

BROADENING APPROACHES TO RELIGIOUS EDUCATION THROUGH CONSTRUCTIVIST PEDAGOGY

Abstract

For many years religious educators have explored a variety of pedagogies in the religious education classroom and in more recent years there has been a conscious move away from instructional, transmission models to process oriented models. This paper will examine constructivist pedagogy as one way of involving the learner in a more dynamic way in the religion classroom. It will provide some practical ideas about how constructivist pedagogy might be used in the compulsory religion classroom and will point to some challenges for teacher preparation for such an approach.

Introduction

Over the past three years I have been interested in exploring different approaches to the teaching of world religions. Most state education authorities have introduced Religion Studies as part of the senior secondary curriculum and some aspects of world religions are taught in lower secondary and upper primary classes. Many of the syllabuses which focus on the teaching of world religions have been modelled on the British approach and therefore tend to adopt phenomenological methods. Terry Lovat (2001a; 2001b) who helped shape the original NSW syllabus *Studies in Religion* admits that, while phenomenology is a useful tool for the study of religion, there has been a weakness in classroom educational materials based on phenomenology. I believe that Australian approaches have focused too narrowly on Ninian Smart's (1975) dimensions as the primary means of teaching world religions. While on the one hand Smart's dimensions have proved to be a useful tool, they nevertheless limit the educational process and in many cases confine teaching to the level of description and categorise elements of religion without developing deeper understanding. Over emphasis on didactic or transmission models has reduced learning about the world's religions to multi-fact religion at the expense of a serious and robust study including critique of the world's religions.

In addition, many world religion text books display what Freire (1970, 1987) calls a 'banking approach' to knowledge. The use of short definitions and over simplified explanations displays a 'glossary approach' which often appears trivial and superficial, neglects a deep understanding of the nature of religion and its practices, and limits opportunities for students to engage with the subject matter itself (Homan, 2004). What many students end up with is a list of facts about a religion rather than a deep understanding of how that religion is in the world and how its followers experience and perceive that religious tradition. In transmission models, information is not always well integrated with prior knowledge. On the other hand, constructivist approaches focus on internalisation and deeper understanding.

In this paper I explore the possibility of using a social constructivist approach in the teaching of world religions. Before we begin to see how it might work in the religion classroom, we need to explore the background to the approach.

Constructivism is a theory of knowledge, or a meaning-making theory, which offers an explanation for how we learn. Constructivism views all of our knowledge as 'constructed'. It proposes that we create or construct new understanding through interacting with what we already know and believe; and the ideas, events and activities with which we come in contact. Knowledge is acquired through involvement in content rather than through imitation or repetition. Constructivism grew out of the dissatisfaction of educational methods which were transmission-based and focused on rote learning and memorization, the regurgitation of facts and the division of knowledge into different subjects. These approaches spent a deal of time covering large quantities of facts and very little time was spent on problem solving and thinking beyond the facts, thus limiting independent and autonomous learning.

Basically there are two broad interpretations of constructivism: psychological constructivism related to the investigations of Piaget (1950); and social constructivism associated with Vygotsky (1978). Two major issues shape these interpretations: on the one hand, education for individual cognitive development, and on the other, education for social transformation and acknowledging social contexts.

Psychological Constructivism

Psychological constructivists generally believe that the purpose of education lies in educating the student in a way that supports the student's interests and needs. Learning is an internal process of accommodation and assimilation. Drawn from the work of Piaget, who saw learning as a process whereby an individual constructs his/her own meaning through cognitive processes, the student is the focus and individual cognitive development is emphasised. It is a teacher-organised, child-centred approach and assumes that students come

to the classroom with ideas, beliefs and opinions that need to be altered or modified by a teacher who facilitates the alteration by devising tasks and questions for students. To a certain extent, it assumes that all students regardless of gender, class, race, social or cultural context learn in much the same way. Because internal development is the focus of the teaching environment, it has been criticized for its lack of attention to classroom culture and social and historical contexts as well as issues of power related to knowledge production. Psychological constructivism is more concerned with process of learning than what is learned.

