

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)

Beginning to crawl – the second in a series of articles outlining our research/learning project

The first article (3/06/14) outlining our research/learning project ended by stating that, “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 Years 1-4 of the mandated *Religious Education Programme for Catholic Primary Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand* (NZ Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 1997).

(1) Next steps in exploring the concept

In the covering email that accompanied the first report/write-up of our research learning project Mike Nolan asked the following question and outlined what was anticipated to be the next step in the process:

“Next Steps & a Question for Principals ...

Our next steps are to work with groups of teachers throughout the Diocese to draft the questions for the eventual RE online assessment.

All principals, DRSs and teachers at the launch day (*as did principals at the 2013 Principals’ Day*) agreed that the best professional development will be the writing working party sessions when we get appropriate people from each school to gather together to write the questions.

With this in mind, I write to ask principals whether you would be prepared (*in principle, without having a definite date at this point*) to release one appropriate person (*probably, but not necessarily, the person who attended the launch day*) to attend an initial question-writing workshop day to “kick start” the question-writing and drafting process?

We would propose running three initial “kick start” question-writing workshop days (*dates to be negotiated and confirmed*): one day in Timaru, one day in Greymouth and one day in Christchurch.

Such proposed initial “kick start” question-writing workshop days would enable us not only to make a great start on the question-writing process, it would also increase the leadership density of this process when we go out to schools (*probably clusters of schools*) to further develop the question-writing process with RE teachers at staff meeting times (3.15pm – 4.30pm(ish) staff meetings).”

So after ongoing discussions we rearranged our plan and we ended up having two major writing days of two days each!

On 10/09/14 we emailed boards of trustees, principals and DRSs to inform them of the wee changes to the initial plan:

“Further to our email of 3 June 2014 and its attendant report/write-up (*attached*), this email provides you with an update on progress regarding the systemic religious education (RE) research/professional learning project.

Cushla O’Connor (Primary RE Adviser) has completed a round of DRSs’ meetings throughout the Diocese where feedback was positive and enthusiasm was high for the proposal of two initial “kick start” question-writing workshop days, one in Christchurch and one in South Canterbury.

People were invited to register their interest in these initial “kick start” question-writing workshops. The importance of workshop participants having a thorough knowledge of the RE programme from Years 1-4 was emphasised and accepted as appropriate.

With this in mind we have confirmed the following initial “kick start” question-writing workshop days:

Mid Canterbury/Christchurch

Wednesday 24 September 2014 (9.00am – 3.00pm) at the Catholic Education Office
Thursday 25 September 2014 (9.00am – 3.00pm) at the Catholic Education Office

South Canterbury

Wednesday 22 October 2014 (9.00am – 3.00pm) at the St Joseph’s School, Timaru
Thursday 23 October 2014 (9.00am – 3.00pm) at the St Joseph’s School, Timaru

We thank the following people for their willingness to share their wealth of RE knowledge and curriculum expertise and leadership at the initial “kick start” question-writing workshop days:

Mid Canterbury/Christchurch

Kath Clark (DRS, Sacred Heart School, Addington)
Leigh Cunningham (DRS, St Joseph’s School, Rangiora)
Elizabeth McDowell (DRS, Our Lady of the Assumption School, Hoon Hay)
Maria McDonald (DRS, St Mary’s School, Christchurch)
Jacque Culling (DRS, Christ the King School, Burnside)
Catherine Quinn (DRS, St Albans Catholic School)
Catherine Rush (DRS, St Joseph’s School, Ashburton)

South Canterbury

Angela Marshall (Principal, St Joseph’s School, Fairlie)
Bernadette Ewer (DRS, St Joseph’s School, Pleasant Point)
Suzy Duffield (DRS, St Joseph’s School, Temuka)
Debbie Plant (DRS, Sacred Heart School, Timaru)
Trish McCambridge (DRS, St Joseph’s School, Timaru)
Carmel Brosnahan-Pye (Principal, St Joseph’s School, Timaru)

... At this point we anticipate a process along these lines:

- In the first instance we will look at prayer and ask the question what prayers do our students need to know by the end of Year 4 (using the Prayer Module)
- Then we may look at the Liturgical Year and 'Church' practices (gesture, sign, symbol etc., using overall teacher knowledge and the Liturgical Year module)
- The next step would be to divide into two groups, each working on a strand each.
 - (a) Using the page that has the achievement objectives on it, with the learning outcomes, and looking at these across Years 0-4 we can decide on the core questions (knowledge based) that we think need to be tested.

