

**The Religious Education Teacher  
as Expert:  
Using Teacher Knowledge  
to Engage Students**

RE Conference

Catholic Education Melbourne

# Introduction

Importance / challenge of engaging students

Religious Education (de Souza, 1999; White, 2004)

*RE not interesting, meaningful or relevant*

Literacy (Culican, Emmitt, & Oakley, 2001)

Maths (Siemon, Virgona & Corneille, 2001).

**Pedagogical and curricula factors** 

**Engagement / disengagement in RE** (Lacey, 2011).

*How do we engage students in RE?*

## **Doctrinal Approach**

*Catechism Workbooks* “participatory learning”  
filling in the gaps, crosswords and quizzes

“over their heads... past their hearts (Hofinger, 1962).

# Kerygmatic Approach

## **An example of the Personalised and Activity-based Pedagogical Approach**

### **A Message for Me. From My Father**

This is My Beloved Son, hear him.

### **For Me to Do**

1. Read the story of the feeding of the 5 000 in St John 6, 1-14.
2. Ask your teacher if you could act this story.
3. Draw a picture of this happening.

Extract from *My Way to God. Book One: Teacher's Book* by Australian Bishops' Committee for Education, 1964, Sydney: E. J. Dwyer.

# Life-centred Catechesis

**Relevant** and **meaningful** by focusing on issues that were important in the lives of students:

“Religious education that is meaningful for students in the 1990s must seek to bring the Gospel into dialogue with the concerns of our times and with the distinctive realities, issues and concerns which **students experience in their daily lives**” (Little, 1995, p. iv).

Students in upper primary surveyed -  
RE classroom learning (CEM):

Importance and doing academically well (**high**)  
enjoyment, interest and challenge (**low**)

➤ **Key Factors that Engaged Year 5/6 Students in  
a Religious Education Curriculum**

Case study: six composite classes of year 5/6  
students and their teachers within a particular  
Catholic primary school.

Three interrelated dimensions - affect, behaviour and cognition - form a widely held conception of engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

### Affective engagement

emotional responses such as enthusiasm and interest in learning (Fredricks et al., 2004).

### Behavioural engagement

student immersion in a learning task;

student effort & persistence

(Russell, Ainley, & Frydenberg, 2005).

### Cognitive engagement

“deliberate task-specific thinking”

(Helme & Clarke, 2001, p. 136).

# Global context:

## Situating the findings of this case study

Catechesis and religious instruction were complementary yet distinct from each other (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1990, #55).

Catechesis (sharing of faith between believers)

Aim: spiritual maturity

Likely context: local church community

Religious Instruction

“the aim of the school, however, is knowledge”

(Congregation for Catholic Education, 1990, #55).

RE: “scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines”

(Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, #73).

RE curricula in each jurisdiction is generally reflective of the state or territory curriculum (NCEC, 2017)

In RE, a more cognitive approach was sought (de Souza, 2005; Rymarz, 2007).

Many Australian diocesan RE programs feature a cognitive emphasis (NCEC, 2008).

“Continuum” (Groome, 2018)

“paradox” (Scott, 2015, p. 47)

Creative tension (Rossiter, 1981)

Catechesis



Religious Instruction

**In addition to its educational outcomes for all students, RE can have other effects:**

- ✓ Catechesis
  - ✓ New evangelization
  - ✓ First proclamation
  - ✓ Deepen knowledge of and faith in own tradition
- (NCEC, 2017)

How teachers used knowledge to enhance student-centred discourse and facilitate the engagement of year five / six students in RE learning is explored.

Content knowledge - knowing the subject matter.

Pedagogical knowledge - knowing how to teach.

Pedagogical content knowledge - making content comprehensible to students

(O'Donnell et al., 2016).

# Classroom Discourse Fosters Student Engagement

The role of the teacher is fundamental to student learning outcomes and engagement in learning (Buchanan & Hyde, 2006; Hattie, 2009; Shostak, 2011).

Teachers use their pedagogical knowledge to select from learning strategies such as classroom discourse, which have effectively fostered student engagement (Shostak, 2011; Smart & Marshall, 2013).

Tasks involving peer interaction facilitate the engagement of students in learning

(Ames, 1992; Gambrell, 2011; Helme & Clarke, 2001).

