The Diocesan Learning Framework: Foundations for Catholic Education in a Changing World

It is the 21st Century and Western civilization is undergoing a deep, profound and very confronting paradigm shift – a shift from modernity to something new and quite different. The nature of this paradigm shift, and the ‘new something’ we are moving towards, has been the focus of much inquiry in recent decades (Doll, 1989; Gough, 1989; Slaughter, 1989). There are many different views on the nature of this territory, and whether we have ‘arrived’ or are still ‘in transition’. Some argue that we have entered post-modernity where the ‘rigid dichotomies modernity has created between objective reality and subjective experience, fact and imagination, secular and sacred, public and private’ (Waters, 1985, p.113) have given way to a world view espousing a skeptical relativism, where no foundation for truth or morality exists. Others consider this new territory to be ‘a transition period from which we are emerging as we enter into a second phase of modernity’ (D’Orsa, 2010, p.68). Still, what is clear is that we have entered new cultural and philosophical territory, as Ulrich Beck (2000, p.81) puts it:

[It is] the basic assumption that towards the end of the twentieth century the [human condition] opens up anew – with fundamentally ambivalent contingencies, complexities, uncertainties and risks which, conceptually and empirically, still have to be uncovered and understood. A new kind of capitalism, a new kind of society and personal life are in the making which both separately and in context are clearly distinct from earlier phases of social evolution. Consequently, a paradigm shift in both the social sciences and in politics is required.

This paradigm shift is a significant challenge for leaders in Catholic education. The philosophical, theological, ecclesial and cultural ground upon which Catholic education in Australia was built in pre-Vatican II times has shifted in the latter half of the 20th Century with these broader and deeper seismic shifts in Western culture. There are cracks in most foundational pillars which underpin Catholic education: epistemological, metaphysical,
ethical, ecclesial and pedagogical pillars. Indeed, the whole enterprise of teaching and learning in Catholic schools rests on foundational understandings about what constitutes truth, knowledge, faith, human flourishing and the nature and purpose of learning, and in the post-modern world these understandings are rapidly changing.

In recent years, leaders in the Diocese of Toowoomba Catholic Education Office have sought to address this issue through developing and implementing a Diocesan Learning Framework in an effort to provide a rigorous philosophical and pedagogical foundation for Catholic education in the diocese. The resulting framework, the explanation and evaluation of which is the focus of the remainder of this paper, emerged through the inquiry into the question: what philosophical system and pedagogical model should underpin curriculum development and pedagogical practice for Catholic education in the diocese? The result was to develop a Diocesan Learning Framework on the critical realism and transcendental method of the Jesuit priest and scholar Fr. Bernard Lonergan, who in the second half of the 20th Century re-worked the scholastic tradition of Thomas Aquinas for the postmodern world.

The Diocesan Learning Framework

The Diocesan Learning Framework is a conceptual framework for collaborative creativity in matters of pedagogy and curriculum within the diocese. It is represented by the Diocesan Learning Framework Image (see appendix 1) which is a conceptual portal to the model of knowing and doing expressed by Lonergan’s Transcendental Method, i.e. experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding, being in love (Lonergan, 1957; 1973). This model provides the philosophical and theological foundation of our concrete, practical work in pedagogy and curriculum.

At the centre of the Diocesan Learning Framework Image is Lonergan’s fifth precept: be in love with the Mystery that is the ground of all being. This is human life flourishing. This is red, the colour of the spirit, and the red spiral emerging from this centre is the ‘flaming out like shining from shook foil’¹ of human knowing and doing which when fully developed springs forth from being in love with God:

¹ Gerard Manly Hopkins’ The Grandeur of God.
Being in love with God, as experienced, is being in love in an unrestricted fashion. All love is self-surrender, but being in love with God is being in love without limits or qualifications or conditions or reservations. Just as unrestricted questioning is our capacity for self-transcendence, so being in love in an unrestricted fashion is the proper fulfillment of that capacity (Lonergan, 1973, p.105).

For Lonergan, there are four levels of consciousness, three which constitute knowing and one, the fourth, which is concerned with doing.

The first level is *experiencing*, and Lonergan invites us to fully embrace our experiencing, according to his first precept: *be attentive to the depth and breadth of your experiences*. Experiencing is not *knowing*, but all knowing comes from inquiry into our experiences, and all believing comes from at least some person knowing. For Lonergan, knowing is not merely taking a look (Lonergan, 1957). Rather, we find in ourselves an unrestricted, pure desire to know that moves us beyond our experiences to seek understanding.

