

Secondary RE Digital Resources Development - Research/Professional Learning Project ... **Article 1**

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

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Foreword: Why are we undertaking this secondary school research/learning project?

Because our learners have changed; because the world our students are growing up in is changing.

Whilst one may wish it were not so, this fact necessitates a change in our teaching practice in order that we might better meet the learning needs of our students and, importantly, help them think deeply and critically.

[AJ Juliani](#) (Director of Technology & Innovation for Centennial School District, Pennsylvania) provides a very interesting metaphor (*at least Mike thinks it's interesting!*) that provides insight into why we might need to provide a mechanism to easily enable teachers to alter some aspects of their teaching practice; a mechanism that supports multiple approaches and flexibility in RE classroom delivery.

Juliani puts it this way:

*When I talk with schools I often give this message: **We need to think and act like Netflix, not like Blockbuster.***

A Model That Works, Sometimes Needs to Be Changed

Blockbuster was doing everything right. They had a fantastic business. It was booming and growing each year. They would tweak something here or there. Improve customer service.

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>

Move to DVDs or Blu-ray. But the model stayed the same. Because in all honesty: the model was working.

Netflix came along and challenged Blockbuster by telling customers they didn't have to go to the store anymore. Netflix would send the DVDs right to your house...for a monthly flat fee. A lot of people liked this. They could go online, pick out the movies and tv shows to add to their queue, and have a steady flow of DVDs coming in throughout the month. Blockbuster said, "we can do that too..." – but you all know this is not how the story ends.

Netflix changed their entire business model to meet the growing needs of people who wanted to stream movies and tv shows to their devices.

The difference is simple: Netflix saw how the world was changing around them, and adjusted accordingly. They weren't doing something "better", instead they were doing something "different" because it matched what was actually happening in the world.

We Can Do Things Better, But What Should We Do Different?

To me, this is the big question. I'm not saying schools are like businesses (because they are not). I'm also definitely not saying students are like consumers (because they are not). Instead, let's take this lesson and apply it to our schools with a focus on change ... so, if all this change is happening, and we know that change is going to be a "constant" in our lives...let's come together to see what needs to be done differently.

Netflix isn't a perfect model to look at, but we can take one thing away from their story: They have changed with the world, instead of fighting back at it.

So our challenge, as teachers of RE, is to consider teaching differently to meet our students' learning needs because [our students learn/think differently from the way we did because the world they experience daily is changing](#).

Our research/professional learning project (RPLP) aims to provide a digital structure/platform with student-centred learning activities and assessments. We are trying to maximise flexibility of classroom delivery approaches and, ultimately, to make the entire RE curriculum visible for all teachers and students, in order to be able to meet the individual needs of all students.

(1) What is the aim of our collaborative RPLP?

Our aim is to assist the teaching/learning process by providing busy secondary school classroom Religious Education (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 [FaithCentral](#), 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 possibly beyond the Diocese of Christchurch).

(2) First tentative steps in exploring the concept

This works builds upon our initial research project with primary schools on providing [digital resources for the Years 7&8 Church Strand](#).

We shoulder tapped (*after first talking with principals!*) classroom RE teachers to come into the Catholic Education Office (CEO), to work for four days as we begin, with wobbly initial baby steps, our (long) journey towards developing a bank of online classroom RE resources to support the mandated Years 1 to 13 RE Curriculum.

The team of RE teachers who worked to produce this first draft resource comprised:

Teacher	School
Andrea Craig	Villa Maria College
Thomas Newton	Villa Maria College
Stephen Woodnutt	Catholic Cathedral College
Rosemary Madden	Catholic Cathedral College
Hamish McIntyre	St Bede's College
Sylwia Smiarowska	Marian College
Whitney Hansen	St Francis of Assisi Catholic School
Jeremy Cumming	(ex) Catholic Education Office
Cushla O'Connor	Catholic Education Office
Mike Nolan	Catholic Education Office

The team's brief was to take our first tentative step towards interactive online classroom resources to enhance the teaching and learning of RE in classrooms, alongside other good strategies teachers employ in their classrooms – we say 'first tentative step' as we took just one strand, The Church's Story: The Beginnings (Year 9), as our initial area of focus for online RE resource development.

In taking our first steps we seek to engage the learner at the same time as developing their Catholic knowledge and understanding.



We believe our research/professional learning project (RPLP) 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](#)", is 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

It is acknowledged that innovative teaching can be achieved without technology; that said, we are of the view that the combination of an effective teacher alongside the appropriate use of technology enhances innovation and student learning – the validity of this view is evidenced from the [student feedback we received in the second phase of our primary school project](#). In such a situation the technology simply becomes a commonplace vehicle for teaching and the facilitation of student learning.

It is our collective thinking that will create innovative solutions, not any particular technology. That said, we acknowledge both teacher thinking & technology, and we seek to harness both to give us opportunities in our teaching toolkits that did not exist previously.

(3) Parameters for this first phase/generation of our collaborative RPLP

The parameters of this first phase/generation in our collaborative RPLP are as follows:

- we will attempt that which is achievable within the resources available;
- we will continue to take ‘baby’ steps before we attempt to walk confidently;
- we will continue to work with real teachers in real classrooms, with real students;
- if this first phase/generation points to the fact that we are still 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 secondary schools.