Social interaction supported affective engagement as the comments of peers piqued their interest, and working with peers contributed positively to the overall appeal of tasks

(Faircloth, 2009; Turner & Paris, 1995).

Influenced by **Vygotsky's social constructivism**, contemporary pedagogical approaches stress that learning is a social and interactive process (O'Neill, Geoghegan, & Petersen, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978).

+ “more knowing other”

Engagement is enhanced when the learning process includes learner-centred discourse and “learning-through-interaction”

(Edwards-Groves & Hoare, 2012, p. 98).

Teachers lead this interactive process:

Modelling / enacting discourse that utilises scaffolding strategies such as clarifying ideas and challenging opinions

(Kiemer, Groschner, Pehmer, & Seidel, 2015; O'Neill et al., 2013).

Two major approaches to this learner-centred pedagogy are:

clarifying discourse

scaffolding of student ideas

(Walshaw & Anthony, 2008).

Clarifying discourse – involved in conversations.

Teacher use of open-ended questions, which give students latitude to explore their thinking and understandings, support student engagement (Jurik, Groschner, & Seidel, 2014).

Scaffolding - teacher feedback that moves students forward in their thinking or provides them with strategies to support their thinking and involvement in the learning process

(Ferguson, 2012a, 2012b).

Teacher knowledge and teachers' response to students' prior knowledge are two key factors in the effective use of scaffolding conversations

(Ferguson, 2012b).

Student engagement is promoted through both clarifying discourse and student scaffolding

(Furtak, Seidel, Iverson, & Briggs, 2012).

# Student Interviews: Clear Explanations, Meaningful Examples and Classroom Discourse

Engagement with a knowledge-centred curriculum was enhanced when teachers used their knowledge of content to support student understanding.

Two key ways: through use of clear explanations and meaningful examples, and by enabling student-centred discourse through interactions with students using open-ended questions and discussion.

# Teacher Interviews: Knowledge of Key Content & Interaction Involving Questioning and Discussion

Teachers stressed - importance of knowing content.  
They saw a correlation between their use of content  
knowledge and effective pedagogy;  
knowledge enabled them to facilitate student  
understanding and participation.

They used their knowledge to facilitate student learning through *discussions and clarifying questions.*

For students having difficulty understanding concepts, they indicated that they *guided the discussion* in a way that built up student understanding.

They also perceived that they *actively led interactions* with students, and *used questioning to stimulate, guide and deepen thinking.*

# Researcher Observation: the Role of Teacher Knowledge in Student-centred, Small Group Discourse.

Teachers used their knowledge to interact with small groups of students through:

*open-ended questions & scaffolding conversations.*

*\* (Isaiah 11: 1-10) & Scripture Think Pad*

They used *textual, thematic and historical knowledge* in the construction of these questions.

Questions implied some knowledge that the text was about the Jewish exile in Babylon

The teacher asked open-ended questions such as:  
*“In what ways was their situation as slaves unjust?”*  
and *“What sort of future did they imagine for themselves once they escaped from captivity?”*

or that a central theme of the text was justice:  
*“What imagery does the text use to describe a just future?”*; *“What does your symbol using balance scales suggest?”*; *“How did you arrive at justice as an important issue?”*

Some of these open-ended questions, such as “*What imagery does the text use to describe a just future?*” were examples of probing questions.

Such questions are designed by the teacher to go beyond a student’s initial response to ascertain what students know and don’t know (Sadker et al., 2011).

Whilst such questions prompted further discourse amongst some groups, they did not with others.

## Scaffolding conversation

An example of a teacher using:

open-ended probing questions to determine current understandings;

closed cuing questions to respond to and deepen student thinking.

The teacher referred to the word messiah on the groups' think pad: "The Jewish people were slaves in Babylon - Where is the messiah going to lead them?" Students: "To a place of peace ... freedom". Teacher: "How do they describe this place of peace, justice and harmony? Student: "They use images". Teacher: "What are the images?" Student: "The wolf and sheep sit together". Teacher: "The wolf would usually eat the sheep – what does this image mean?" Students: "Enemies will be united ... They'll be friends ... Enemies won't be enemies". Teacher: "So it's making us think about a different future for the exiles in Babylon. They will be taken to a place of peace and harmony".