Social Constructivism

The second approach, Social constructivism, on the other hand emphasises education for social transformation and reflects a form of human development and learning which places the individual within a socio-cultural context. We construct knowledge within an environment and in the process, we and the environment are changed. Learning is a dialectical relationship between individuals and the social and cultural milieu. Social constructivism emerges from the work of Vygotsky (1896-1934), a Belarusian psychologist who grew up in a Marxist environment. He critiqued the work of Piaget's cognitive constructivism, and pointed to the importance of the dialectical relationship between culture, language and context in the process of constructing knowledge. One of his best known concepts is the "zone of proximal development" which argues that students can learn from adults or peers who are more advanced, and when working in pairs or small groups can master concepts and ideas more effectively than when working alone. He emphasises that learners actively construct knowledge and meaning through participating in activities and challenges as they interact with other learners and facilitators.

Some social constructivists (von Glaserfeld, 1995; O'Loughlin 1992; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978) talk about two aspects of the social context that affect the nature and extent of learning. The first is the learning acquired by a person from their particular culture such as language, ways of thinking, and symbol systems all of which dictate how and what is learned. The second is the learner's social interaction with knowledgeable members of the society. Without the social interaction with more knowledgeable others, it is impossible to acquire social meanings of important symbol systems and how to use them. Hence young children develop their thinking abilities by interacting with adults.

In this approach, theory and practice do not develop in a vacuum but are shaped by dominant cultural assumptions. Formal knowledge, the form of instruction and the manner of its presentation, is influenced by the historical and cultural environment that generated it. To achieve the goals of social

transformation and reconstruction, the context of education should be deconstructed and the cultural assumptions, power relationships and historical influences that undergird it must be identified, critiqued and altered if necessary. Social constructivists argue that the most optimal learning environment is one where a dynamic interaction between instructors, learners and tasks provides an opportunity for learners to create their own 'truth' from interaction with others.

The Learner

Social constructivism views each learner as a unique individual with unique needs and encourages this uniqueness as an integral part of the learning process. Social constructivism encourages the learner to be actively involved in the learning process because each learner constructs his or her own understanding; they do not merely mirror and reflect what they read. Motivation is also important for the learner. New learning builds on successful experiences of completing challenging tasks and as learners gain confidence they are motivated to embark on more complex challenges.

The Teacher

Teachers, according to social constructivists, have to adopt the role of facilitators and help the learner to acquire his or her own understanding of content. Facilitators ask questions rather than tell, and provide guidelines rather than instructions.

Vygotsky (1978) believes that the most significant moment in the course of intellectual development occurs when speech and practical activity, two completely independent lines of development, converge. Through practical activity a student constructs meaning on an intrapersonal level, while speech connects this meaning with the interpersonal world shared by the learner and his/her culture.

Social constructivist models stress the need for collaboration among learners themselves and interaction with teachers. Social constructivist approaches may include reciprocal teaching, peer collaboration, cognitive apprenticeships, problem-based instruction, webQuests and methods that involve learning with others. Most approaches that have grown from constructivism suggest that learning is accomplished best by using a hands-on approach. Learners learn by experimentation and not by being told what will happen. They are encouraged to make their own inferences, and draw their own conclusions. Students learn new information by building upon knowledge that they already possess. According to Burbules (1993), a constructivist approach creates opportunities and occasions for students to develop their own questions, needs and purposes, and thereby gradually construct a more mature understanding of themselves, the world and others.

Towards a constructivist model in the religion classroom

The British religious educator, Michael Grimmitt (2000), has provided one model for how social constructivism might operate in a religion classroom. I use his three-step process as an example.

He labels the three steps as

1. Preparatory Pedagogical Constructivism (PPC)
2. Direct Pedagogical Constructivism (DPC) and
3. Supplementary Pedagogical Constructivism (SPC) (pp. 216-217)

Preparatory Pedagogical Constructivism (PPC) engages the students in an enquiry into their own experience in order to prepare them for an encounter with an item of religious content. The teacher assists the students' enquiries by asking questions and making interventions which may include practical, group-focused activities (Grimmitt, 2000, p. 216).

