

## Developing a living theory of theopraxis: How do I improve my practice as a professional educator in Religious Education?

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### Abstract

In this paper I attempt to explain why I believe that a relational form of teaching is a vital aspect of good pedagogical practice in Religious Education (RE). This applies to those who wish to become teachers of RE, as well as to those who teach them, like myself. I have come to this belief through my experience of engaging with issues around dominant forms of RE, grounded as they are in dominant forms of theory; I have done this as part of my action enquiry in which I interrogate my practice in an effort to improve it. I have come to understand that most contemporary conceptualisations of RE see it as a subject to be taught, rather than an experience to be lived. This, I believe, stems from a commitment to propositional forms, which are inadequate to offer explanations for the lived realities of people's lives. I prefer to engage with generative transformational forms, from my commitment to understanding life as in the moment and theory as constituted of the descriptions and explanations we offer as we make sense of our lives in the present. I explain how I try to live this view in practice, by revealing how my practice becomes an aspect of my faith-based living; and I explain how I am finding new forms of visual and linguistic expression that communicate appropriately the dynamic relational forms that I seek to live in my practice.

**Keywords:** Theopraxis; Confluence; Downlogue; Metaphor.

## Introduction

I am a senior lecturer in higher education, teaching Religious Education (RE) to novice teachers who will also teach RE, some in faith schools. I am also pursuing my doctoral studies, and this paper outlines one of the emerging areas of my research. My main doctoral work involves interrogating and theorising my general pedagogical practice, and also focuses more specifically on aspects of religion that enable me to generate what I call a living theory of *theopraxis*. By this term I mean that I am offering an explanation for how I am generating my living theory of faith-based practice. Faith is understood as that which is to be embodied and manifested. In that context, and through the expression of faith, theology becomes a living practice rather than an abstract propositional concept or theory. The form of words I use is also significant. Following Fromm's (1956) ideas of 'having' and 'being', I do not claim to 'have religion' but rather I exercise faith, understanding this as a methodology towards love and compassion. In this I agree with Tillich (1957) that 'faith has a cognitive context, an act of the will' (p. 8). I therefore term my practice 'theopraxis', a morally committed practice in the light of my faith in God.

This paper explores the position of relationality within this theory, and also engages with issues of how such a relational practice may be communicated, favouring especially the metaphors of visual communication, dance and dialogue.

In order to communicate what I consider the significance of my theory of relationality, I incorporate specific episodes from my practice to explain what I see as the educational nature of the influence I am exercising in my own and others' thinking. I offer my narrative from a position of wishing to share it with others, like Palmer (2000), who says, 'The story of my journey is no more or less important than anyone else's. It is simply the best source of data I have on a subject where generalisations often fail but truth may be found in the details' (p. 19). I also draw on Lomax's ideas (1994), that my story 'is the narrative of a personal journey that locates my educational values within my personal biography' (p.1). And because I believe that education is a value-led profession, I seek to articulate those values which are the heartbeat of my practice and which I shall, as my paper proceeds, offer as the living criteria and standards by which I judge the quality of my research and work.

I now set out my current professional situation, and explain why I am led to write this paper.

## My contexts

I am at the point in my research-programme in which I feel justified in making a provisional claim to knowledge. This is, that I am contributing to a new epistemology of faith-based practice grounded in the three main Christian Pauline<sup>1</sup> values of faith, hope and love. In understanding these three values in the context of Bernstein's (1991) ideas around a constellations of values, I believe that care, respect and human flourishing are very much linked with love in a relational web. I refer you to the image at:

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<sup>1</sup> Pauline is the adjective referring to St. Paul.

[http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3140:/2672776799\\_fdef6c3a37.jpg](http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3140:/2672776799_fdef6c3a37.jpg) that communicates these ideas. The image, however, also symbolises the difficulty I experience in trying to articulate these deeply embedded, and clouded, underpinning values, especially since I now understand how those values have only recently become significant for me through their negation in my practice. Some values, such as fairness, have been obviously apparent and have 'shone' through in my work; but others are more dense and embodied. I now wish to articulate those hidden, embodied values for myself, and find ways to show how they might be further clarified and articulated through and in my practice. A main reason for this is so that I can transform them into living standards of judgement (Laidlaw, 1996) by which my work might be judged, and make them public for further examination by others; another reason is so that I can come to understand my practice more fully for myself.