# **Analysis and Discussion: The Teacher's Knowledge and Student-centred Discourse**

## **Open-ended questions**

Teachers emphasised a learner-centred pedagogy: they used their content knowledge to create open-ended questions designed to encourage group discussion. This approach to RE is reflective of contemporary, learner-centred pedagogies (Wilson & Smetana, 2011).

Encouraged group discussion and opened up the possibility for students to explore understandings. (Compare Jurik et al., 2014).

Teachers often used a form of open-ended questions called probing questions; these did not always promote student-centred discourse (when groups lacked conceptual understanding).

In other curriculum areas teachers have used this type of questioning to determine student knowledge with the intention of extending their understanding (Ferguson, 2012b).

Whilst contemporary pedagogies emphasise a student-centred, social and interactive learning process, the teacher has a key role in this process (O'Neill et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 1978): 'more knowing other'

### **A Key Role of the Teacher:**

explicit / systematic teaching of key content

### **Possible Affect on Students:**

“exposed to some key understandings that could deepen and extend their thinking” (Rymarz, 2007, p. 68).

Teachers emphatic - knowledge of content essential  
Students - clear explanations / meaningful examples

## Challenges

- ❖ content knowledge and direct instruction
- ❖ only student-centred discourse
- ❖ utilising the opportunity to extend students' knowledge and facilitate “task-specific thinking”

## **Scaffolding conversations: probing / cuing questions**

Teachers - student understanding was enhanced when they led questioning / discussions with them.

A teacher used open-ended probing questions to determine current understandings. Then, closed cuing questions to respond to and deepen student thinking. These questions were underpinned by the teacher's historical and textual knowledge.

Subject specific knowledge is necessary if teachers are to be able to offer clear explanations of complex concepts and teach for understanding in specific curriculum areas

(Grossman, Stodolsky, & Knapp, 2004; O'Donnell et al., 2016).

Deep knowledge of the Christian tradition is also necessary for effective teaching and learning in RE (NCEC, 2017; Rymarz, 2007).

Current trends in classroom RE learning place an emphasis on the achievement of knowledge-centred outcomes (Buchanan, 2003); this knowledge may also be a vehicle to faith formation (Buchanan, 2009; Durka, 2004).

Catechesis



Religious Instruction

**In summary**, in the context of a student-centred pedagogy

Content knowledge *to guide and deepen discourse*

- ✓ Open-ended questioning
- ✓ Scaffolding conversations
- ***Direct instruction***

Pedagogical knowledge *to guide and deepen discourse*

- ✓ Scaffolding strategies
- ✓ Questioning
- ✓ Thinking tools / strategies / routines

# **Religious Education in Australian Catholic Schools**

The Framing Paper of the National Catholic  
Education Commission (2017)

# Religious Education: Responding to our Context

RE needs to “reread the memory of faith”  
(General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2015),

“recontextualising so that students can engage in an open narrative and ***dialogue*** between the richness of the *Catholic tradition* and their *personal experiences* and *contemporary cultural contexts*.”

# The Religious Education Teacher

Must have “deep *knowledge* and *understanding*” ...

(and)

“*pedagogical capabilities* that model an inquiry disposition and *build dialogue* between the students’ experiences and cultural contexts and what the Catholic Church believes, celebrates, lives and prays.”

# Features of a High-quality Religious Education

Effective pedagogy *engages* and empowers the learner...

It provides freedom to investigate, inquire (and)... to engage in critical reflection and *empathetic dialogue* with the Catholic Tradition, culture and their experience.

A *dialogical interplay* between the experiences and perspectives of students, the Catholic Tradition and other religious worldviews imbues the pedagogy and learning.

# The Role of the Teacher

## as Witness-Specialist-Moderator

### Specialist

Teachers are only free to witness to the faith tradition and moderate the engagement of students with it if they have a deep understanding of the tradition.

(Sharkey, 2015)

What guidance might this metaphor offer in thinking about the role of the RE teacher as *specialist*?



What guidance might this metaphor offer in thinking about the role of the RE teacher as *moderator*?



**What guidance might this metaphor offer in thinking about the role of the teacher in establishing a *Practice Room*?**



**Questioning &  
Investigating**  
*Think / Puzzle /  
Explore*

What do you think  
you know about  
this artwork?

