

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

You can say today we are not living an era of change but a change of era ... [t]his, our time, requires living problems as challenges and not obstacles: the Lord is active in the work of the world ... [w]herever you are, never build walls or borders, but meeting squares and field hospitals.²

(1) The genesis of our research/learning project

As part of our ongoing commitment to ensuring that Religious Education (RE) is delivered in the same robust manner as all curricula areas we sought to begin a process whereby we create interactive online resources to support the Years 7 to 9 RE Curriculum.

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 existing RE programme, available to teachers on [Faith Alive](#), and make the learning process relevant and engaging for the 21st century classroom.

Please be assured that whilst digital pedagogy and resource provision is the major focus of this research/professional learning project, we are acutely aware that the identity of a classroom hinges on the relationship between student and teacher; in other words, the human person is at the centre of our classrooms.

Our desire is to support, in and through our RE classrooms, the wonderful words and approach outlined by Pope Francis in his 2015 [World Communications Day message](#):

*“By growing daily in our awareness of the vital importance of encountering others ... we will employ technology wisely, rather than letting ourselves be dominated by it ... [t]he great challenge facing us today is to *learn once again how to talk to one another*, not simply how to generate and consume information.”³*

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 Pope Francis (November 2015) <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/catholicism-can-and-must-change-francis-forcefully-tells-italian-church-gathering>

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

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 see no reason why we, collectively, cannot be national leaders in this important process.

Achieving the best possible academic standards is a goal for all Catholic schools. [...] Parents should not have to choose between the best academic standards and a Catholic education; the Catholic school should employ them both. Expecting and facilitating the achievement of the best possible academic standards for all children, whatever their ability, is part of enabling each student to use his or her God-given talents in promoting the good of society and to spread the Kingdom of God.⁴

(2) First tentative steps in exploring the concept

We advertised and called for principals to nominate a suitable classroom teacher from their school to come into the Catholic Education Office, to work for two weeks with Cushla O'Connor (Primary RE Adviser) and Jeremy Cumming (Secondary RE Adviser) as we begin, with very 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.

Rory Paterson (B Theol) was duly seconded for two weeks.

Rory is the Deputy Principal at St Patrick's School, Greymouth.

A delightful surprise of the initial advertising process and dialogue was the willingness of **Lorraine Frances-Rees** (MRE) to work (at distance) with the team as our professional mentor and critical friend as we work up our first set of digital resources for classroom use and, in the next wee while, receive professional feedback and feedforward from students and teachers who trial our first set of resources in their RE classrooms.

Lorraine is the Principal at St Joseph's School, Pleasant Point.

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 strand, at one level, Years 7 & 8, 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 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

⁴ New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference (2014) *The Catholic Education of School-Age Children*

*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.*⁵

Further on 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.*⁶

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

(3) Parameters of the project

The parameters, in this initial exploratory phase 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.

⁵ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20140407_educare-oggi-e-domani_en.html

⁶ Ibid

(4) Outline Plan for the Project

The outline plan for the team's work, in this initial exploratory phase of our research/professional learning project, is 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 (Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes)**

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 whilst 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.

(5) What have we created so far? - in two short weeks!

In the last two weeks of Term 1, 2016 we have developed, using Google, a draft RE resource site (populated with resources for the Church strand only at this first step of our journey) with the following structure:

- a teacher page;
- a Year 7 student page;
- a Year 8 student page.

Each of the student pages has:

- 6 – 7 key ideas;
- 1 video plus learning tasks per key idea;
- 1 learning task per learning objective (from the NZCBC's mandated RE curriculum);
- Quizzes/quizlets;
- Rubrics.

Here is summary of the structure of the Google site we have created:

Teacher Page	Year 7 Student Page	Year 8 Student Page
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why are we doing this presentation? • Achievement objectives. • Key statement (sourced from the theological focus). • What is the learning sequence? • Flipped learning video. • Two minute professional development. • Resource answers. • How one accesses the learning tasks. • Affective domain tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key ideas 1 – 6 (may have 2 – 4 learning objectives). • Videos – one for each key idea. • Learning tasks (one for each learning objective). • Watch, summarise and question sheets; • Quizzes/Quizlets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key ideas 1 – 6 (may have 2 – 4 learning objectives). • Videos – one for each key idea. • Learning tasks (one for each learning objective). • Watch, summarise and question sheets; • Quizzes/Quizlets.