(4) Outline Plan for the Project

The outline plan for the team’s work, in the first exploratory phase of our collaborative RPLP, was as follows:

- provide resources for both the Google and Microsoft 365 platforms;
- provide “how to” videos to assist teachers in copying the resources onto their school’s network, ready for use in their classroom;
- provide “how to” videos to ensure all technologies used in the resources are easily understood for teachers who may not have come across this particular technology;
- request, teachers across the Diocese to trial these resources in their classrooms and provide feedback and feedforward;

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

- allow the possibility of using a [flipped learning](#) model to supplement teaching and content delivery, **but only where a teacher deems this model as appropriate** ([see the student feedback section in Article 2](#));
- 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;
- ensuring appropriate achievement objectives and learning outcomes (success criteria) of the mandated RE curriculum are covered;
- further develop independent learners;
- encourage curiosity;
- deepen our students RE knowledge;
- provide challenging questions and vehicles for applying and demonstrating students' RE knowledge;
- provide opportunities for enhanced peer collaboration;
- allow for differentiation according to student capabilities and need.

Please note: the technology is simply a tool; the technology is not a learning outcome!

(5) A summary of our RPLP to date

The summary details and appropriate links are as follows:

Within our first version/generation site you will find vocab quizzes, pre and post assessments and a range of student-centred and levelled activities/tasks (*from prescriptive through to open-ended, active inquiry tasks*) to develop your students' knowledge and understanding of the Catholic Faith, as detailed and provided for in the NZCBC's mandated secondary RE curriculum.

Here is our [Secondary RE Digital learning Space](#).

Here is the [Teacher Support Material](#) for our Secondary RE Student Digital learning Space.

For those Microsoft365-based schools, [here is the link to the notebook](#) you can share with your students ☺

One might summarise the approach taken in our RPLP in this way: we aim to integrate technology in the classroom in order to maximise teacher-student engagement (*as positive human relationships form the heart of classroom learning*) as well as maximising flexibility of approach for teachers and students alike.

We have taken a blended approach (which teachers may use to a greater or lesser extent, as they so desire) **where digital engagement is embedded within and alongside face-to-face forms of instruction.**

The feedback from our primary students in their RPLP was clear; they wanted a blended approach, **not** a pure [flipped learning](#) approach.

We await with great interest to see if our Year 9 secondary school students see things in a similar manner ☺

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 thus obtain the 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 primary school 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 an 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 and the director of the attendant tasks/activities to consolidate student knowledge acquisition and learning. Of course an experienced RE teacher may well provide the expert input without using the video.

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 enough³.

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.

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 primary school students in our primary RPLP 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.

Our RPLP aims to provide maximum flexibility in approach for teachers. That said, student feedback from our primary RPLP might suggest a framework such as this may be fruitful:

- (a) mini lesson (*whole group instruction and discussion - using the video or teacher instruction to open the process is a teacher decision*),
- (b) independent student practice (with teacher support when and where required), and then
- (c) sharing (partner share, large group share, digital publishing share, etc.) of the important work students undertook that day/week/unit.

Again, we await with great interest to see if our Year 9 secondary school students see things in a similar manner 😊

(6) Why might it be important that our primary colleagues are in a similar RPLP with us?

Mike Nolan is of the view that this a vital step in our aim to assist the teaching/learning process by providing busy classroom Religious Education (RE) teachers with resources that engage the learner.

If our big dream came to be a reality in the future all RE teachers from Years 4-10 would be able to see the entire suite of digital RE resources used to support the teaching of the NZCBC's mandated RE curriculum from Years 4–10.

Why might this be important?

Mike's view is that this would enable RE teachers to be in a position to truly differentiate the RE curriculum to meet the needs of individual students.

For example, if a pre-test shows that a particular student already knows the content of a unit of work that is about to be taught, then a teacher might do two things:

- (1) this student might be encouraged to simply undertake the higher level thinking "create and share" task for the unit; *and*
- (2) this student might also be encouraged to undertake the pre-test for the same unit at the next Year level up (*or similar unit if it is a Year 8 moving into the Year 9 secondary curriculum*) and then move through that unit of work as the pre-test results might indicate.

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

In this way a student is always able to access the next steps in their academic journey and are not simply marking time on content they already know.

In a similar fashion, a secondary RE teacher who has a student who is not academically ready for a particular secondary curriculum unit of work would be able to direct them to the same unit of work (*or similar if it is, say, a Year 9 student undertaking a Year 7/8 unit of work*) at a suitable academic level.

These approaches to providing individualised and differentiated pathways would become possible because the entire NZCBC-mandated RE curriculum would be digitally visible to all RE teachers and all RE students.

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!

(7) Where to from here?

Our team will gather together in Term 4 (2018) to review and reflect upon the feedback we receive.

We will provide a forum for digital feedback for teachers alongside a face-to-face feedback session for teachers and representative Year 9 students (2 from each secondary school).

We will be sharing our learning and this structure and this collaborative process with the National Centre for Religious Studies (NCRS) and the NZCBC.

In this way, if our structure and process proves to have validity and “legs”, we (i.e. RE teachers and administrators throughout the various Dioceses of New Zealand) might consider collaboratively crowd sourcing and taking responsibility for particular strands and thus relatively “quickly” provide such online resources to augment the teaching of our NZCBC-mandated primary RE curriculum (and Years 9 & 10?).

(8) Conclusion

Our RPLP aims to work with teachers and assist teachers in the creation of rich RE classroom learning environments.

Teaching today is no easy task! This is a time of great change and it is the only time we have to live in. 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.⁵

Our RPLP is an attempt to work with teachers and to assist teachers rise to this challenge in the prime curriculum area of our Catholic schools, RE. 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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⁵ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20140407_educare-oggi-e-domani_en.html