In recent times I have increasingly developed this practice of communicating difficult and often tacit understandings through the use of visual metaphors, and I continue to do so in this paper, and will do when I come to write my doctoral thesis. I try to find images that communicate the dynamic and relational forms of theories that are generated from studying my practice. I provide links to images of this kind in this paper, and request you to access the images as you read. The images I use here are drawn from art, sculpture and poetry; my hope is that their dynamic form will communicate the dynamic nature of the epistemological and logical form of my enquiry. In doing this, and drawing especially on the work of Eisner (1988; 1993; 1997), I am exploring new ideas (at least for me) about how the use of artwork can be symbolic of different forms of theory, in which more iconic forms seem to represent static forms of theory that emphasise the abstract propositional nature of claims to truth, whereas the more fluid forms seem to represent idea of theories in flux, transforming, adding new interpretations and meanings to practice. This approach appears to be sympathetic with my theorising in as much as the language of faith and symbolism are often understood as synonymous. I am also influenced by Moustakis' (1990) ideas around heuristic research with his claims that such work is often, 'illuminated through careful descriptions, illustrations, metaphors, poetry, dialogue and other creative renderings rather than by measurements, ratings or scores' (p. 42).

So, to continue with an outline of my current professional positioning, I am much occupied with generating theory from my practice, and also, like Cooling (2007), I am interested in the concept of teaching as a Christian vocation. In asking whether I have a 'theology of practice', I am unsure; but I claim that I have, at least, 'theological thoughtfulness about the practices of teaching' (Watkins, 2008, p. 1). If I understand theology to be about 'faith seeking understanding' (Saint Anselm<sup>2</sup>), then it is, I believe, possible to offer up such a theology, incorporating the idea that the committed believer 'lives' theology rather than 'does' it in abstract (Sheldrake, 1998). My examination and explanation of my work involves my asking, 'How do I improve what I am doing?' (Whitehead, 1989), as I seek to show how I hold myself accountable for my practice, progressively interrogating my identity as an academic practitioner in company with others with whom I work. I enquire into how I am influencing my own learning, in order to influence others that I teach, and to influence the social formations in the institutions in which I work.

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Anselm lived from 1033-1109 and there are no extant page numbers extant for his work.

## My research programme

Let me now give an outline of my research programme and explain why I use action research as my preferred methodology.

My wish as a teacher is to develop a critical pedagogy that aims to encourage those with whom I work to exercise their originality of mind and critical engagement. Some of those colleagues are learning to become faith-based primary teachers within a neo-liberal social context that values technical rational forms of thinking and learning, a situation that gives rise to considerable ontological dissonance for me, as I explain shortly. It is my commitment to engage in practices that nurture human flourishing for all, irrespective of their own and others' faith stance. I maintain that education needs to contribute to personal and social growth and enablement. Some colleagues believe they come to life and religion from a neutral point, a view with which, like Polanyi (1958), I disagree. I argue rather that neutrality is overrated or nigh impossible in areas of religion and education. This view is held also by Kincheloe (2004). He states that this is how it should be, 'as critical pedagogy maintains, little in the world and certainly little in the world of education is neutral. Indeed, the impassioned spirit is never neutral' (p.5). I find Sheldrake's (1998) comments also pertinent when he says, 'Our whole sense of the world in which we live is the product of the frameworks of belief that we carry with us. These affect our experiences, not least our spiritual ones, and how we interpret them' (p.5).

