“I CAN’T TELL ‘EM THAT!”
USE OF DIRECT INSTRUCTION IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Context

Let me begin with an emblematic story. I was once observing a trainee RE teacher take a senior Catholic high school class. The topic this day was stem cell research, one lesson in a unit dedicated to “ethics in the modern world”. The class had a heavy focus on student centred learning. The main activity was students, working in groups, researching various aspects of stem cell research and then reporting back to the whole class. As I listened to these reports I noted that very few of the students seemed to realize the significance of the distinction between embryonic stem cells and adult stem cells. When I raised this with the teacher after the class she was adamant about her rationale. She saw her role as a teacher to facilitate learning and not to impose knowledge – indeed she commented, “I can’t tell ‘em that!” It was, therefore, the students’ task to come up with crucial distinctions. This was seen as being a more pedagogically sound methodology as it was, amongst other things, much more likely to result in long term transformational learning. My point was that some direct instruction on the part of the teacher, in this case, pointing out to students some critical vocabulary and concepts – such as the distinction between adult and embryonic stem cells far from inhibiting learning could actually facilitate it. My student teacher was sceptical and gently rebuked me for promoting an “empty vessel” approach to learning. This is a well known analogy where teachers are seen as filling up the vacant heads of students. 

I think this narrative sets out some very important issues that are especially relevant to teaching in religious education. There is a great reluctance on the part of many RE teachers to use direct instruction in the classroom. Rymarz (2004) proffers a number of reasons for this and two of these will be mentioned here. Firstly, direct instruction can be seen as an educationally unsophisticated approach, more in keeping with bygone and outmoded instructional methodologies. Secondly, and related to this, RE teachers working in religiously affiliated schools in particular need to be vigilant about the dangers of imposing religious beliefs on students. This may be construed as a type of quasi indoctrination - also a feature of an era now passed.

Guidelines for use of direct instruction in the classroom

General rationale

A number of recent studies have pointed out that direct instruction in the classroom has a place in contemporary pedagogy in a number of situations (Mayer & Moreno, 2003; Kirschner et al., 2006; Gredler, 2009; Hattie, 2009). Many of these insights dovetail with established theoretical approaches such as the Vygotskian paradigm of scaffolded learning and teachers being the mediators of student movement into the zone of proximal development (ZPD)(Vygotsky, 1987). ZPD is the area between what students can do
unaided and the most difficult task that they can undertake (Karpov, 2003). Use of direct instruction is best utilized within a contextualizing framework such as the following principles.

*Lowering cognitive load*

If students lack strong content knowledge of a particular area then they find it difficult to orientate themselves to a new topic (Mayer, 2004). What can happen in these instances is that the amount of exogenous material that students encounter can severely restrict new learning. In these situations students have a relatively low saturation level, commonly understood as information overload. One such area is engagement with the basic contours of Christian belief and practice. Dean (2010) has pointed out that adolescents today have a poor grasp of the major tenets of the Christian narrative. In order to deal with this, teachers should be aware that students can very quickly become disoriented and disengaged, when doing topics with which they have very little connection. In these instances direct instruction can provide a mechanism by which students can enter into the conversation by at least giving them some key vocabulary and concepts.

None of this is supposed to override prior learning. Good teachers will always try to situate new learning within student prior knowledge. In some areas of religious education students will bring with them some misconceived ideas. These should be acknowledged and addressed, not as the final word on the subject but as a prelude to further learning. In Vygotskian terms this is the recognition that students often have spontaneous concepts which may be incorrect but, nonetheless shape student perceptions (Chaiklin, 2003).

*Time efficient and focussed*

Direct instruction (DI) needs to be focussed both in terms of the amount of time devoted to it as well as toward content objectives. Good use of DI is time efficient. It cannot be too long or used too often. In a similar way, it should focus on these key elements that students need to know and would have difficulty finding out on their own violation (Mayer, 2004). To illustrate, many RE teachers cover topics related to morality and ethics. A key concept in these areas, from a Christian perspective, is conscience. The elaboration of the notion of conscience is a complex area but some assistance in providing key terminology can be of great assistance. It can be too much to expect students to, say, realize the importance of Augustine in deriving the modern notion of conscience and then to discover his definition. A teacher can provide these as a context for further leaning.
This sense of the teacher leading the way is very akin to Shulman’s (1986) notion of teacher competence. Here the teacher needs to have mastery of content knowledge in order to be able to generate the stories, metaphors and analogies that can engage students. This is a question of quality of information not quantity. It is the ability to identify what are the key mediators and roadblocks to future learning.

What comes before and after?

DI should always be seen as part of an overall approach to learning. Many of the fears of teachers about using DI come from experience of it being used as the sole or dominant form of instruction. University courses, for instance, make heavy use of DI in the form of lectures. There is ample evidence that this is an unsatisfactory pedagogical model. When using DI in religious education a critical question is, “What comes next?” DI needs to be integrated into a learning strategy that aims to have students participating in an involved and engaged capacity.

The problem with the stem cell lesson mentioned earlier was not that the teacher was relying on student directed learning. It was, to use a Vygotskian idea, that she was not providing sufficient support for the tasks to be meaningful (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). It would have been much more productive if students, after a range of teaching and learning strategies, including DI, were then encouraged to explore the theme in a more self directed way.

References


Let me note here that I was not convinced that the student teacher was aware of the difference between adult and embryonic stem cells. The issue of content knowledge of RE is perennial. No amount of discussion of pedagogical principles can distract us from the fundamental point that if RE teachers have poor content knowledge this will severely limit their capacity to teach well. Certainly self described discovery learning cannot make up for teacher deficiencies.