As part of our own formative assessment of progress the groups could swap the strands and repeat the process and then compare what questions had been written and discuss, arriving at some consensus.

- (b) The page that focuses on attitude/values and prayers we will also be used as this will help us craft 'understanding/affective' based questions."

Again the wisdom of Dr Seuss (*albeit that we would use the plural case*) best describes the professional quality of the collective wisdom of the participants and the intent of the question-writing workshops:

*"You have brains in your head.
 You have feet in your shoes.
 You can steer yourself in any direction you choose.
 You're on your own.
 And you know what you know.
 And YOU are the one who'll decide where to go ..."*

The timetable for the two-day Christchurch question-writing workshop was:

Christchurch Workshop Timetable

Wednesday 24 September	
9.00am - 9.15am	Gathering
9.15am - 10.00am	Prayer in the Primary RE programme What questions do we need to write in regards to this? Create a list
10.00am - 10.30am	Liturgical Year Create a list based on the Liturgical Year programme
10.30am - 10.50am	Morning Tea
10.50 am - 11.50am	Split into groups: 1. God strand 2. Jesus strand Using the achievement objectives and learning outcomes create a list of what you deem to be the most important knowledge?
11.50am - 12.50pm	Swap strands: • Create a similar list for the other strand you have not worked on?
12.50pm - 1.30pm	Lunch
1.40pm - 2.00pm	1. Compare the core knowledge lists in both God and Jesus strands 2. Read Ten Rules for multiple choice question writing
2.00pm - 3.00pm	Begin writing process
Thursday 25 September	
9.00am - 2.00pm	Continue writing process
2.00pm - 3.00pm	Critique the questions written

A similar timetable to the Christchurch workshop was followed for the two-day South Canterbury question-writing workshop; with the exception that the South Canterbury workshop focussed on the Sacrament and Church strands.

A further two-day question-writing workshop was held in Christchurch on Thursday 19 and Friday 20 February 2015. This workshop focussed on the Holy Spirit and Communion of Saints strands.

Out of the Christchurch and South Canterbury question-writing workshops we generated 127 draft questions on the God, Jesus, Prayer, Liturgical Year, Sacrament and Church strands of the Years 1-4 religious education programme.

We took careful note of the points made by Patrick Nisbet (CEO, Creative Ministry Resources) in his critique of the sample questions we generated in the “having a go” session of our initial March 2014 workshop launch day and were pleasantly surprised ☺ that many of the questions we generated “passed muster”!

That said, we provide below six examples where Patrick’s knowledge and wisdom provided us with the following question critiques:

Question

The Eucharist is a sacred meal because at it:

- a) people are blessed
- b) people gather together
- c) people are fed by receive Jesus’ body and blood
- d) people listen to the Word of God

“meal” and “fed” are too closely linked

Question

A ritual is a set way of doing things. Symbols are used in Sacraments to help us more fully understand the message more deeply. A symbol of Baptism is:

- a) the Eucharist
- b) an outstretched hand
- c) the purple stole
- d) the white garment

redundant sentences

Question

A pilgrimage is a:

- a) journey for a time of rest and relaxation
- b) prayerful journey to a holy place
- c) journey to a holy place
- d) prayerful journey that you can do alone

add the word prayerful

Question

The first book of the Old Testament is about begins with:

- a) Jesus’ life on earth birth
- b) miracles Jesus performed
- c) the creation of the world
- d) Moses receiving the 10 commandments

Question

After meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus:

- a) became a disciple of Jesus
- b) took no notice of Jesus became a Rabbi
- c) kept on cheating people
- d) did not do what Jesus told him went to the temple and prayed

options b), c) and d) are all negative and are easily excluded

Question

In the Gospel of John, what was Jesus' first miracle?

