

RESEARCHING A LIVING PAST

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RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

DOES IT COUNT

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Introduction

This paper discusses the processes currently being undertaken in researching the past 25 years of religious education in Australia. It considers the nature and purpose of such a task and its value to religious educators of today and tomorrow. It discusses the rationale for the design and development of the research project and considers some ways in which the product may be used by various groups of people. It presents the importance of researching the human dimensions of oral history as well as the curriculum and theoretical documents of any period of education if a true picture is to emerge, which can inform and effect decision making for the future.

The development of religious education in Australia in the past 25 years reflects the changes in society and education and religious experience of a changing population. It is very much a case of researching a living past. It is very difficult for today's religious educators to appreciate the curriculum and teaching resources they use, which are, at times, the product of ongoing development and in other cases a reaction to issues of a particular period. The aim of this research is to do more than make the material of the past available to the religious educators of today and tomorrow. It intends to establish some of the links between various parts of the story of this development and its outcomes. It also critiques some situations where the context has been ignored to the detriment of the learning process. Some educators consider particular approaches as absolute and complete in themselves. They do not recognise that they are a compromise response to the interaction of theological and educational changes in the lives of particular people. In the field of religious education there is the added complication of the relationship between the language and practices of a Tradition. This paper explores a research project, which is also seen as a tool to challenge, affirm and at times, improve the approaches being used today.

Research Project

The writer is involved in a project, for which she received a CUTSD grant in 1998, to develop a resource bank of textual, graphic and video material on CD-ROM. This will give lecturers and postgraduate students flexible access to a wide range of historically relevant materials that would otherwise be not available for postgraduate students on each of the University's campuses. The CD-ROM will have search capacities as well as glossary and research databases. This will give form to historical material which otherwise could be neglected in teaching and provide post-graduate religious education students with a framework for their study and a model of systematic analysis to follow in completing specified learning and assessment tasks for units within their program.

The project includes the conversion of existing print material, which is held on only some of the campuses of Australian Catholic University, into an electronic format so that all staff and students can access them in a variety of ways through the internet and linked CD-ROM. The databases will be linked to video segments that will provide interpretation and application of the theoretical issues. CD-ROMs will be the principal media used for delivery of learning materials. Internet linkage with the CD-ROMs will enable wider access to the materials, particularly for students who do not live in the metropolitan areas where the University campuses are located. Sections of the collected video assets will be digitalised for placement on CD-ROMs. Formative evaluation of the CD-ROM material will also consider the production of edited videotapes of historically important interviews and lesson study materials.

As project leader, the writer of this paper, has been involved in a series of research projects to describe and analyse the key events, documents, persons, curriculum and student materials of the past twenty-five years. During the first semester of 1997, with the help of several Masters students, she analysed the Australian religious education journal *Word in Life* to provide a summary of the key events, issues, documents and influential people for the period of the study. Previously she analysed the developments of religious education in the seventies (1983) and critically analysed twenty years of Church documents (1992). During the second half of 1997 in an Outside Studies Program approved and funded by the University she visited key religious educators in each section of Australia to video discussions with them of their perceptions of the key issues and influences on Australian religious education. She also explored religious education approaches in various Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley and Northern Territory. This collection of video and audio material and typed transcripts are all part of this project.

Religious education is a complex field, which is affected by changes in religion, religious observance and the social and cultural context as well as changes in education itself. Students who do not have ready access to printed materials, which are only available on some campuses of the University, or to lecturers because of their part time status and distance from any of the campuses have great difficulty in understanding and interpreting the factors involved. The proposed CD-ROM will complement existing processes and facilitate self directed, independent learning. It will also enable personnel from the Catholic education sector to access information in an effective way and support their development of curriculum materials and inservice packages for their staff. It is intended to provide samples of material linked to actual interview video clips and reflective questions and comments to assist the students in their analysis of materials.

There has been much recent discussion about the value of situated learning and Anderson, Reder and Simon (1996:8) would maintain that 'learning would occur best with a combination of abstract instruction and concrete illustration' and this innovation reflects this combination in its conceptualisation and design. Cates (1992) warned of the need to ensure that students are not disoriented by the provision of too much information in a package without providing some instructional process. Litchfield (1993) also notes that many programs simply are 'click and see' because of the lack of navigational features to assist the learner search, reflect, and interpret the data. This project will provide clear chronological and conceptual frameworks. Students will navigate the program initially to achieve specified

learning in units related to curriculum development; theoretical underpinnings and cultural context issues of religious education.