What questions or  
puzzles do you  
have?

What does the  
artwork make you  
want to explore?  
*(from [Artful  
Thinking](#))*



**Observing &  
Describing**  
*Beginning,  
Middle, End*

From what  
you now know  
of this story,  
what might  
happen next?  
*(from [Artful  
Thinking](#))*

**Edwin Long's [Esther](#)**



Picasso's Guernica



**Picasso's**  
**Weeping**  
**Woman**

Develop a 'character inventory' of the woman. What is her age, occupation, family background, socio-economic standing, habits/tastes, education, occupation, fears, dreams and so on?

Why is her face mostly green? How do Picasso's choice of colours overall contribute to the mood of the painting?

How can you tell that Picasso was passionate about his Spanish identity?

How might reactions to this painting unite or divide people?

In what ways was Picasso prepared to take risks that could have led to criticism and alienation?

*(From [NGV Website](#))*

# The Temple

## The world behind, of the text

“A man was once in his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho...”



Old city of Jerusalem – elevation of 760m (Mt Dandenong – 630m)



**Jericho**      Oldest continually inhabited city in the world  
Average annual rainfall = 200mm  
258m below sea level (lowest city in the world)

# The road from Jerusalem to Jericho



# Temple Mount: Dome of the Rock & Al-Aqsa (“the farthest”) Mosque



# The Western Wall (Retaining wall)



# The Feast of Tabernacles (7: 1 – 10: 21)

- Priests turn from the rising sun to profess belief in the one true God (7: 31 – 36).

***“The Pharisees sent the Temple police to arrest him.”***

- Solemn procession to the Pool of Siloam (collecting of water for ritual washing in the Temple) (7: 37 – 52)

***“If anyone is thirsty, let them come to me.”***

- Mounting of four golden candelabra in the centre of the Temple (The Temple was the light of all Jerusalem) (8: 12 – 20)

***“I am the light of the world.”***



# The Cure of the Man Born Blind (9: 1 – 41)

Jesus as living water & true light in action

Pharisees: “We are not blind, surely?”

Against the falseness of the ‘blind’ shepherds of Israel,  
Jesus is

## The Good Shepherd (10: 1 – 21)

- **I used to think...**
  
- **Now I think...**





Daybreak: the household slept.  
I rose, blessed by the sun.  
A horny fiend, I crept  
out with my father's gun.  
Let him dream of a child  
obedient, angel-mind-  
old no-sayer, robbed of power  
by sleep. I knew my prize  
who swooped home at this hour  
with day-light riddled eyes  
to his place on a high beam  
in our old stables, to dream  
light's useless time away.

I stood, holding my breath,  
in urine-scented hay,  
master of life and death,  
a wisp-haired judge whose law  
would punish beak and claw.

My first shot struck. He swayed,  
ruined, beating his only  
wing, as I watched, afraid  
by the fallen gun, a lonely  
child who believed death clean  
and final, not this obscene

bundle of stuff that dropped,  
and dribbled through the loose straw  
tangling in bowels, and hopped  
blindly closer. I saw  
those eyes that did not see  
mirror my cruelty

while the wrecked thing that could  
not bear the light nor hide  
hobbled in its own blood.

My father reached my side,  
gave me the fallen gun.

'End what you have begun.'

I fired. The blank eyes shone once into mine, and slept.  
I leaned my head upon my father's arm, and wept,  
owl blind in early sun for what I had begun.

## Barn Owl by [Gwen Harwood](#)

### Claim, Support, Question

Make a ***claim*** about your topic

***Claim*** – An explanation or interpretation of some aspect of the artwork

Identify ***support*** for your claim

***Support*** – Thing you see, feel and know about your claim

Ask a ***question*** related to your claim

***Question*** – What's left hanging? What isn't explained?

What new questions does your claim raise? *(from [Artful Thinking](#))*

## Step Inside

Choose the father, son or elder brother and step inside that point of view.

Consider:

What does that person **perceive** and **feel**?

What might that person **know about** or **believe**?

What might that person **care about**?

(From [Artful Thinking](#))

Take on the character of the person you've chosen and improvise a monologue.

Speaking in the first person, talk about who you are and what you are experiencing.



[Rembrandt's Prodigal Son](#)