My practice stems from my very being, my ontic<sup>3</sup> stance. As a practising Christian I refute the divide between secular and sacred, and see all aspects of my life as an interconnected, related, synthetic whole. I do not wish to compartmentalise different aspects of my life or prioritise one over the other; this, for me, would be tantamount to schism. I agree with Cooling's (2007) similar rejection of dominant views of professionalism when he says:

To be a professional [from dominant contemporary perspectives] has been judged to mean that you privatize one's faith and respect the higher authority of academic objectivity; you keep the sacred and the secular aspects of your life in carefully labeled compartments, recognizing the superiority of the latter over the former. (p.3)

Instead, I draw on the images of confluence, and I braid the secular and the spiritual in a synthetic relationship. This stance, however, can be problematic, for a key challenge for me becomes how to keep the integrity of a Christian practice alive when it appears the dominant contextualising secular ideology often assumes religion as a private affair, a state observed and identified by scholars such as Sheldrake (1998), Copley (2005) and Cooling (1994) and where others can be suspicious of a Christian proclaiming that they are aiming to exercise educational influence. It is widely acknowledged that Dawkins (2006) maintains that faith-based influence can lead to much harm in the minds of the young. This situation has arisen, I believe, mainly because so many have misused such influence to teach in confessional ways, ways that leave little place or time for reflection or independent

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<sup>3</sup> This word relates to a sense of ontology, or 'possessing the character of real rather than phenomenal existence; noumenal' (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/ontic>).

generation of knowledge and respect for the other. A person who teaches in confessional ways wishes the other to agree with them and is not really interested in hearing an alternative view. Confessional teaching is therefore not a relational methodology, grounded as it is in attitudes constituted through power.

My chosen methodology for my research is self-study action research, a methodology that is relational in character and requires me deliberately to adopt an insider approach. My choice also appears commensurate with my faith-based understanding that I feel compelled to look at my own life in judgement before another's (Matthew's Gospel 7: 3-5). Other forms of research seem to me incongruent with my ontological and epistemological stance. A powerful image that communicates these ideas may be found at [http://bbs.chinadaily.com.cn/attachments/month\\_0904/finger-pointing-796415\\_LibKhVdkzTpG.jpg](http://bbs.chinadaily.com.cn/attachments/month_0904/finger-pointing-796415_LibKhVdkzTpG.jpg).

Perhaps the message that the image communicates is somewhat hackneyed but it remains true – when one points at another then undeniably three fingers point back at self. Positioning myself as a central part of my research, I am in companionship with those who I consider fellow researchers. So, rather than pointing at them, I adopt the use of the living 'I' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) as a key feature of an empowering form in action research as I, a practitioner researcher, attempt to improve my own practice before seeking to influence others. To communicate these ideas further, here is the inscription on George Lewis' gravestone, found in Warnford, and engraved and erected as a token of sincere respect by his brother, Stephen Lewis:

TO  
THE MEMORY OF GEORGE LEWIS  
WHO DIED  
DECEMBER 17<sup>th</sup> 1830 aged 41 YEARS  
And where's the man O reader? Point out then  
Where lives the man who hath not to his share  
Too many faults and then too much sin  
Inspect thyself and mark how 'tis within,  
Then note not other's faults. Thine own amend.  
This do, you will yourself and them befriend.



**Figure 1.** Tombstone of *George Lewis*

So, having set out some of the main issues in my research programme, I now begin to describe parts of my practice, in order to explain and improve it. To enable me to adopt a structured approach to this account, I adopt the critical questions posed by McNiff and Whitehead (2006), as follows:

- 1) What is my concern?
- 2) Why am I concerned?
- 3) What can I do about it?
- 4) How will I evaluate the educational influence of my actions?
- 5) How do I modify my ideas and practices in light of my evaluation?

### **What is my concern?**

I have already explained that I am involved in the preparation and teaching of initial and continuing professional development programmes for novice and experienced teachers. Such preparation and teaching, and the programmes themselves, are grounded in the belief that all may improve their learning in order to improve their practice; I am endeavouring to do this through my research. I am called a senior lecturer but I prefer to understand myself as an educator or teacher, refuting as I do the image of one standing on the higher ground, distinctly divorced from the 'swampy lowlands' of everyday practices (Schön, 1991). I believe my previous Primary School practice of twenty years allows me to acknowledge the popular understanding of the asymmetrical positioning of teachers and academics and the issues around those relationships. I disassociate myself from the image of one who temporarily escapes their ivory tower to speak in esoteric terminology to the very few rather than exoterically to the many (Mitroff & Linstone, 1993). Instead I take as my example the teacher, Christ, the Logos, the Master communicator, the relational one, and seek to place myself under his influence. Adopting this stance, however, means that I must offer an account of how I am living these ideas about relationality in my practice, as I do now.

