

Let's Unpack That! Teaching about the Trinity in Australian Catholic High Schools.

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For several decades the educational paradigm has been dominant in religious education in Australian Catholic schools. An important aspect of this approach is an emphasis on conventional educational discourse which now can be utilized and applied to religious education. Relatively few studies, however, have examined classroom practises of religious education teachers. This study contributes to the wider literature by investigating what pedagogical strategies are used by teachers of a new course which involves comparatively sophisticated content knowledge. A number of general approaches were surveyed. Teachers were interviewed about what practises they used and how these strategies aligned with their understanding of an educational approach to religious education. It was concluded that most of the teachers of the new unit followed a scaffolded learning approach in the classroom. Using this approach allowed teachers to reduce the cognitive load on students and enabled them to engage with new learnings. Scaffolded teaching involves a range of strategies designed to facilitate learning whilst not overwhelming students.

Key words: religious education, scaffolded learning, Trinity

Introduction

This study is part of an ongoing project which examines the planning, delivery and evaluation of a new subject in Catholic schools in New South Wales (NSW), *Studies in Catholic Thought* (SiCT) (Starkey and Rymarz, 2019; Rymarz and Starkey, 2021). One of the main aims of this project is to better understand teacher practice so as to be able to improve student engagement. It is part of a wider research agenda that investigates a perennial, but surprisingly under researched, topic of interest in religious education, what happens when “the door closes,” that is, what pedagogical and other strategies does the teacher employ in the classroom? This may differ from what is prescribed in the curriculum as the expectations are often not matched by the capacity of the teacher to deliver complex theological content. The focus in this paper is on how teachers of SiCT approach the subject with specific reference to the teaching strategies they use.

A note on RE in Australia

In Australia RE is, with very few exceptions, not offered as a subject in public schools. Consequently, much of the research into RE teaching takes place in independent schools, especially Catholic schools. Australian Catholic schools have long been a part of the educational offerings and currently enrol about 20% of all students, including a significant number of non-Catholics. There is no national or even state based Catholic educational system and each diocese, largely through school boards, has governance over Catholic schools in that area. Religious education is a prominent part of the curriculum in Catholic schools across the country. The approach and content may differ, but significant time and resources are directed to religious education, perhaps best illustrated, in the RE curriculums that have been developed by various centralized bureaucracies in each diocese.

Teaching about the Trinity

SiCT is offered in schools across NSW. To give some indication of the scope and depth of the content covered in SiCT consider Unit 51, *The Trinitarian God and Humanity*. This unit was selected for examination in this study because it was seen as a topic where the course content involved relatively complex theology. The unit is made up of six parts and the content headings for each part are given below:

PART 1: The Nature of Jesus; Emerging Heresies; Arianism; Gnosticism; Docetism; Nestorianism; Nature of Jesus in the Gospel of John; The Title, 'Christ' Son of Man; Full Humanity of Jesus ; Jesus in Scripture and Heresy

PART 2: Emergence of Church Councils; The Church Responds; Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople; Council of Ephesus; Council of Chalcedon; After Chalcedon

PART 3: The Church Fathers on the Trinity; St Gregory of Nyssa; St Basil the Great; St Augustine of Hippo; St Thomas Aquinas

PART 4: The Holy Trinity in the Life of the Church; The Holy Trinity: Core of the Church's Faith; Paradox – The Key to the Orthodox; The Church's Response; Principal Beliefs of Divinity and Humanity of Jesus Christ; Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ; The

Resurrected Jesus; Beliefs about the Nature of God and of the Trinity; The Trinity; Trinitarian Nature of the Church's Liturgy; The Father; Christ; The Holy Spirit
PART 5: From Liturgy Towards Theology; Introduction; Jesus – God in Person; One with the Father; Oneness of Relationship; Doctrine of the Trinity; From Invisible to Visible; The Image of the Invisible God; Expression of the Mystery of God; Guerrero's 'Duo Seraphim' ; Michelangelo's Paintings in the Sistine Chapel; Andrei Rublev's Icon of the Trinity; Clarise Nampijinpa's 'Wapirra' (Trinity); La Sagrada Familia by Gaudi
PART 6: Know Thyself; St Augustine of the Human Person and the Trinity; Distorted by Sin; In Need of Redemption; St Thomas Aquinas on the Human Person and the Trinity; Dignity of the Human Person; Destined for Perfection

Many of the students who enrol in SiCT do not have strong academic backgrounds and this highlights the challenge facing teachers. A key hermeneutical insight into teaching the course is the overarching idea of making complex, theological content more comprehensible.