Aims of the research project

Students using the CD-ROMs will be better able to explore the interconnections and examine the effect of various events, documents and models of religious education on the principles and practices set out in specific programs and texts. Learning in this area needs multiple pathways so that students can explore the variables within religious education and critically analyse how they interact and how they are reflected in the content and processes in specific approaches to religious education. Present methods of instruction are dependent on the availability of textual material and an experienced religious educator who can interpret and explain such materials and processes. This project will provide flexible pathways, complement existing processes and facilitate self directed, independent learning

Through the use of this program it is expected that the students will be better able to:

- access a range of important source materials in religious education
- integrate and make stronger links between theory and practice
- critically analyse the assumptions inherent in various religious education programs through a detailed study of a range of materials
- explore the relationships between religious, cultural and educational changes and their implications for religious education and interpret latest research through the use of databases
- develop independent learning skills and acquire confidence in navigating through computer assisted learning package
- achieve the outcomes of several units in the Masters of Religious Education course by completing specific learning and assessment modules.

The School of Religious Education of Australian Catholic University comprises 20 religious education lecturers on the seven campuses of the University. A common set of undergraduate and postgraduate units has been developed and is being taught across the university. The material developed on the CD-ROM will be trialled by staff on the various campuses and will then be directly linked with modules in several of the postgraduate units.

Description of the project

The project has been conceptualised within a series of key themes. Initially it had been proposed to use a chronological framework but the analysis of the journal articles demonstrated the amount of overlap between the various periods. Issues in one state of Australia often occurred at a different time in another place sometimes because of the availability of material and people. It was decided to use the following sections as the framework for the material.

1. Church Documents relevant to RE

2. Religious Education Theory, Issues and Developments
3. Religious Education Curriculum Documents and Programs
4. Religion Studies Courses, Government reports and Syllabus material
5. Diocesan Religious Education Structures and Personnel
6. Australian Issues , Significant People and Events
7. Professional Development of and Professional Associations for Religious Educators

The above sections are simply an organising framework of content so that the user has a range of entry points and can navigate simply between the major areas. The presentation of the content in each section will involve a range of materials. Sections of key documents are being scanned in to provide textual information for the reader. These will have links with related material on the CD-ROM and with relevant articles on the University web page and will also have related reflection questions. The CD-ROM will incorporate short video clips so that the people whose material is being considered will be making their own comments about the significance of the printed text. Longer videos will be available as supplementary resource material.

Data gathering

One of the key elements in gathering the materials for the research has been to interview a range of teachers, researchers and lecturers who have been involved in the field of religious education for part or whole of the period of research. Previous research of the writer (Malone 1983) had established the reality that curriculum change reflected not only the educational developments of a period but the variety of social, cultural and religious influences on the people involved.

Each person who was interviewed, was asked to name and comment on the people, events or resources that were significant for them. This was found to be a key question. Most teachers spoke of curriculum or teaching materials or a fellow teacher or consultant from their diocesan education office. Practitioners, other than those who were involved in postgraduate study, very seldom mentioned any scholar or theoretical debate. Those who had been involved in the development of curriculum material and diocesan syllabus documents regularly referred to various scholars and theoretical and Church documents but the influence of these materials was not recognised by the practitioners. It is hoped that this CD-ROM may establish the relationship between the various sources and thereby free individual teachers to be more critical of the approaches that have been set out in their syllabus material.

The project will give a high priority to story as well as to document analysis because of the effect that story has on communicating the teaching process. As Elbaz (1991:3) stated:

Story is the very stuff of teaching, the landscape within which we live as teachers and researchers, and within which the work of teachers can be seen as making sense. This is not merely a claim about the aesthetic or emotional sense of fit of the notion of story with our intuitive understanding of teaching,

but an epistemological claim that teachers' knowledge can best be understood in this way.

The material will be organised in such a way as to tell the story of the past 25 years of RE and the author will play the role of narrator providing links between the various sections. The author has been directly involved in the whole of the period and therefore has a personal knowledge of the majority of people and resources that will be included in the resource. Other members of the School of RE in ACU, who have different experiences of this period, will provide an objective check to the accuracy and validity of the material and comments without losing the value of a personal story being presented. As Ballantyne et al (1997: xix) noted in their presentation of academic stories:

Each story is unique in that the teaching practice is influenced by the academic's educational development, current orientation, discipline, course and learning objectives, students, available resources and institutional support.

The same overlapping interaction of educational and cultural context and resources and institution and personality is equally significant in the story of religious education. This research project aims to present them in such a way as to highlight the various relationships and to raise questions for teaching practice.