Stage 2: **Direct Pedagogical Constructivism (DPC)** places before the students an item of religious content without explanation and instruction so it becomes the stimulus for them to begin to construct their own meaning and understanding of it through looking, and examining, and asking questions, while at the same time drawing on their own experience and the experiences of the group. Both the teacher and students contribute to the process by asking questions and making interventions (Grimmitt, 2000, p. 216).

In Stage 3: **Supplementary Pedagogical Constructivism (SPC)** the students are provided with additional information about the religious content which enables their construction and interpretations to deepen and perhaps for them to consider alternative perspectives. The students should not abandon their interpretations in the face of this new knowledge but rather engage in an interpretative process in which the new knowledge is critiqued and is, then, either accommodated within their own understanding or not (Grimmitt, 2000, p. 217).

In order to see what this might look like in the religion classroom the following example works through the three steps Grimmitt recommends. The topic I have chosen for the example is prayer and some religious objects that may assist prayer. Using Grimmitt's (2000) three step approach we might ask the following questions:

1 Preparatory Pedagogical Constructivism (PPC)

- Why do people pray?
- Where do people pray? Does it always have to be in a building?
- How do they pray? Are there bodily actions that they might perform as part of prayer? What might these be?
- Are there any special preparations such as dress? - How might it assist them to pray?
- How might religious dress and religious objects aid the person to pray?

- Name any religious dress or religious objects that people use for prayer?

In stage two the **Direct Pedagogical Constructivism (DPC)**, the students are provided with some religious artefacts from Judaism as the items of religious content. The students are shown the religious items with no explanation or instruction. Their task is to try to construct their own meaning.

For instance, students are presented with the following Jewish items: Tallit or prayer shawl, tzitzit, yamulka, tefillin, scroll and yad, and given the following questions:

- What do you think these things are?
- What might they be used for?
- In groups
 - Describe the tallit. What are its features?
 - Describe the yamulka. What are its features?
 - Describe the scroll. What might it be used for?
 - Describe the yad. What is its purpose?
 - Describe the tefillin. What is this? Do you wear it? How?
 - Describe the tzitzit. What does it look like? What might its purpose be?
- Which religion do these items belong to?
- Would both men and women use these?
- How might these objects be worn or used?
- Why do you think the person wraps their hands in the Tallit?

In the third stage, **Supplementary Pedagogical Constructivism (SPC)**, Students are provided with additional or supplementary information about the religious items.

Students and teacher together continue to engage in an interpretative process. Show students a picture of a boy dressed in tallit, tefillin and yamulka and ask:

- Does what you wear affect how you feel? How?
- Then provide students with some quotes from people talking about what they wear and how it helps them to focus for prayer.
- Ask them what other things might assist Jewish people to pray?
- Music
- Chanting
- Nearly all Jewish prayers are in Hebrew. Discuss why might this be so?
- When do Jews pray?

Teachers using a constructivist approach encourage students to think about how the activity is helping them to gain understanding. The aim is to develop 'expert learners' who will not only question themselves as learners and their strategies but will also encourage them to broaden the tools they use to assist them to learn. Constructivist learning is spiral: it requires students to reflect on their experiences and to continually increase the complexity of ideas which, in turn, enables them to integrate new information. The teacher's role in this process is to encourage learning

and reflecting on learning. Constructivism does not down play the role of the teacher or dismiss the relevance of expert knowledge. Teachers are required to focus attention on helping students rather than provide the 'answer'. The role of the teacher is to assist students to construct knowledge rather than to reproduce facts. The challenge for the teacher is to provide problem-solving activities and inquiry-based learning activities for students so that they can test their ideas, draw conclusions based on evidence and share their knowledge in a collaborative learning environment. If used effectively constructivism assists the student to move from being a passive recipient of information to an active participant in the learning process under the guidance of the teacher. Constructivism does not require students to 'reinvent the wheel' but should engage the students in ways which stimulate curiosity. In turn, students become engaged through applying existing knowledge and real-world experiences, by testing theories, learning to hypothesise and drawing conclusions based on their findings.