- a) ~~helping~~ **healing** a leper
- b) feeding a crowd of people
- c) raising a man from the dead
- d) ~~preaching in the temple~~ **walking on water**

helping is not a miracle

preaching is not a miracle

(2) Benefits for the participants in the “kick start” question-writing workshops

In our discussions with the 5 initial and representative principals it was hoped that (arguably) the best professional development would be the question-writing workshop when appropriate people from each school gather together to write the assessment questions.

This is an important outcome as this assessment research project is a learning project and we teaching professionals are charged with being continual learners in order that our students might benefit from our commitment to ongoing understanding of curriculum content and the teaching-learning process.

These quotations provide an insight as to how the workshop participants experienced the process:

“The benefits to myself and my school are that I have a much more in-depth knowledge of each year level and what needs to be taught. I also got the benefit of the experience of the other DRS's and what had worked well in their schools. Having to sort out the most important teaching points to then focus on the questions means that I have a very good understanding of what my teachers need to be focusing on. Also made you realise just how much we manage to teach our students within a relatively short time-frame.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed being part of the process. I had initially not put my name forward as I felt that being young in ‘DRS years’ there were a lot of other DRS’ out there with more knowledge. I came to the two days slightly apprehensive as to how valuable my contributions would be. From a personal point of view it was great to have a small group of people who were all so passionate about RE in Catholic Schools that I could share some of my highlights/concerns with from a DRS’ viewpoint. I found that the process gave me time to review the whole Jesus/God/Liturgical Year/Prayer strands in depth and take the time to realise just how much it all ‘fits together’. (It would be a beneficial thing to do for all new DRS’).

I have come away feeling very confident in my own knowledge of the programmes from Years 1-4 and feel that I will be of more benefit to the staff at my school who teach those year levels. I think the task ahead is going to be a long one with the writing committee but feel honoured to be part of it and would like to see myself carry through to the end as it's an exciting and challenging thing to be involved in.”

(3) Where to from here?

We think it is fair to say that the question-writing workshop participants enjoyed their experience and are keen to support Cushla as we gather teachers in clusters of schools across the Diocese together to provide details of the fruits of our question-writing labours and to ask these wider groups of teachers to participate in the process of writing further draft multiple choice questions.

All question-writing workshop participants were keen to gather again as the professional steering groups for our online religious education assessment research/professional learning project.

So, with the support of Patrick Nisbet's RE knowledge, wisdom, professionalism, creativity and technical skill, we're off and continuing on our journey together. This collective strength and support will be important, for as Dr Seuss notes:

“Onward up many a frightening creek, though your arms may get sore and your sneakers may leak. Oh! The places you’ll go!”

In addition to the all-important task of generating further questions, our next major target is to trial the online RE assessment process with all Year 4 students throughout the Diocese.

Our initial trial will take place on Thursday 15 September 2015.

We will conduct a quick sample test (just a few questions) at on Tuesday 8 September 2015 – this is to provide us with an initial shot at the process in order to discover all the technical “problems” that might arise when we conduct the online assessment for all Year 4 students simultaneously throughout the Diocese

We also have a reserve day (Thursday 17 September 2015) for any school that had a major problem on Tuesday 15 September, e.g. for a school where there was an area-wide electrical fault on Tuesday 15 September.

The purpose of this first run through of the actual process is two-fold:

1. To discover all the technical “problems” that might arise when we conduct the online assessment for all Year 4 students simultaneously throughout the Diocese.
2. To provide us with an opportunity to test the integrity, reliability and validity of the initial set of questions we have developed.

So our initial trial will be as much about the technicalities of the process as it will be about having our first glimpse of being in a position to better *know where we’ve been* and to have an initial foretaste of being in a data-based position *to say what we’ve seen*.

Please remember, the vision for our online RE assessment research/professional learning project is:

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.

Ultimately, when this process has matured in a number of years, we, as individual schools and as clusters of Catholic schools, aim to be in a position to use the assessment data the project will (hopefully) 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.

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

*“So ...
be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray
or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O’Shea,
you’re off to Great Places!
Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting.
So ... get on your way!”*

We've reached basecamp and continue to make preparations to ascend our research/learning mountain.

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

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&

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