

Research/Professional Learning Project - Online Religious Education Assessment

*Well, we know where we're goin'
But we don't know where we've been
And we know what we're knowin'
But we can't say what we've seen*

*We're on a ride to nowhere
Come on inside
Takin' that ride to nowhere
We'll take that ride*

from *Road To Nowhere* (*Talking Heads* - David Byrne)

The genesis of our research/learning project

Mike Nolan (Manager, Catholic Education Office, Christchurch) attended the Australian Catholic University's 6th International Conference on Catholic Educational Leadership in August 2013.

Mike attended a workshop entitled *Online Religious Literacy Assessment as a Tool for Improved Teaching and Learning in RE*. This workshop was presented by Patrick Nisbet (Director, Creative Ministry Resources Pty Ltd, Australia). Catholic Education in the Diocese of Parramatta and Creative Ministry Resources have been in partnership since 2010 to deliver diocesan-wide online religious literacy assessment.

Attending this workshop set Mike to thinking about the application of online RE assessment to our mandated national RE curriculum in New Zealand. After a follow up conversation with Patrick, Mike was convinced there was merit in exploring this possibility.

First tentative steps in exploring the concept

After returning to Christchurch Mike talked through the idea with Cushla O'Connor (Primary RE Adviser, Christchurch) to gauge Cushla's initial reaction. Cushla could see worth in exploring the idea and after some discussion and clarification of our thinking, we decided to meet and talk through the concept with 5 primary school principals, representing a range of schools (low, mid and high decile; rural and city, small and large).

In each of our conversations we received a warm welcome and much healthy food for thought.

The 5 principals agreed that the best professional development would be the writing working party workshops when appropriate people from each school gather together to write the assessment questions. All agreed that we ought approach this project as a research project.

Each principal could see enough merit in the proposal to take it to the full group (29 primary and 7 secondary) at our Principals' Day in October 2013. Whilst it was proposed to start the project in our primary schools, such a project would also have application to Year 9 and/or Year 10.

Prior to the Principals' Day meeting we contacted Anne Kennedy (Associate Director, National Centre for Religious Studies) regarding supporting us in our research/learning project – if indeed the principal's group saw merit in such a research/learning project. Anne was supportive whilst also noting that she would, obviously, need to talk this through with Professor Anne Tuohy (Director, The Catholic Institute of Aotearoa New Zealand) and would not be able to do that before the Principals' Day meeting.

At the Principal's Day meeting we provided principals with a summary of the email correspondence that Mike had previously had with Patrick Nisbet up to that point and background information on Creative Ministry Resources.

Mike presented the purpose of this possible project to the principals – the purpose, as Mike saw it at that point in time, was:

To provide our teachers, participating schools (and the Diocese) with well-informed feedback on their students' knowledge and understanding of the (say) Year 4 NZ RE curriculum in order that the teachers and schools, and the Diocese in terms of professional development offerings and perhaps the development of a new TCI paper(s) to support teachers in teaching the RE curriculum, might reflect on and respond to individual and collective teaching practices in order to continuously improve RE learning outcomes for their students.

For example, is a concept not well understood because of:

- a lack of teacher knowledge?
- an unhelpful pedagogical approach?
- a lack of targeted teaching strategies?; etc.;

In other words, by interrogating the data/results we will be provided with teacher inquiry questions to focus on improving student learning outcomes.

The response from principals was positive and there was a clear consensus that we ought take the next step towards confirming the research/learning project.

Following the Principal's Day meeting we contacted Professor Anne Tuohy and Anne Kennedy and both agreed to support us in our research/learning project – if indeed there was a consensus to confirming such a research/learning project.

We confirmed Wednesday 7 May 2014 as the day Patrick would come to Christchurch to help facilitate the official launch of the details of the project with those who lead and teach RE in our Catholic primary schools. At the conclusion of the launch day with the RE teaching professionals we would be in a position to confirm or reject the proposed systemic research professional learning project.

In December 2103 (and again in February 2014) we emailed primary (and secondary) principals, Directors of Religious Studies (DRSs), and boards of trustees to update them on progress and confirm the launch date for what we hoped would be an exciting systemic RE professional learning journey for us all.

In March 2014 we asked principals and DRSs to nominate an appropriate person(s) to attend the launch day. Twenty five primary teaching professionals (principals, DRSs and teachers) gathered together at the Catholic Education Office in Christchurch on Wednesday 7 May 2014.