In a constructive classroom rather than just using primary texts and workbooks we need to include contestable materials, primary or secondary sources which offer differing views on the topic. The learning should be interactive and built on what the students already know. It is the dialogical process between teacher and student that assists the student to construct his/her own knowledge. The role of the teacher should also be interactive and s/he should create situations where the students feel safe and empowered to ask questions. The teacher should also create activities that lead students to reflect on their knowledge and experiences. Students should be encouraged to talk about what was learned and how it was learned.

The constructivist classroom is a collaborative classroom and in many instances students work in groups. Collaboration assists student to learn from each other and when they review and reflect on the learning processes together they can pick up strategies from each other.

One of the challenges in using a constructivist approach is asking appropriate and challenging questions. Using an inquiry method often assists students to ask questions, investigate a topic and use a variety of resources to find solutions and answers. There are many inquiry processes but most inquiry models involve commitment of the learner to continuous reflection and re-evaluation of the direction and purposes of the inquiry. There are a number of skills which students can develop which will enable them to participate successfully in an inquiry process: They are asking questions and discussing. Central to inquiry learning is knowing how to ask and answer questions. Peavey and Hutchinson's (1993) questioning process is very helpful. The questions

move from simple questions through to complex questions and can be grouped as follows:

- *Questions* are concerned with how to get from the present situation to a more ideal situation e.g. What needs to be changed?
- *Personal Inventory and support questions* are concerned with identifying a person's interest and potential contribution and the support necessary to act e.g. What should we do? What can we do?
- *Personal action questions* are those which get down to the specifics of what to do and how and when to do it. The actual plan begins to emerge e.g. What support do you need?

Sometimes students are unable to create and sustain dialogue in a discussion and they often jump from one idea to another in a disjointed manner, neglecting to explore ideas offered. They need to be assisted to develop a language of dialogue which can be modelled by the teacher. The following is useful in assisting students to ask questions which promote dialogue and discussion:

Focus: What did you find interesting?

Clarification: Could you explain it to me?

Reasons: Why did you say that?

Connections: It sounds like you agree/disagree with X. Is that right?

Distinctions: How is that different from what X said?

Implications: What can we work out from that?

Assumptions: What have you based that on?

Testing: How could you work out if that was true?

Information gathering: What do we know about that?

Examples: Can anyone give me an example of that?

Counter-Examples: When wouldn't that happen?

Consistency: Does that agree with what was said earlier?

Relevance: How does that help us?

Alternatives: What if someone said...?

Summarising: What have we found out?

Listening strategies: Did I hear you say...?

Participation: What do others think?

(De Hann, MacColl & McCutcheon, 1995).

Conclusion

Approaches to teaching and learning in subject areas other than Religious Education can be adapted for the religion classroom. Some of the strengths of a social constructivist approach are that it enables students to imaginatively and empathetically enter into a religious tradition thereby developing inter-subjective understanding. It may also enable them to make connections between their own feelings and experiences and the content being studied and to use this as a basis for understanding religious concepts, beliefs and practice and as a means of developing critical reflection upon their own beliefs (Grimmitt, 2000, p. 223).

A constructivist approach encourages students to explore ideas and issues for themselves and arrive at their own conclusions. It also allows students to understand religious ideas in a variety of ways. Merely providing students with pre-packaged meanings does little to engage them. The importance of establishing 'zones of proximal development' (novice and master) where students learn from more advanced peers enables religious knowledge and understanding to be problematised and its language and meaning to be deconstructed. Learning develops from students' own experiences, interests and questions and by interacting with others their own views are challenged by other pupils and the teacher. Constructivist pedagogy is one way of involving the learner in a more dynamic way in the religion classroom and engages both teacher and students in the process of learning.

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Professor Peta Goldberg teaches at the Brisbane Campus of Australian Catholic University.

Understanding the world's religions and ideologies is important in three ways. First, they are a vital ingredient in the varied story of humankind's various experiments in living... Second, and of more immediate importance, is the fact that in order to grasp the meanings and values of the plural cultures of today's world, we need to know something of the worldviews which underlie them... Third, we may as individuals be trying to form our own coherent and emotionally satisfying picture of reality, and it is always relevant to see the great ideas and practices of various important cultures and civilizations. Ninian Smart, 1989.