In asking what my concern is I do not start with a given hypothesis that I wish to have accepted. I do not believe I will come to any absolute conclusions, nor do I look for final answers. Like Gromit laying down the train track in *The Wrong Trousers* (Aardman Animations, 1993), I seek to create a pathway through my research through travelling along it. Positivist research would appear to take the fixed journey from point A to point B; but ironically, although rails should be linear, the track of my research does not aspire to a final destination. I understand that the end of one journey is the beginning of the next in that I am starting to reconceptualise myself as a lifelong learner. I believe that an image that communicates this idea effectively is at [http://static.squidoo.com/resize/squidoo\\_images/-1/draft\\_lens2332530module13127548photo\\_1229854935Gromit\\_train.jpg](http://static.squidoo.com/resize/squidoo_images/-1/draft_lens2332530module13127548photo_1229854935Gromit_train.jpg).

### **Why am I concerned?**

Whilst claiming that I teach Religious Education in relational ways I am conscious that this is not how I have always taught. My former ways of teaching were often characterised by the one-dimensional transmission of propositional knowledge. Although teaching specific subject knowledge is a necessary and important part of instruction, I believe there are better

ways of teaching than transmission, especially when teaching for understanding and appreciation of the significance of the topic for one's own life. I perceive that in many ways this approach was fuelled and perpetuated through the use of certain schemes used in faith schools that neither require the pupils to think through issues nor ask that the teacher be involved in any form of creative pedagogy. It is possible for teachers to reproduce fact-based lesson material in RE; in many ways that was what I was doing.

My pedagogy was often characterised by a sense of unchallenged safety and ease; in some ways, it still is. My growing awareness of this lack of challenge gradually changed into a deep frustration, a realization that the denial of my values had led to ontological dissonance. There was clearly a need for me to reconceptualise ideas in order to stay on top of my life, 'to break away from seeing the new in terms of the past and always dealing with it in the same way as previously, and thus facilitate the production of novelty' (Cropley, 2001, p. 161). However, I still could not make the necessary breakthrough in my practices in order to arrive at a position where I was realizing my values in my practices. I was afraid to initiate dialogue with my students in case I did not know answers. I still positioned myself as the expert, the repository of knowledge, and my anxiety in case people 'found me out' often became apparent. In short, I did not really enjoy teaching as it had become so stressful. I can easily identify with the underlying concepts in Anderson's *The Emperor's new clothes*, as shown in this image: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/17860/17860-h/images/plate24.jpg> I still strove to provide fixed answers rather than believe that novice teachers have the capacity for creating their own knowledge. This attitude was based, I believe, on an inaccurate understanding of what a teacher's role is and from a position of pride. I wrote altogether prescriptive lesson notes, which left little space for the place of dialogue or the unexpected. I 'ruled' from the 'front' and was capable of becoming irritated by those who hindered my flow of expertise. My students were left to second-guess what answers were required and my teaching script was fully and comprehensively written, learned and followed.

I believe that my attitudes of that time were endorsed by the dominant mode of teaching, rooted as it is in propositional forms of theory. The prescriptive modes of teaching I have described are, I believe, perpetuated by certain overly prescriptive materials used in RE which view the topic in terms of static propositional religious knowledge, knowledge of religion. Recently, in a course that I was running, I spoke with some vibrant and gifted newly qualified teachers who told me stories of how they 'went off piste' and deliberately changed schemed RE material to suit their classes; but their stories were generally admitted behind cupped hands, in hushed tones, as if it were something mischievous and unorthodox. Some schemes are so prescribed that deviation in some way seems maverick. Why such guilt? Are there power struggles evident here? I maintain that parts of these overly prescribed RE schemes that these teachers are expected to follow are not sufficiently engaging or suited to the twenty first century child. The topics can be characterised by predictability of material linked with dogmatic methodology that masks how faith can be exciting, challenging, significant and vital. Although no doubt acceptably written from a position of religious orthodoxy I believe that such prescriptive methodologies should and need to be challenged, as I have learned, through my research programme to challenge them for myself.