Individuals respond to an interview question in a more unstructured way and tend to reflect on personal experiences. An example of this is Maria Harris an American religious educator who has visited Australia several times and whom I interviewed for this project in the UK during a conference in 1998. This was the same year as the publication of a book on religious education, which she co-authored (Harris and Moran, 1998). This book was presented in the format of a conversation between the two religious educators on various issues including their perceptions of what religious developments have been significant during their period of involvement, which spans the past 30 years. Harris (Harris and Moran, 1998:3-4) named three significant issues, namely the centrality of justice in the gospel message, the ecological movement and the role and identity of adult religious educators. In the videoed interview with me her answer about significant developments in Australian RE was of a different order and did not mention any of these issues. The interview took place after the book was published and might therefore have been expected to reflect her earlier thinking. In the interview she focused on a recent Art exhibition, in which she had been involved in as a respondent as the most significant event.

This exhibition of modern art, which Crumlin arranged was called '*Beyond Belief: Modern Art and the Religious Imagination*.' It presented an overview of art of the 20th century and the challenges that the artists present to us to go beyond our beliefs and understanding. There were many images in this exhibition that challenge religious educators but one that emphasises some dimensions of the challenge being faced by religious educators at this stage of history is Ben Willikens 1976 painting, *Last Supper*.

In Willikens' painting one is confronted with an empty upper room, which reflects the structure of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* but which contains none of the people or objects that are part of the Christian story of the Last Supper. The apparent starkness and

sterility of the grey and white presents an emptiness, which some could see as completely negative and providing no links with religion. It has, however, a life of its own and the suggestion of a brighter light takes the viewer outside the picture into some new reality, which is not simply negative. Indeed Schwebel (1998:134) states 'art is approaching a borderline where it reaches contemplation via negation, as a clarifying road to mysticism.' One of the aims of this project is to help religious educators to move outside the traditional languages of theology and educational curriculum to find an appropriate language for religious education in Australia in the new millennium.

Another significant sculpture was that of George Mung Mung from the Warmun community in the East Kimberley. I had seen this sculpture of Mary of Warmun (the pregnant Mary), which presented a pregnant Aboriginal woman with a dancing adult male in her womb, in its own setting in the Kimberley in 1997 during research for this project. In the Melbourne Art Gallery, in a quiet space created in the centre of this exhibition, this sculpture was in a different context. This heightened the challenge for me to explore religious symbols outside the narrower Anglo-Celtic boundaries that are reflected in most Australian religious education resources. It is the aim of this project to refer to such visual challenges as well as to analyse textual material.

Contextual issues

At this stage of the project one of the issues that is becoming very clear is the lack of awareness of cultural issues in locally produced material. In preparation for the third section, curriculum documents and programs, examples of programs preparing young people for the sacrament of confirmation have been analysed and lists of content and rationale statements and sample modules have been analysed. Confirmation is a sacrament of initiation and there has been an obvious recognition within the material of the theological development of understanding of the initiation process and the direct relationship between Baptism and Confirmation. There has been no recognition of the changing reality of initiation into a church, which is no longer mono-cultural and which exists in a society that is becoming less religious in many ways. The same assumptions about the children and the families as members of a faith community, which worships together, are still being made in programs developed in the 1990s as in those prepared in the 1970s. They have never been valid assumptions in Australia but they are less so today.

It is important to consider some recent demographic and cultural shifts in Australia. Since the 1970s there has been a slight growth in the numbers of those recording themselves in the Australian census as Catholic. This is now the largest Christian denomination in Australia. There has however been a very great increase in the numbers recording themselves as having no religion or a religion other than Christianity. The present religious affiliation of the Australian population of just over 17.5 million, as set out in the 1996 census was:

- 70.3 % identified themselves as Christian ;
- 3.5% with other religions;
- 16.6% designated themselves as having no religion
- 8.7% did not answer this question (Bentley & Hughes, 1998:8).

Catholics are the largest group in the Christian sector, comprising 27% whereas Anglicans are 22% of the Australian population and 21.3% are other Protestant traditions (Bentley & Hughes, 1998:10). The highest rate of increase since the 1991 census, was in the category, religion other than Christianity, the next largest increase was the 'no religion' category. This changing reality reflects both the changes in migration pattern and the public acceptance of a less important role for formal religion. These changes have serious implications for initiation processes in our multicultural society as these families do not live in a Catholic or even a Christian culture.

Australian public holidays reflect the Christian feasts but the basis for these is not necessarily recognised. The *Sun Herald*, a Sydney Sunday paper, (April, 1998), reported a survey on the meaning of Easter and noted that for the majority of respondents it was linked with the Royal Easter Show and chocolate Easter eggs, less than 20% mentioned any religious significance. The results of the 1994 National Social Science Survey recorded that less than one quarter of the adult population claimed to attend church once a month or more often (Hughes et al 1995:22). More than 54% of the churchgoers were found to be over 50. This raises many issues for religious educators who are teaching the children of a generation who are largely non-churchgoers. This is particularly important when we consider the processes of preparing children for sacraments of initiation. Children from those families who are part of the parish community and who regularly participate in the Eucharistic celebration need a very different preparation from those whose families have minimal relationship with the parish. None of the material analysed recognised such differences in the population and there were no materials prepared for the families who do not attend Church.