Teaching strategies and religious education: an overview

Since the 1980's the dominant approach to religious education in Australian Catholic schools has utilized an educational paradigm (Buchanan, 2005). An educational approach places emphasis on conventional methods of teaching and assessment in religious education (Rymarz et al, 2021). This can be contrasted with historical approaches which were heavily dependent on engaging the life experience of the student or saw classroom RE as a catechetical avenue to increase the faith and commitment of students.

In an educational approach the emphasis is on acquiring knowledge and as a means to achieve this, teachers can call on conventional educational discourse and utilize a wide variety of instructional and pedagogical techniques. These may closely resemble teaching and learning in other parts of the school's curriculum. A good teaching strategy, for instance, in a discipline such as history could be used seamlessly in religious education as the rationale for its use is similar. Rossiter (1982) points out that such an educational approach is not opposed

to catechetical intent as it is reliant on how students appropriate the content of classroom RE. For some students it will augment faith development as it is helping them better understand their own religious beliefs and practices.

A further feature of the educational approach to RE is that it can more easily aligned to mandated approaches to teaching and learning as set out in government framework documents such as the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). As well as specific subject areas ACARA set out a range of general capabilities that can relate to the goals of religious education when approached within an educational paradigm (ACARA, 2023). This allows teachers of RE to use a wide range of skills and capacities in their planning and preparation.

A brief survey of teaching methods

Hattie (2023, 11) draws attention to the importance of a learning sequence where the initial stages are identified as gaining precarious knowledge or knowing what. These stages establish a cognitive platform for deeper learning described as knowing how and knowing with. Without this platform, which has some overlay with Beck's notion of expository teaching, higher critical skills and self-directed learning are less likely to occur (Beck, 1998). Four general teaching approaches: Inquiry learning; Scaffolding; Direct Instruction and Collaborative strategies will be mentioned in this paper as indicative pedagogical approaches. These approaches can be used for both precarious and deep learning but distinctions between strategies employed in both areas will not be elaborated on as they are beyond the scope of the paper.

Inquiry based learning

Inquiry based learning can be described as a range of teaching techniques which, in general, place emphasis on the student accessing and interacting with a variety of materials, resources and discovering patterns and connections with existing knowledge. Inquiry learning is heavily student directed and the learning sequence is determined by the direction that the students seek to follow. One of the assumptions of inquiry based learning is that student learning is enhanced when they are encouraged to uncover new insights for themselves. The task of the teacher is to further facilitate these insights by providing students with the resources needed to make this possible. In RE, for instance, an inquiry learning approach to studying scripture would be to task students to find common themes from a series of scriptural passages and then to ask them to utilize these insights to orientate future learning.

Questioning is a key aspect of inquiry based learning and the pedagogical approach to classroom teaching is focused on students forming and then responding to questions. Some of the variations of inquiry learning include how much direction should be provided by the teacher and how interactions with other students are negotiated. Working with other students is seen as integral to the inquiry process. An important rationale for encouraging student inquiry is that this encourages deep learning which entails a capacity to appropriate and then critically evaluate knowledge. There is an explicit assumption that students have preexisting precarious knowledge and are able to easily access this given the right classroom dynamic. Inquiry learning also has a significant overlay with experiential approaches to teaching RE.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is an approach to teaching that is most often associated with Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 2012). A key Vygotskian concept is that learning best takes place in the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD can be described as the conceptual space between

what a student can easily do on their own without any assistance and tasks which, despite assistance, are too difficult for them (Belland, 2014). In this paradigm the teachers task is to assist the learner through a series of controlled interventions which enable the student to master basic concepts and skills and as they grow in confidence to tackle more complex tasks.