The teachers present at one meeting were doing this and encouraging each other in discovering creative and dynamic ways to teach the material. One teacher admitted that the

children were 'falling off their seats with boredom', as she admitted to a continued presentation of some often non-relational and prescribed material that she said she knew in her heart was neither stimulating nor meeting her children's needs. I would go so far as to say that such tidy packaging of religious conceptual understanding seriously limits the possibility of dialogue and diminishes the essential capacity to live with and grow from ambiguity and doubt. Such a practice appears to further 'enbox' the faith-based life. Most importantly it does not facilitate life flourishing and mutually beneficial, collaborative, transformational relationships to grow between teacher and pupil and fellow learners. Broadbent (2004) has this to say: 'Religions are dynamic and life changing: they are about revelation and inspiration... Religions, therefore, could be regarded as synonymous with creativity, because they are about change and movement, about making something new' (p.150).

I link this with McNiff's (1984) ideas of the generative transformational nature of evolutionary systems, the idea of one form growing out of another, out of relationship. I believe that if relational teaching is realised, it will be of a discursive, dialogical kind that leads to the creative generation of knowledge. This relationality between fellow learners, materials, subject content and experiences of being can be truly transformational.

My situation these days, three years into my doctoral programme, is that I no longer seek to position myself as the expert involved in a banking model of education, deigning to make deposits in those before me (Freire, 1973). In agreement with Kincheloe (2004), I do not seek to have students grow to be those who know their place in the strata of institutions; I want, as he writes, 'empowered, learned, highly skilled democratic citizens who have the confidence and savvy to improve their own lives and to make their communities more vibrant places in which to live, work and play' (p. 8). Whilst acknowledging that I have accrued a wealth of propositional knowledge through my studies and life experience, I also seek to hold my knowledge base with open hands and not consider it a gift to be graciously bestowed on the ignorant and uninitiated from a position of power. This I would claim is emulating Christ's example of emptying himself for others in order to serve (Philippians 2:5-7). I would claim that this is also my stance when considering my educational knowledge and its transformation into living theory, open to modification and growth. Thayer-Bacon (2003) holds the same view:

I offer a self-conscious and reflective (e)pistemological theory, one that attempts to be adjustable and adaptable as people gain further in understanding. This (e)pistemology must be inclusive and open to others, because of its assumption of fallible knowers. And this (e)pistemology must be capable of being corrected because of its assumption that our criteria and standards are of this world, ones we, as fallible knowers, socially construct. (p.7)

## **What can I do about it?**

These days I seek to be the type of teacher who reconstructs her work in order to empower and encourage others, seeing them as autonomous learners, able to engage critically in their own thinking. I do not want students to have to second-guess what answer I am seeking or expecting. I wish to be the pedagogue posing probing, open-ended questions that help others think through the material, corresponding issues, those involved in their

own knowledge creation. Examples of this are my heightened use of scenario in introducing real-life classroom situations and issues linked with real practice in schools as appropriate. I encourage the students to 'micro-teach' in groups, providing more pre-reading enabling them to come to sessions having considered material that we study together. This I find limits the need for download of factual knowledge. There is much more space for learning from each other through interaction and dialogue. I have discovered that the novice teachers very soon find their own voice through discussion and start learning about themselves as learners, being able to listen to themselves. Like Kincheloe, I maintain that best practices 'help create a democratic consciousness and modes of making meaning that detect indoctrination and social regulation' (ibid., p.3).

So let me describe the stance I adopt today, and describe aspects of relational practice I endeavour to model in the hope that others may be influenced to be relational teachers of RE. Although not specifically related to RE I draw on a special example of how I teach a postgraduate masters programme in education.