(6) Problems, problems, problems!

If you've read this far you might be thinking of all the problems that might arise and lots of reasons why this approach to the RE teaching/learning process is not a good idea!

As we roll out our research/professional learning project, and we will do so by way of a face-to-face launch with teachers, we will have the opportunity to talk through potential problems/roadblocks such as these, and many more we are sure:

Potential Problems & Roadblocks	
(a) Technological	(b) Pedagogical
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not everyone has access to 1:1 devices; • teachers do not wish to change their method of delivery; • teachers need PD to get comfortable with such methods of delivery; • costs; • we are not in line with the rest of NZ; • what's wrong with what we do now?; • is this change for change's sake?; • using technology means we will lose our Catholic Special Character; • etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it's too prescriptive ... can't we choose? • I just don't have the energy for this; I have only two years until retirement; • does using technology improve student learning outcomes? • I don't have time for this; • other curriculum are more important; • I'm not going to reinvent the wheel; • we will lose the co-operative learning elements of the RE programme; • this will diminish the prayer aspect of my RE delivery; • etc.

(7) Where are we going from here?

Before we roll out the initial trial and ask all Year 7 & 8 teachers and students throughout the Diocese to use the resources and provide us with feedback and feedforward on the concept, five schools have accepted our invitation to undertake an "initial" initial trial in their Year 7 & Year 8 classrooms.

The five schools are:

- St Mary's school (Hokitika)
- Our Lady Star of the Sea School (Sumner)
- Our Lady of the Assumption School (Hoon Hay)
- Catholic Cathedral College
- St Joseph's School (Timaru)

You might well ask why we are having an "initial" initial trial?

The answer is simple; we don't want to inflict any major initial problems that we might find upon the entire Diocese!

In addition, we will work through the "initial" initial feedback and feedforward we receive to improve upon a first shot and then seek feedback and feedforward from all schools throughout the Diocese as they (hopefully) engage with the process and the resources we have produced for the students in Years 7 & 8 studying the Church strand.

(8) My school is not in the "initial" initial trial, however ...

Can I get a feel for the online process and the online resources?

Sure thing 😊 [check this out](#)⁷, it's Key Idea 6: *The Church - Catholic and Apostolic* from the Year 8 Church Strand.

(9) Where to from here?

Once we have received the feedback and feedforward from the teachers and students in our 5 "initial" initial trial schools we will invite Years 7 & 8 teachers to gather together (in regions) to launch our research/learning project and its conceptual underpinning.

We are working with Anaru White (CORE Education) as our technical expert and as we open one door we see another in the distance that needs to be opened!

One such "door" is the need to use a learning management system, we are thinking Moodle at this point, on which to host such resources. This would 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. This element of our research/learning project is a piece of work that is about to commence and it will not be available to the "initial" initial trial schools!

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

If there is enthusiasm to continue and there is evidence that this process and these types of online resources provide an option that assists student learning 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.

⁷ <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1WQFc0gUou8qCJ8VrWUJWHSdcPAn3EKpG-CrFEPrtSfA/edit?ts=57156ab0#slide=id.p>

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 is being undertaken in a time of great change.

Such times are never easy times and seldom are they comfortable times.

In “Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion” (2014), the Congregation for Catholic Education puts it this way :

Nowadays education is going through rapid changes. The generation to which it is addressed is changing quickly as well, therefore each educator must constantly face a situation which, as Pope Francis put it, “provides us with new challenges which sometimes are difficult for us to understand.”⁸

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

Be it viewed as an exciting time or a daunting time, we are called to rise to the challenges of this time and to present our RE programme in a manner that speaks to the world our students inhabit.

The internet offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God.⁹

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

At all times the person of Jesus Christ and the human person lie at the heart of endeavours:

The digital world can be an environment rich in humanity. A network not of wires but of people.¹⁰

⁸ https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20150123_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html

⁹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/09/19-memorable-quotes-from-pope-francis/>

¹⁰ Ibid

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.

Mike Nolan
Manager
Catholic Education Office
Christchurch

Cushla O’Connor
Primary RE Adviser
Catholic Education Office
Christchurch

Jeremy Cumming
Secondary RE Adviser
Catholic Education Office
Christchurch

Rory Paterson
Deputy Principal
St Patrick’s School
Greymouth

Lorraine Frances-Rees
Principal
St Joseph’s School
Pleasant Point

(28 April 2016)