Bouma (1996) distinguishes between cultural plurality and cultural pluralism. The former is simply a statement of fact about the diversity that exists within society where the various groups live together with a degree of harmony. Cultural pluralism, on the other hand, is an 'ideology which legitimates, defends and promotes the peaceful cohabitation of differing cultural groups. (1996: 96)'. He argues that religious plurality and the various forms of inter religious dialogue actually promote cultural pluralism. Religious educators tend to ignore the cultural diversity within the Catholic population and act as if there is one way of being Catholic and their role is to induct the child into 'the Catholic Tradition'. As Bouma maintains 'Denominations have become plural churches in a plural society.'(1996:97). There is a tendency to only think of this plurality in terms of ethnic differences but it is much more inclusive. Bouma notes:

As Australian society becomes much more diverse than ever before in terms of including diverse ethnic groups, significant subcultures and a wide range of lifestyles, so too the experience of Australians is much more diverse, and their expectations, hopes and aspirations will be more diverse as will their meaning systems, life-styles, liturgical preferences and ethical systems. (1996:98)

The challenge for religious educators involved in inducting children into the sacramental life of the Catholic Church is to respect this diversity and to consider it in the educational process developed. Most sacramental programs do not address this diversity at all. It is the aim of this project to assist educators to critically reflect today's materials by an analysis of

the assumptions underpinning the material, the selection of content and the learning process suggested.

The following statements of belief about families in the process presented in the Sandhurst diocesan material illustrate the tendency to ignore the implications of the social and cultural context of the learners (Sandhurst Sacramental Team, 1998:10).

The Sandhurst Sacramental Team formed the following statements after much research and dialogue. These statements express our beliefs for authentic processes for sacramental preparation.

We Believe. .

- That Children belong within the Parish community.
- That the Parish community embraces the Sunday assembly, school community, families, parish pastoral groups and the wider Church community.
- That this Parish community takes the responsibility to welcome, gather, affirm, empower, educate, support and challenge itself along with the families of the candidates for the sacraments.
- That Sacraments of Christian Initiation and Penance lead people into the mystery of faith, calling them into experiences of and relationships with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- That the mystery of Christ is manifest in the Tradition, stories and life experiences of the Christian Church.
- That Tradition, stories and experiences are named, proclaimed and joyfully celebrated through scripture, prayer, ritual and symbols culminating in the Sunday Liturgy.

So That . . .

- All may become disciples of faith within a faith community.

It is interesting that these statements are written as a series of belief statements. They are really the assumptions that underpin the material that is presented in the sacramental programs and to a certain extent provide the rationale for its approach. It makes no explicit reference to the range of relationships that may exist between the candidates and the parish community. The whole document is written in theological language and does not acknowledge the religious pluralism that exists in the diocese. The document sets out the process to be followed as one of faith development although there is recognition that there are varying needs and background. It continues:

Therefore . . .

Faith development is a process that is:

- Directed to the participants taking into account their background, needs, experiences and gifts.
- Founded on Christ as the Word of God and encountered through Christian tradition and ritual, experiences, prayer and reflection. (Sandhurst Sacramental Team, 1998:11).

Even though there is an acknowledgment of varying needs, most of the assumptions, set out as belief statements above, are invalid for approximately 75% of the families concerned. Many families still wish their children to receive the sacraments even though they are not part of the parish community and may only attend worship at Christmas and Easter and family occasions such as weddings and funerals. The diocesan programs tend to be mono-cultural as they reflect a particular understanding and practice of the Roman Catholic tradition, even though this is not the majority experience of the families whose children are being prepared for the sacraments of initiation. Similar patterns have been discerned in much of the curriculum material being analysed.

Conclusion

At this stage of development of the CD-ROM and associated materials several issues have become apparent. Much of the material that has been analysed has been written in theological and educational language that reflects the developments in these fields but ignores the social and cultural context of various parts of Australia. One of the aims of the project is to tell the story of the material in such a way as to connect the people with the events and with the materials produced. It will enable the students to appreciate the effect of a key person in an Australian diocesan office studying under a particular English or American theorist on the materials developed in that office.. It will raise questions of cultural relevance and hopefully enable a new generation of religious educators to draw on the wisdom of the past in a critical way and only in as far as it is appropriate for the present and the future.

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