A scaffolded approach to teaching is heavily influenced by social context (Deeming, 2017). Implicit in this approach is an awareness on the part of the teacher of the needs and capacities of students and interventions are designed to this end. This requires imagination and creativity on the part of teachers as their role can vary depending on the learner and the context in which teaching is occurring.

In RE a scaffolded approach to teaching scripture would involve initially exposing students to certain passages and then using a variety of techniques to assist the student to better understand the meaning and purpose of these texts. Once this platform has been established the student is encouraged to take more control of their learning by developing skills that have been acquired in earlier stages of the learning process. In the study of scripture, for instance, once students had a better understanding of literary genre, they could be encouraged to explore other types of scriptural texts and then assigning them to a particular style of writing. Scaffolded approaches to learning, in keeping with the metaphor, recognize that once the student has acquired the necessary skills and capacities the scaffolding is removed as it is no longer needed and the students can become more self-directed (Fisher and Frey, 2021).

Direct instruction

Hattie (2023, 360) points out that Direct Instruction (DI) is often misunderstood and perceived negatively but when implemented correctly it is a highly effective pedagogical strategy. In this paper no distinction will be made between DI and Explicit Teaching (Norris and Ortega, 2000). DI should not be equated with purely didactic teaching directed only toward so-called surface learning. DI rests on several assumptions such as the content to be covered, the nature of the learner and the role of the teacher in facilitating learning (Hornby and Greaves, 2022). In DI it is important that the intention behind the teaching sequence be clearly understood and the instructive success criteria be established and monitored (Rymarz, 2013). Careful consideration must be given to the content of classroom lessons mindful also of sequential and spiral learning. Key content is covered more than once and cognitive load increases as the student progresses through the school. Hattie (2023, 361) describes the key aspect of DI in the following terms:

In a nutshell the teacher decides the learning intentions and success criteria, makes them transparent to the students, demonstrates them by modeling, and evaluates if they understand by checking for understanding; student practice is first guided and then becomes more independent.

In RE the use of DI can also be demonstrated in the teaching of scripture. Here, for example, the teacher would identify a key concept to be covered and then make judgments on how best to present this content to her class with an appreciation of the classes capabilities and prior learning. The intention would be to convey a key concept, such as the notion of textual historicity, and then direct teaching to explaining this concept with some way of monitoring learning incorporated into lesson plans.

Collaborative learning

Collaborative learning places significant emphasis on students working together to achieve educational and social goals. In collaborative approaches learning is seen in social context and to this extent there is some similarity with the Vygotskian scaffolded approach. Johnson

and Johnson (2009) identify some key features of collaborative learning. These include: positive influence of students on another's learning; cultivation of interaction between students; recognition of the capacity of students to contribute and shape the learning process by giving elaborate explanations; accountability of all students for their learning and the learning of others in the group.

In religious education one example of a collaborative approach could also involve teaching scripture. Here students would be encouraged to plan out a learning sequence for the group and to determine what it is they want to learn and then how best to achieve and evaluate this. The teachers role is to help facilitate this process by providing advice and helping resolve so called roadblocks to learning and thereby enabling groups to regain control of the learning process.

In this study the pedagogical strategies of teachers who teach one unit in the new SiCT course will be examined. Unit 51, The Trinitarian God and Humanity was selected as this involved relatively complex content, the assumption being that such a unit would require a range of teaching strategies. Selecting one common unit was decided upon as this would give the study greater concentration as opposed to examining pedagogy across the whole subject. Of particular interest is whether the teaching approach used by teachers can be categorized within a preponderant pedagogical paradigm.

Methodology

The participants in this study were teachers from one Catholic school system. Teachers who were seen as good practitioners and who had some experience in teaching SiCT were invited to take part and thirteen teachers responded. Teachers were interviewed via zoom following a semi structured interview technique (Minichiello et al., 1995). Participants were asked in

advance to bring along materials and other items that they used when teaching Unit 51.

Interviews were conducted during school time and took no more than one hour.