Launch and initial workshop day outline

(1) How did we get here?

The day began with Mike Nolan outlining the genesis of the proposed project.

Mike spoke to and around the following points:

(a) This project is a commitment to innovation

- This research project may turn out to not be a good idea; it may not work ... if that's the case then we will know a little more about how this issue of obtaining well-informed feedback on our students' knowledge and understanding might be better be tackled and solved.

- This research project is all about improving, evolving, innovation, learning and feedback ... for us and, ultimately, for the benefit of our students.

(b) What is important?

- Our NZ Catholic Bishops Conference's RE curriculum is our starting point.
- Our RE curriculum is the driving force.
- We must be faithful to and honest about the delivery of the RE curriculum.
- We must cover all the key aspects of the RE curriculum in our teaching.
- Our initial task, as I [Mike] see it, is to write a bank of relevant student assessment questions that reflects all the key aspects of the RE curriculum we are tasked with teaching.
- "All students, whatever their level of faith development, need some understanding of the theological content of their faith, not just an understanding of the cultural elements of Catholicism. For those students who already have a committed relationship with Jesus Christ the religious education programme must deliver at the level needed to sustain their desire to grow in knowledge and understanding."
The Catholic education of school-age children (2014) NZCBC

(c) What does assessment enable?

- Assessment enables us to check our students' understanding, learning and knowledge of our RE curriculum.
- Assessment enables us to reflect on the effectiveness of our teaching and respond to individual and collective teaching practices in order to increase RE learning outcomes for our students.
- Assessment enables us to set meaningful individual, class and whole-school RE targets.
- "Religious education takes the form of a school subject, presenting the Christian message and the Christian event with the same seriousness and depth with which other learning areas present their knowledge."
Catechetical Directory for ANZ #3.1.3 (2011)
- It is necessary, therefore, that religious instruction in schools appear as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines.
General Directory for Catechesis #73 (1997)

(d) Towards a vision for our research/learning project ... draft 1

To develop a bank of student-centred questions & use online RE assessment to provide teachers with objective data to:

- check their students' understanding, learning and knowledge of the learning outcomes in our national RE curriculum;
- reflect on, and respond to, the effectiveness of their individual and collective teaching practices; and
- set meaningful individual, class and whole-school RE targets to make learning more effective for students.

(2) Features of Creative Ministry Resource's online assessment

Patrick Nisbet (Creative Ministry Resources: <http://ministryresources.com/about.aspx>) showcased the many features of this form of online RE assessment as a tool for improving teaching and learning in religious education – see <http://www.chchceo.org.nz/?sid=289> for more details.

(3) Multiple Choice Question Writing

Professor Anne Tuohy presented this session. Anne provided the context for using multiple choice questions in assessing religious education by sharing with the participants her experience when working as a lecturer in Theology at the Australian Catholic University.

Having expressed the value of this tool to assess RE she then provided participants with an article entitled *Exploring Theology: making sense of the Catholic tradition*. They were asked to read this article and then identify the key learning from it. Concepts such as the early life of Jesus, his ministry, death and resurrection were identified. Then, in groups, participants were asked to write and share one multi choice question for the reading.

The following points became evident:

1. In assessing we need to first establish what our learning outcome is.
2. The questions can range from simple to complex therefore providing the teacher with more than just knowledge recall.

(4) Confirming our target year level for the initial online assessment

We considered a number of options from multi-year levels to single year levels. After much discussion and wise counsel from Anne Kennedy, we decided to begin by assessing Year 4 students, in the fourth term of the year.

The points Anne made to the group in support of Year 4 being an appropriate year level to test the students' RE knowledge were:

- Year 4 student's literacy and reasoning skills enable them to respond independently to the assessment survey.
- By Year 4 students have covered all of the Sacraments of Initiation and will have some experience of celebrating Sacrament to bring to their responses.
- In the Communion of Saints Strand students will have covered the 4 focusses of this strand – Year 1 Mary, Year 2 Saints and Inspiring People, Year 3 Life, Death and Christian Hope which will allow for a wide coverage of the whole concept of the Communion of Saints.
- In the God Year 4 programme the students cover some Old Testament people and concepts, e.g. The Exodus, the Ten Commandments, covenant, and Trinity – these are important foundational beliefs and understandings which would be useful to assess as a guide to further learning.
- By Year 4 students have been introduced to the concepts of grace and sin and knowing how teachers/adults can struggle to understand these concepts it would be helpful to pin point areas that need further consolidation.
- Students in Year 4 have been introduced to many of the important Scripture stories and being able to assess the impact of the people and their actions in these stories would be very helpful for future resource development.
- By Year 4 students will be able to show signs of their developing relationship with Jesus and why this is important.