As a key aspect of the programme, I draw extensively on visual metaphor to show how adopting such metaphors for practice can be effective in helping me to reconceptualise and explain my own teacher identity. In one of the Masters modules that I teach I ask all the post graduate cohort to devise a metaphor that encapsulates in some way what they think a good teacher is – what they would like to be in the classroom. Novice teachers find this exercise a significant aspect of coming to recognise their educational values and in structuring their own identities. Linking their metaphors with educational theory that either challenges or confirms their choice, they begin, importantly, to theorise their own practice in order to improve it. In this I draw on Tesson's (2006) Ph.D. dissertation entitled *Dynamic Network: An interdisciplinary study of network organization in biological and human social systems* as an interesting consideration of the use of metaphor. (See <http://www.actionresearch.net/tesson.shtml>)

I have observed that, as novice teachers develop and their initial metaphors change, it can be revelatory to consider how and why this happens as it does. The images become more fluid, connected and inclusional whereas the initial ones can be very one-dimensional. One student progressed to draw on the metaphor of the *Old Curiosity Shop*, drawing the shop-window full of exciting and significant objects. She maintained that everything a child encounters holds the potential and is a springboard for vital and transformational learning. She spoke of the connections between areas of learning and the relationships formed and having observed the same student in the classroom on numerous occasions I can witness to a vibrant, captivating pedagogy where children enjoyed some very deep learning. Some of my collated data for my doctoral study consists of colleague's choice of metaphor in evaluating my practice.

At present, one of the main metaphors I have chosen for my view of educative influence is dance. (See an example of this in the image at [http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3092/3226311543\\_5da67fe9a4.jpg](http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3092/3226311543_5da67fe9a4.jpg))

I am struck by the way this photographer has found the essence of dance in nature, showing how natural the form of collaborative and unified movement can be. I am reminded that one of the core ideas in the Christian concept of sin is alienation, and I understand this as a false state, in that people were made for community and relationship with God and

others. Rayner takes many of his ideas about inclusional practice from natural form. For examples of his work see <http://people.bath.ac.uk/bssadmr/inclusionality>.

Palmer (2000) also writes about the metaphor of dance. He notes: 'my gift as a teacher is the ability to "dance" with my students, to teach and learn with them through dialogue and interaction' (p.52). He continues to paint a dynamic picture as teacher and students dance as one; but he also mentions the destructiveness there can be when 'wallflowers' refuse to join in, thus denying his gift. At such times, he confesses, 'I get hurt and angry, I resent the students – whom I blame for my plight – and I start treating them defensively, in ways that make the dance less likely to happen' (ibid., p.53). He believes he can never be the teacher he wishes to be when this happens but needs to learn to find ways to keep the invitation to encounter open so that others may engage. I can well empathise with his perceptions.

Yet there is an obvious vulnerability in relational and loving practice and in extending an invitation that may be spurned. There have been times when whatever I have tried to do to encourage and even cajole some to join in this dance called 'Learning Together' has been rejected. I then find myself acting in uncharacteristic ways, being false to my values, becoming a living contradiction (Whitehead 1989) and feeling utterly deskilled. Confidence wanes, demoralisation sets in and one wonders if one has ever developed as a teacher at all. It is at times like these that I feel compelled to keep loving in unconditional ways, which is not easy; but I bear in mind words such as those in 1 Corinthians 13: 7 '(love) always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres'.

And to communicate these ideas I draw on Matisse's image here of the dancers: [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/telegraph/multimedia/archive/01183/arts-graphics-2008\\_1183381a.jpg](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/telegraph/multimedia/archive/01183/arts-graphics-2008_1183381a.jpg) I believe the image depicts something of the joy of abandonment when one loses oneself in the joy of dancing with others, whilst still retaining individual identity but not in a spirit of individualism. There is completeness in the unity, and one senses that it is not good for a person to be alone. Buber (1958) speaks of this special un-self-conscious form of relationship and realises that it can be only too fleeting. Matisse's painting is one of primeval, memorable beauty and movement and I adopt it as a metaphor of interactive, dialectical, dialogical practice, something to be rejoiced in. How often have I been delighted by groups of novice teachers ready to engage, discuss and build up relationship with one another and with me? This appears as a gift. This anonymous, unconventional, haiku poem that a student once told me seems to sum up something of such encounter in a simple manner.

