional competence is the necessary condition for openness to unleash its educational potential. A lot is being required of teachers and managers: they should have the ability to create, invent and manage learning environments that provide plentiful opportunities; they should be able to respect students' different intelligences and guide them towards significant and profound learning; they should be able to accompany their students towards lofty and challenging goals, cherish high expectations for them, involve and connect students to each other and the world. Teachers must be able to pursue different goals simultaneously and face problem situations that require a high level of professionalism and preparation.[7]

Our research/professional learning project is an attempt to work with teachers and to assist teachers rise to this challenge in the prime curriculum area of our Catholic schools, Religious Education.

We look forward to our journey; a journey that Dr Seuss probably best describes:

> *"You'll get mixed up, of course, as you already know.*
> *You'll get mixed up with many strange birds as you go.*
> *So be sure when you step.*
> *Step with care and great tact*
> *and remember that life's*
> *a great balancing act.*
> *Just never forget to be dexterous and deft.*
> *And never mix your right foot with your left"*.

Nevertheless we hope we are off to great places.

We will let you know the places we end up as we continue our adventure.

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[7] http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20140407_educare-oggi-e-domani_en.html