- Having celebrated the Liturgical Year at least 4 times at school, students should be capable of demonstrating knowledge of the seasons and the key events behind them and how the Church celebrates them.
- After 4 years of using bi-lingual terms for important names and concepts in an RE context (e.g. hehu karaiti, te wairua tapu, aroha, tika, etc.), students would be expected to recognise, use and understand these alongside their English equivalents. It would be very important to use them in the questions of the RE test as their inclusion in the RE programme was part of the bishops' commitment to biculturalism and enculturation when the programme was developed.
- The choice of Year 4 is endorsed by NEMP (National Education Monitoring Project) as the ideal time to monitor students' learning as it is half way through their primary education.

(5) Multiple Choice Question Writing – having a go!

Cushla O'Connor facilitated this session. The participants worked in groups, putting into practice the theory that had been presented during Session 3 by Professor Tuohy. The following strands from the mandated *Religious Education Programme for Catholic Primary Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand* (1997) were used:

- Year 4 Jesus Christ – Hehu Karaiti: *Jesus came to show people how to live and lead them to God;* and
- Year 4 Sacrament – Hakarameta: *Food for life.*

Cushla provided each group with:

- The theological focus page from each strand (pp.4 & 5 in all teacher manuals).
- The overview of lesson material page which succinctly summarises the Achievement Objectives (AO) of the strand and the Learning Outcomes (LO) that are related to each achievement objective and lessons in the unit of work. (p.12 in all teacher manuals).
- The summative self-assessment sheet for students at the end of each of the strand lesson material.

Participants had also brought along their own copies of each of the teachers manuals and the student activity book for the Year 4 level. This provided access to the teacher's notes related to each lesson.

These resources provided each group with enough material to practice writing three multiple choice questions for their allocated strand; one easy, one moderate and one difficult. It was explained to the group that we would share the questions at the end of the session and that we would critique them for their validity and robustness.

The writing process took about an hour. Everyone was fully engaged and much animated discussion took place.

We would point out that this was our first ever attempt at writing multiple choice questions and we did not have any particular tools at your disposal on the day, e.g. 10 Rules for Writing Multiple Choice Questions (http://thelearningcoach.com/elearning_design/rules-for-multiple-choice-questions/); so please evaluate our participants' first ever attempts with generosity and loving support – we were just in the “trying to figure out how to crawl stage” in our development!

Below is a sample of the questions generated at our launch and initial workshop day.

Patrick Nisbet's initial critique of the multiple choice questions we generated is found in the appendix.

One may debate Patrick's expert and initial critique of a particular question. That is not the point; the point is that we are commencing a dialogue where people with various talents and areas of expertise are exchanging ideas with the aim of establishing a precise question that is able to measure a Year 4 student's understanding, learning and knowledge of a particular AO and/or LO. As we are beginning to understand, this is no easy task!

(a) Sample of "easy" questions generated

Example 1: (Year 4, Jesus, AO 1, Lesson 2, LO 2)

God's grace allows us to:

- grow tall and strong.
- forgive people.
- play sport well
- learn more in R.E.

Example 2: (Year 4, Sacrament, AO3, Lesson 5, LO2)

The Eucharist is a sacred meal first celebrated by Jesus:

- at the wedding feast at Cana.
- receiving mana in the desert.
- at the Last Supper.
- at the feeding of the 5,000 .

Example 3: (Year 4, Sacrament, AO 2, Lesson 3, LO2)

A symbol and ritual used to celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism is:

- pouring of water and saying the words.
- confessing your sins.
- laying on of hands.
- receiving the body and blood of Jesus.

Example 4: (Year 4, Jesus, AO 3, Lesson 6, LO4)

In the gospel story of Jesus healing the leper, He showed tika,(the right and proper thing to do by):

- walking past the man with leprosy.
- touching the leper and healing him.
- stopping and speaking to the leper.
- telling the leper to go to a temple and pray.