The second level is *understanding* and the second precept invites us to *be intelligent into our understanding of the meaning of those experiences*. It is here where we have insights: our questions allow us to create percepts and thoughts, and we inquire into what our experiences mean in order to understand them. Insight is the resolution of inquiry, the ‘aha’ moment, the ‘Eureka’ moment. From our insights into the meaning of our experiences we develop concepts and ideas. But we do not yet have knowledge. Understanding, which is arriving at the insights into our experiences and formulating these as concepts and ideas, is the second level on the way to knowing.

The third level of knowing is *judging*, where we stand back from our insights and the ideas we formulate from them and ask ‘is it so?’ Here we have Lonergan’s third transcendental precept: *be reasonable in your inquiry into the accuracy of your understanding*. This is where we ask questions for reflection to determine whether our ideas are true. So for Lonergan, and for Catholic education in the diocese of Toowoomba, truth exists, but it is not necessarily the truth of authority, scientific or otherwise. Rather, it is the truth that settles the pure, unrestricted desire to know, and determining truth is a further insight into understanding our experiences. We arrive at truth when there are no further pertinent
questions that arise in ‘a mind that is alert, familiar with the concrete situation, and intellectually master of it’ (Lonergan, 1957, p.287).

The fourth level is deciding. It is not that we know, but rather what we do with what we know that makes us fully human. The fourth level is where we discern what is ultimately good and what we should do to bring about the good. Here we find the primacy of conscience, that we should act in accordance with what we know to be true and good.

What Lonergan has developed is a cognitional model of knowing, where knowing is the compound of our experiencing, understanding and judging. From this cognitional model emerges an epistemology which he develops into comprehensive philosophy to underpin Catholic education. A metaphysics: being is what we know when we know something, and therefore being is the object of our pure, unrestricted desire to know. God is the ground of all being, therefore God is implicit in all our inquiry. God exists because being (what is real) is completely intelligible. An ethical theory: the good as firstly our experience of concrete practical goods; the good of order which anticipates the order of the universe as God intends and which underpins Catholic social justice teaching; the good of value which is an insight into the good of the created universe itself. In his two monumental works, Insight and Method in Theology, Lonergan uses this model to synthesise scientific knowing, mathematical knowing, common-sense knowing and faith, which he defines to be knowledge which arises from the reality of God’s love flooding our hearts. Within this model, faith and reason are not at odds. Rather, both emerge from the common process of experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding, and the reality of God’s love flooding our hearts. This is the process which brings to fruition God’s Kingdom through human knowing and doing.

Of course, any real discussion of Lonergan’s philosophy is well beyond this brief paper. It is enough to say here that this philosophy grounds our Diocesan Learning Framework and we have begun to enact the framework in a number of concrete, practical ways within the diocese.

The cognitive model at the centre of the Diocesan Learning Framework, from which emerges Lonergan’s epistemology, is a generic, fundamental model of human knowing, believing and learning. This is not just to help us focus on what students should be doing
when they are knowing. This has also been located at the centre of a model of pedagogy embraced within the diocese, a model which locates the teacher’s inquiry into how best to help students learn at the centre of the pedagogical processes of planning, teaching, assessing and reporting. (Within the technical aspects of this model, the word pedagogy is understood to be the ability to help students learn, and pedagogical processes are how teachers exercise this ability in actually helping students learn.) This is why the words planning, teaching, assessing and reporting are placed around the Transcendental Method at the centre of the Diocesan Learning Framework. Within the Diocesan Learning Framework it is this vision of the person of the teacher – experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding, and on a personal journey of conversion towards ‘being in love with the mystery of at the ground of all being’ – that is the foundation of the teaching and learning process in the diocese.

