

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)

Mike's been thinking – the fourth in a series of articles outlining our research/learning project

I have been reading Professor John Hattie's latest (June 2015) research papers.

John Hattie is Professor and Director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia, and Deputy Director of the Science of Learning Research Centre.

Hattie's two research papers are entitled:

- What Doesn't Work in Education: THE POLITICS OF DISTRACTION¹, and
- What Works Best in Education: THE POLITICS OF COLLABORATIVE EXPERTISE²

(1) So what was Mike thinking?

As I read these two papers my thoughts turned to our research/professional learning project regarding online RE assessment for Year 4 students.

In particular, I wondered, in the light of Hattie's research, are we on the right track with our research/professional learning project?

Or, to be more precise and, in my view, more importantly, are we asking the right questions with our research/professional learning project?

I say this because we might be asking the right questions but the particular track we have chosen to go down in our attempt to answer our questions might end up being the wrong track.

That said, it's always better to be asking the right questions rather than asking the wrong questions!

(2) How did Mike seek to answer his question? ... i.e. are we asking the right questions with our research/professional learning project?

As I read the papers much of Hattie's research resonated with the discussions we have been having over the past 18 months in our lead up to the initial trial of the online assessment in September 2015.

¹ <http://visible-learning.org/2015/06/download-john-hattie-politics-distraction/>

² <https://www.pearson.com/hattie/solutions.html>

By way of evidence that might support my statement that “much of Hattie’s research resonated with the discussions we have been having over the past 18 months in our lead up to the initial trial of the online assessment in September 2015”, I offer the following excerpts from our first three process summary articles (3rd June 2014, 24th March 2015 & 3rd June 2015) and compare them with excerpts from Hattie’s research papers:

We need more sophisticated diagnostic tools to help teachers ascertain each student’s recent successes and work out the best way for them to progress to the next level. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work.³

The major purpose of assessment in schools, however, should be to provide interpretative information to teachers and school leaders about their impact so that they have the best information possible about where to go next in the teaching process.⁴

“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.”

Until we see tests as aids to enhance teaching and learning and not primarily as thermometers of how much a student knows now, on this day, on this test, then developing more tests will add little and will remain an expensive distraction.⁵

“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.”

Schools need high-impact instructional leaders, ones who make several formal classroom observations each year, interpret test scores with teachers, insist teachers collaborate in planning and evaluating the teaching programme across grades, insist teachers expect high proportions of their students to do well on achievement and social outcomes and insist and know that the staffroom and classroom atmosphere is conducive to learning for all students.⁶

“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).”

³ <http://visible-learning.org/2015/06/download-john-hattie-politics-distraction/> (p.13)

⁴ [Ibid](#) (p.16)

⁵ [Ibid](#) (p.16)

⁶ [Ibid](#) (P.23)

Teachers are asked to account for their 'overall teacher judgements' in the major domains – if they rely solely on tests, they fail; if they use no tests they fail – they must defend their day-to-day judgements about the interpretation of the meaning and consequences of evidence from multiple sources.⁷

We need to understand teacher and student expectations, to ensure they are appropriately high – and then to provide teachers with decent assessment and evaluation tools to help them set and evaluate these expectations.⁸

We need more research on how to create reports drawn from test results which teachers and students can interpret accurately, and which teachers can use to work out what their next teaching interventions should be. We also need to move beyond a debate that is too obsessed with measuring achievement.⁹

“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.*”

Collaboration is based on cooperativeness, learning from errors, seeking feedback about progress and enjoying venturing into the ‘pit of not knowing’ together with expert help that provides safety nets and, ultimately, ways out of the pit.¹⁰

This is as true for student learning as it is for teacher learning, school-leader learning and system learning. What we are therefore searching for is a basis from which they can discipline and challenge each other to achieve excellence collectively – based on evidence of their impact. This evidence of what maximises impact can then be shared meaningfully between schools. Herein lies a major function of systems: to provide the resources, the forums and the emphasis on success in our schools. Teachers, especially many successful teachers, are so busy in their orbits of classrooms that they need leaders and systems to be critical partners in building coalitions.¹¹

“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.”

⁷ <https://www.pearson.com/hattie/solutions.htm> (p.8)

⁸ [Ibid](#) (p.13)

⁹ [Ibid](#) (p.13)

¹⁰ [Ibid](#) (p.27)

¹¹ [Ibid](#) (p.27)

Have we the courage to dependably recognise the excellence that is often all around us in our schools, among our teachers and with our school leaders? Have we the courage to then build a coalition of success based on this excellence and invite the others in the system to join this coalition? The aim is not aspiring to utopia but scaling up the success already about us. It is expertise, it is reliable judgement, it is passion for making the difference, and it is collaborative sharing of this knowing and doing and caring. This requires the greatest investment, and the benefits for the students will be manifest, powerful and exciting.¹²

“We have a long way to go, but *we’ll take that ride and we know where we’re going!* 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!”

(3) So, are we asking the right questions with our research/professional learning project?

My view is, yes, we are at least asking the right questions; questions that Professor Hattie’s research would suggest are the key questions for student achievement.

Perhaps others may have a different view? And that is understandable as evidence for policy-making and educational interventions is “not always clear-cut and is often the subject of vigorous debate – which is healthy, but it doesn’t make it easier to reach conclusions.”¹³

(4) Conclusion

Our research/professional learning project sits alongside current individual RE teacher practice in formative and summative testing, and day-to-day teacher judgements, where teachers interpret meaning and consequence from multiple sources of evidence.

Our project seeks to provide an additional, objective, statistically valid and reliable, data set that will add to individual and collective teacher conversations about the effectiveness of RE teaching within schools and across clusters of schools.

We are seeking to add to the evidence base from which teachers and schools might reflect upon the impact their teaching practice has had on their student’s learning.

We are seeking to create a culture of trust, to use the power and wisdom of teacher expertise in the question writing process supported by the power and capacity of cloud-based computer technology to enable us to better answer the questions about what students know and what the appropriate next steps might be for our students.

Professor Hattie puts it this way:

Teaching is to **DIE** for ...
D Diagnose what they do/don’t know; **I** Intervene; **E** Evaluate your impact ... repeat.

In our project we are seeking to ask the right questions.

In our project we are giving ourselves permission to fail and we are giving ourselves permission to excel and innovate. For failure means we are trying new things, learning new things, and pushing ourselves in new directions.

We hope at the very least the research evidence would suggest we are asking the right questions and our project has a greater chance of leading to success rather than failure for, as Dr Seuss says:

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

¹² <https://www.pearson.com/hattie/solutions.htm> (p.27)

¹³ Barber, M. <http://visible-learning.org/2015/06/download-john-hattie-politics-distraction/> (Foreword)

So we cannot be 100% sure of success.

This does not matter because we will learn from, and make adjustments to, any “failures” we encounter over the lifetime of our project.

We speak about success all the time; perhaps it’s time to give failure its due as a catalyst for greatness and as a means for success.

We continue make preparations to ascend our research/learning mountain:

Early in Term 3 I will forward teachers their *Teachers’ User Guide* for our Online Year 4 Religious Education Assessment 2015.

The *Teachers’ User Guide* covers topics such as:

- Logging in
- Student assessment process
- Devices
- Viewing class data
- Editing student details
- Viewing student data (assessment status & assessment results)
- Reporting – generating reports
- Etc.

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

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