Example 5: (Year 4, Sacrament, AO2, Lesson 3, LO2)

Bread and wine are symbols of:

- Baptism.
- Confirmation.
- Eucharist.
- Penance.

(b) Sample of "moderately difficult" questions generated

Example 1: (Year 4, Sacrament, AO4, Lesson 6, LO1)

At the Last Supper Jesus:

- cured the blind man.
- was baptised by John the Baptist.
- fed the people with bread and fish.
- blessed the bread and wine.

Example 2: (Year 4, Jesus, AO2, Lesson 3, LO2)

I can help the Reign of God grow on earth when I:

- speak kind words when others are mean.
- say mean things to other people.
- plant seeds to grow in my garden.
- go to Church on a Sunday.

Example 3: (Year 4, Sacrament, AO3, Lesson 5, LO3)

The Eucharist is a sacred meal because:

- we have it at Mass.
- it is the body and blood of Jesus.
- the priest blesses the bread.
- we receive it at our first Holy Communion.

Example 4: (Year 4, Sacrament, AO 4, Lesson 6, LO2)

In Eucharist we receive:

- ashes on our forehead.
- a blessing from the priest.
- the body and blood of Christ.
- the bread and the wine.

Example 5: (Year 4, Jesus, AO1 , Lesson 2, LO2)

God's grace helps people to:

- recall prayers.
- grow in holiness.
- explain what a Sacrament is.
- talk about the early life of Jesus.

Example 6: (Year 4, Sacrament, AO3 , Lesson 5, LO 1)

Jesus showed the Eucharist is a sacred meal when he:

- gathered his friends together.
- washed the disciples' feet.
- took, blessed, broke and shared the bread and wine.
- passed Judas the cup.

(c) Sample of "difficult" questions generated

Example 1: (Year 4, Sacrament, AO4, Lesson 7, LO3)

By receiving the Eucharist:

- people receive God's forgiveness.
- the Holy Spirit helps people to go into the world and be more loving.
- become members of God's family.
- people are healed in body and soul.

Example 2: (Year 4, Sacrament, AO1, Lesson 2, LO1)

Reflective times are time of:

- going to Church.
- dancing to loud music.
- thinking about God's presence and feeling God near.
- quiet and calm.

Example 3: (Year 4, Jesus, AO4, Lesson 2, LO2)

The first letter of John tells us:

- about the ten commandments.
- about the creation story.
- about how much we are loved by God.
- about the birth of Jesus.

Example 4: (Year 4, Jesus, AO4, Lesson 2, LO2)

The first letter of John tells us:

- all about God's reign.
- all about God's justice.
- all about God's love.
- all about God's peace.

All participants found this session to be invaluable. Not only did they practice writing valid multiple choice questions but they also commented that it made them really dig deeper in to the content of the strand:

- What is it that we are being asked to teach?
- From the body of knowledge presented which learning outcomes do we believe are key and therefore need to be assessed?

(6) Where to from here?

We think it is fair to say that the group was “fizzing” and more energised at the end of the day than the start of the day. All participants were clear that we ought carry on with our proposed online religious education assessment research/professional learning project.

So, thanks to Patrick's fist class wisdom, professionalism, creativity, personality and technical skill, we have now “cemented in” our systemic research/learning project on online RE assessment ... we're off and away.

Our next steps will be to gather groups of teachers across the Diocese together to begin the challenging, yet hopefully the most professionally enriching aspect of the project, task of writing around 150 – 200 multiple choice questions that cover the mandated *Religious Education Programme for Catholic Primary Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand* (NZ Catholic Bishops' Conference, 1997).

We have a long way to go, but *we'll take that ride* and *we know where we're goin'*. Well we know generally where we're going – we do not have Google maps to direct us; we simply have a compass and a general idea of the direction we're heading!

We trust this research/learning project will enable us to better *know where we've been* and to be in a data-based position *to say what we've seen*. In this way we, as individual schools and as a system of Catholic schools, will be able to use the assessment data the project will provide to

- more accurately describe and *know what we're known*';
- reflect upon how we might better plan for systemic as well as individually targeted professional development and RE learning support for teachers;
- reflect upon individual and school-wide teaching practices that might further improve RE learning outcomes for our students.

As Dr Seuss says:

*“And will you succeed?
Yes! You will, indeed! (98 and ¾ per cent guaranteed.)”*

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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&

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Appendix

Patrick Nisbet’s initial critique of each of our sample multiple choice questions

attached