We meet nervously  
I invite you to walk  
I find you dancing  
I rejoice.  
(Anonymous)

Yet I cannot dance unless I am suitably relaxed and happy, so I am challenged about how to create a setting that might be conducive to deep, collaborative learning. In my journal I wrote:

I have chosen the metaphor of dance because of its fluidity and dynamic movement. Like a lava lamp of the sixties, teachers and students move together in accommodating spaces. I need to practise my skills of teaching and learning, like dancing, so that others may experience joy, purpose and freedom as we join together. My ontological stance dictates that I see myself as fellow learner alongside and with my students as we learn and move forward together whilst I still retain the mode of teacher leader. (Maria James, personal reflective journal, May 21, 2007)

## **How do I evaluate my educational influences in learning?**

I am aware of the need to establish the validity of my emergent claims to knowledge, and so demonstrate the methodological rigour of my research. I asked my colleagues to comment on my practice after being present when I taught a large Masters cohort in an auditorium, a setting that would in my view offer a challenge to the relational possibilities that I seek. They offered the following comments in letters and notes (the originals are in my data archive):

Your approach makes the listener want to be part of your interaction and I would therefore endorse that you were able to 'dance' in unison with the listeners, who seemed to mirror your thoughts and actions, and also add their own steps to the dance. I believe that you can tell a lot about your performance when you look in the eyes of the viewer and listeners; you can gauge their interest, their understanding and their 'eureka' moments, when you say something that really switches off their brain into thought mode... you were indeed dancing with the students. From the start you treated them with respect and showed how much you valued them in your welcoming introduction. (Colleague A, personal communication)

Your values of respect and inclusion were evident throughout both in your dialogue with me and your interaction with the students. During the lecture you were able to interrelate with them and invite them to dance with you. You integrated opportunities for students to think and discuss points raised. You moved amongst students during this time to listen to their discussions. You were noticing students who were not interrelating. At one point you were concerned that a student may be unwell who had closed their eyes. I felt that you were very much with them rather than distant or separate from them. You seemed to be in tune with the group. This is especially difficult to achieve with such a large group of students and in a room that does not lend itself to metaphorical dancing! I find it really difficult to feel part of the large group and I have much to learn from you. (Colleague B, personal communication)

I came to your lead lecture because I wanted to be there. It is sometimes the case that I will be far far too busy to attend an activity that I think will be uncomfortable, not a productive use of time etc. but I knew I wanted to be part of your lecture. As I type this I realized I used the words 'part of' which implies that I felt an involvement in what you were saying. A big lecture hall does not lend itself to 'your dance' and yet I did feel a connection. Your approach is one of 'reaching out' and 'involvement'. (Colleague C, personal communication)

Relational practice can be problematic and encourage a certain hyper-sensitivity. I am deeply committed to the idea of trying to get others to engage, so I will often challenge students about non-engagement, which can lead to confrontation, since I have to respect the fact that others may choose not to engage and resist my attempts to make them. However, I am both surprised and delighted by how often I misread body language. I am also mindful that maintaining a positive atmosphere in a class can be a fragile thing. I recently

challenged a student who was ostensibly resistant to becoming part of collaborative learning in her group. She retorted, 'You know, this RE session is not all that's going on at the moment!' In conversation later, realising her situation, I felt rebuked, and apologised. I related strongly to Bateson's comment that 'the shape of what happened between me and you yesterday carries over to shape how we respond to each other today' (Bateson, 1979, p. 15). I then had to work hard to regain even a working relationship with her and others around her. However, I see this as the kind of example that faces a relational teacher who is prepared to notice the individual within a big group and will take relational risk. Kincheloe (2004) maintains that a critical pedagogy allows us to bring the power of love to our everyday social and institutionalised lives, providing us with the capacity to rethink reason in a humane and interconnected manner.