The initial focus questions centred on teacher practices in the classroom, asking participants to describe in detail the pedagogical strategies they used when teaching Unit 51. In addition, participants were asked about their rationale for using these strategies and how these manifested their general understanding of how to teach RE. Responses of teachers were coded and dominant response categories established (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

These were divided into two major groups: strategies used in classroom teaching; the rationale for using these pedagogical strategies.

Results and Discussion

Bridging the gap or unpacking: The general approach

The fundamental pedagogical issue addressed by most participants was the challenge of teaching to a high content level, a theologically rich course, to students who are not strongly academic or as one teacher put it “teaching an academic course to non-academic students.” Participants often noted that the overarching strategy employed in teaching about the Trinity was the need to “bridge the gap” or to “unpack” the concept with students. As one teacher noted, “there is a lot of unpacking in the Trinity!” In terms of the general strategies mentioned in the introduction, most of these were well described by a scaffolded approach with an emphasis on working with students to build up precarious knowledge. Inquiry based and collaborative learning were not widely reported. When asked about these the most

common response from teachers was that although they were often seen as desirable, in order for them to be educationally efficient they relied on a large amount of prior learning.

One participant put these ideas in the following context: “for me it’s all about setting up the platform for higher learning....my students are good kids, but they struggle with complex content. I see my job as making the topics more accessible but trying to set up points, where they can slowly get some traction on the topic. I call this unpacking.....or bridging the gap.” In terms of the pedagogical approaches raised earlier, the notion of unpacking aligned most closely with a scaffolding perspective with elements of DI.

A wide range of teaching strategies were reported. Analysis of these strategies, as mentioned, placed many of them within a Vygotskian framework of scaffolded learning, that is, teachers were aiming to provide students with the support they needed to be engaged with the topic and not to be overwhelmed by it. It is noteworthy that the teachers themselves often did not articulate this as their strategy. They often described their practice as just “good teaching” or what they used in all their teaching. This is a confirmation that the approach to RE being followed by teachers in this study falls within an educational paradigm as one of the axioms of this is that the pedagogy used in RE should not differ greatly from that used in other subject disciplines. Participants noted that the overall goal was to help students become more self-directed by giving them the knowledge and confidence they needed. This supports Bereiter’s (2002) argument as summarized by Hattie (2023, 380), “the most powerful way to enable students to construct knowledge is to deliberately lead them to the construction and certainly not to wait till they discover it themselves.” A point reinforced in much research on discovery based learning (Alfieri et al., 2011).

The scaffolded approach to learning acknowledges both the conceptual difficulty of the topic along with the lack of strong academic background of the students. Following Vygotsky teachers provided focussed assistance to students to help them better understand concepts by use of a variety of strategies designed to facilitate comprehension and future learning (Hattie, 2023). This facilitation of comprehension by SiCT teachers can be better understood with reference to human information processing theory (Lachman et al., 1979). Here the goal is to reduce cognitive load on students by curating content to best utilize working memory (Rymarz, 2013). The key to learning in this paradigm is the development of a working memory which deals with both new information as well as information retrieved from long term memory (Artino, 2008).

Pedagogical strategies in the classroom

Teachers placed great emphasis on the initial presentation of content within the unit. As one teacher put it, “framing the learning is so important, we have to get the key idea across early.” The notion of the key idea has clear parallels with threshold concepts and presenting these clearly is critical for future learning (Mudge, 2014). A variety of strategies were used to this end, very often the use of multimedia to capture key concepts. One teacher referred to this approach as the, “I have a great video” idea. Earlier work in this project identified the value of appropriate multimedia as a key strategy in conceptual learning and these findings support that work (Rymarz, 2020).

Another strategy reported was the use of controlled repetition. In basic terms this involves a gradual ascending or spiraling of content. This makes heavy use of prior learning (Karpicke and Roediger, 2008). One teacher provided a good example of her use of controlled

repetition as follows: Let's look at the text (scripture); Let's pick out key words; Let's try do this worksheet; Let's read it again; Let's share the meaning with the person next to you; Let's compile a glossary; Let's go to our "word board"; Let's read again. Another instance of strong scaffolding was the use of directed research. These were research topics that students worked on either individually or as part of a group. There were elements here that had parallels to collaborative learning. Students did work together on these tasks and assist each other's learning. The structure and input provided by teachers, however, marked these pedagogical strategies as being more inclined to scaffolded learning. In a similar vein, directed research does not closely correspond to inquiry based learning as the framework within which students operate is provided by the teacher who sets clear parameters for research. The directed research tasks were designed within a framework that incorporated a range of instructions and other assistance that focused the research and reduced cognitive load.