Evaluation of the Diocesan Learning Framework

Soon after the Diocesan Learning Framework was launched in 2009, Bishop Bill Morris referred to it throughout his Catholic Education Week Bishop’s Inservice Days to emphasise that at the centre of our work in Catholic education within the diocese is the call to ‘be in love with God – the Mystery at the ground of all being’. From this flows all our knowing and doing. Here we have an understanding of the Kingdom of God bubbling up within the context of human knowing and doing, an understanding which also grounds many of the Church’s social teachings, including the social justice principle of subsidiarity. In the years since the launch all principals and teachers have encountered the Diocesan Learning Framework in a number of ways, especially through workshops and inservices. There is still very much more to be done to further develop and implement the Diocesan Learning Framework within the diocese. This journey has only just begun and there exists as yet no empirical research to evaluate its impact. However, there are some examples which may illustrate how it has been used to date within the development of diocesan curriculum infrastructure.

First, the Diocesan Learning Framework has been used to inform the development of the Diocesan Curriculum Management System which is called the Diocesan Learning Profile (the DLP). The DLP is an online database developed within the Diocese and used by all teachers
for their planning, teaching, assessing and reporting processes. The DLP has been designed
to function as a digital tool for professional inquiry to support each teacher’s experiencing
(the students and the curriculum), understanding (insights into how to help each student
learn best), judging (determining what is true in what each student knows and how they
best learn) and deciding (formulating and implementing plans for teaching and assessing).
The DLP has been designed and built on the understanding from the Diocesan Learning
Framework that pedagogy is an inquiry process into helping students learn and the fruit of
teacher’s insights arising from this inquiry is what will optimize student learning. It is our
intention to further develop this inquiry process towards an understanding of catholic
pedagogy, which we are beginning to understand as the ability to help students acquire the
synthesis of culture and faith, and the synthesis of faith and life.

Second, our assessing and reporting system, including the report card grades, has been
designed to encourage and promote for each student the process of experiencing,
understanding, judging and deciding through an explicit emphasis on inquiry and insight,
drawn directly from Lonergan’s model, particularly the second level of understanding. For
the higher order grades, teachers ask the following question to guide their own inquiry
(through assessing) into what a student knows and can do: can the student use the targeted
knowledge, understanding and skill in situations that require critical and creative thinking,
inquiry and insight? The answer ‘yes’ to this question is what we mean by ‘A’; the answer
‘partially or with support’ to this question is what we mean by ‘B’.

A third example is drawn from the use of the framework to inform system-level change
management and professional development. The annual workshops and professional
development programs implemented by the CEO Faith Education and Curriculum Team
begin with direct reference to the Diocesan Learning Framework, which centres all of our
inquiry on the Mystery of God at the heart of all our inquiry. The Diocesan Learning
Framework Prayer (appendix 2), developed directly from Bernard Lonergan’s
Transcendental Method and the diocesan Catholic education vision statement, is often used
to focus our efforts at these workshops. Also, the Diocesan Learning Framework has been
explicitly drawn into the design of the rollout and implementation within the diocese of the
Australian Curriculum for English, Mathematics and Science in 2011 and 2012. We have

2 Critical and Creative Thinking is also one of ACARA’s General Capabilities.
encouraged teachers to take the opportunity to engage in *experiencing* and *understanding* during this two year period to allow insights to arise within the teaching community and to be shared and clarified through professional conversation. We have emphasized that our efforts are not about ‘perfection from day one’ but rather faithful integrity to the inquiry process within the Diocesan Learning Framework, and that God works through this human process of knowing and doing.

To locate inquiry at the heart of knowing and doing, and at the heart of the teaching and learning process, is nothing new within education systems. Usually, however, the conceptual foundation is psychological, pedagogical or sociological. But by using this work of the Catholic philosopher and theologian Fr. Bernard Lonergan to anchor the system-wide embrace of inquiry for pedagogy and student learning, the Diocesan Learning Framework has drawn on the latest articulation of Catholic intellectual tradition in the post-modern world. This tradition acknowledges that human knowing and doing is a gift from God; that the order of the universe is inherently good; that truth exists and is an inherent good within the order of the universe. It is this vision of the flourishing human person, in relationship with God through the pure, unrestricted desire to know, and through our experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding, which underpins all teaching and learning in the diocese.
References


Appendix 2: Diocesan Learning Framework Prayer

May we be in love with the mystery that is the ground of our being
May we be attentive to the depth and fullness of our experiences
May we be reasonable in our judgments of our understanding
May we be adventurous in our planning for action
May we be responsible in our subsequent decisions and actions
May we come to understand the meaning of those experiences
May we seek shared joy and hope, built on peace and justice
And as we seek to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God,
May we be in love with the mystery that is the ground of our being