So let me now link the ideas of visual forms of representation and dance, as communicating an invitation to engage, to be together. An image that speaks strongly to me of invitation to engage and encounter is Caravaggio's painting showing Christ sitting and eating with the disciples after the journey to Emmaus (see [http://farm1.static.flickr.com/151/333308530\\_7e0041beae.jpg](http://farm1.static.flickr.com/151/333308530_7e0041beae.jpg)). They have realised who he is, not as he has spoken to them from the Old Testament scriptures, but through the act of the breaking of the bread, something they had seen him do on numerous occasions. His witness to them is through who he is and what he does. I am struck by the welcome and invitation extended by the hands in the painting. I do not need to read about the meaning of the piece, it is not hidden from me, how often our bodily gestures do the work much better than words ever can. The hand gestures draw you in and invite you not only to partake of the material but also the spiritual food. Both sets of hands, Christ's and the disciple's, beckon but Christ is definitely the centrepiece of the whole. This is a picture of God in communion with people. The scales are removed from the eyes of the disciples as, in realising the reality of risen Christ present with them, they start to appreciate the significance of the revelation, and the relationship is renewed. Similarly, my practice as a teacher and fellow learner is not about evangelisation, that is, setting out distinctly to persuade others to become Christians but I do invite others to consider why spiritual encounter, in my life and the life of others, is so vital. I trust the meaning of theopraxis is evident through the way I conduct my life as well as through what I say. I hope that this is communicated through who I am as a non-coercive practitioner.

I believe the invitation in this picture goes on to invite the diners to dialogue. I imagine how the conversation continued as the dance between them continues. In the Matisse picture there is a gap between the hands where one senses anyone may join in. It is not a closed circle; it is open to all as the invitation to learn should continually be. The invitation from Christ is universal.

### **How do I modify my practice in light of my evaluation and ongoing learning?**

I believe that relational teaching in RE provides space for questioning, uncertainty and ambiguity, in other words for discourse. I believe these can be times of personal growth. I attempt to build these spaces into my sessions with the novice teachers, through reflection,

guided visualisations, and time for discussion and through my use of pace. I am struck by the image of God reaching out to Adam in the Sistine Chapel painting by Michelangelo: see <http://www.templestudy.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/02/the-creation-of-adam.jpeg>.

Accepting that art is open to interpretation, I believe that God has fully created Adam and is now providing essential space for Adam to realise the enormity and autonomy of being human. God, even in his eagerness to forge the relationship of the Creator with the created, pulls back, patiently prepared for when Adam turns to him. The grace expressed in this way speaks of worthy pedagogical practice to me. The question for me becomes whether I can do the same.

I try to, recognising that at times in teaching I have been involved in what I refer to as 'downlogue', a monologue disguised as dialogue, where I have controlled the discussion. Now I deliberately refuse to position myself as expert knower and become fellow discussant with others, preferring to use dialectical and dialogical methodologies. Through my on-going research I intend to continue to narrate the journey of transition from a didactic pedagogical stance to one characterised by dialogue and relationship. So far I have accumulated much data that is beginning to show that this transformation is taking place, believing that this is typified by the following feedback from a colleague.

I would very much like to support your claim that you teach in a relational way. I also believe that you behave in a relational way towards me as a colleague both in a professional context such as in our research work, and our reading group and at a personal level. In our last meeting you brought ideas about discourse and encouraged us to share our thinking about this. I felt my ideas have moved forward following your input; and with your humble approach I now feel that my thinking about Buber and relational learning has moved forwards. (Colleague D, personal communication)

## Conclusion

Within this paper I have attempted to sketch a picture of a relational pedagogy through which I am trying to communicate the educational nature of such practice. My journey continues as I continue to make myself critical, as I seek to engage with the politics of educational knowledge, aiming to contribute to the development of new epistemologies of educational practice within a dominant epistemological culture of propositional theory. I have made the provisional claim that I am doing so through theorising my practice as theopraxis, an explanation for how I am generating my living theory of faith-based practice. I have attempted to explain connectedness and relationship with others in terms of the connectedness among persons (Buber, 1958), and how this is a manifestation of the connectedness of humanity with God. I claim that I have learnt to teach in ways associated with life affirmation and transformation whilst rejecting certain normative methodologies linked with faith-based practice. My aim now is to influence the professional learning of others, with implications for systemic transformation, as manifested in the masters programmes that others and I are developing in our institution. Time will tell whether or not I am successful in my endeavours.

The journey continues as I reach forward for the next piece of track.

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