A range of strategies were used by teachers to reduce cognitive load. These approximated the general Vygotskian goal of situating the learner in the ZPD, that is, the area where they are challenged but not overwhelmed by new information. Once again it is noteworthy that the teachers themselves did not identify this as a discrete strategy, rather, they saw these, and their other practices, as simply good teaching. This finding points to the need for further research examining in more detail how teachers understand their pedagogical approaches in theoretical terms. The aim here would be gaining greater insights into how teachers see what they do in the classroom as cultivating quality teaching and learning.

One cognitive load reducing strategy mentioned by several participants was distilling content. This is where the teacher framed the learning task for students in a fashion that indicated the

broad parameters of what was to be covered. For instance, one teacher spoke of one of her pedagogical approaches as letting students know in advance what were the key points to be covered in the first lessons and then in all lessons in that teaching cycle. This was achieved by signposting topics and issues to be covered and also providing brief content overviews.

Another strategy was to use open ended techniques to introduce complex content that could then be discussed, or again unpacked, during class time. Using, for example, an image of the Trinity such as an icon to present a complex range of information and then to slowly explain the significance of symbolic interpretation used in writing the icon. Other forms of great art or symbols such as the interlocking rings were used for the same purpose as were indicative narratives. Narratives were often used to convey essential learnings in a non-didactic fashion. The very well-known story, for example, of St Patrick and the four-leaf clover was one such narrative.

A range of strategies used by teachers were directed toward accessing student prior knowledge. In Australian Catholic schools RE is taught at all year levels so by the time a student gets to senior high school at least in a chronological sense they have done a lot of RE! A sound pedagogical approach is to seek to help students recover or think again about some of this earlier material. One of the key capacities of working memory is utilizing prior knowledge to appropriate new information. One common pedagogical tool was use of brainstorming both done in a group setting and with pairs of students, that is, the think pair share strategy (Johnson et al., 1996). Other ways of accessing prior knowledge included: mind or concept maps and controlled open ended discussions which were based on a modified Socratic methodology (Paul and Elder, 2007). Another technique was use of “lightning writing.” This was a strategy often used at the very beginning of a lesson where students were encouraged to write something straight away on a particular theme. This

strategy encapsulates much of the rationale for accessing prior knowledge. The assumption is that students, even if unaware, may have some recollections of the topic under investigation and need some, unencumbered way of accessing this. The aim here is not to exhaust the topic but to provide some cognitive pathways into teaching by bringing forward some knowledge that students may already have.

Another strategy was to present focussed, definitional reading. For instance, a number of teachers reported using a series of clear statements which defined key conceptual teaching around complex historical theological issues. Some examples of this were chronological lists which gave key information on historical figures and statements of orthodox and heterodox positions. This was important contextual information on the Christological aspects of the unit. Use of definitional readings such as these is a clear illustration of DI. The rationale for using these was given by participants as a departure point for developing the topic further with other teaching strategies. So here DI can be seen as an initial strategy in an overall scaffolded approach.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide further insight into the classroom practices of RE teachers in faith based schools. Teachers of SiCT use a range of strategies that can be grouped under the headings of scaffolded approaches. These approaches seem to be especially pertinent when RE teachers are engaged with topics where students lack background and considerable effort is to be directed toward, “unpacking the topic.” There is a need for more research on teacher pedagogical practices across a wider range of topic areas, especially those topics that teachers and students are more familiar with. Two additional avenues for further research

will be suggested here. Firstly, investigation of how RE teacher sequence and spiral learning, that is, how are topics such as the Trinity is presented at different year levels. Secondly, how can teachers who are teaching complex topics be better supported particularly with a view to expanding the range of pedagogical strategies that are used in the classroom.

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