

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN TEACHING THE BIBLE

Yvonne Joubert
University of Pretoria

Abstract

The role of the teacher is crucial in the education process. The emphasis in the teaching situation should be on the learning process as facilitated by the teacher and not on the 'conveying of knowledge' by the teacher. Competencies rather than content have become an imperative to enable students to comprehend a continuously changing world. To realise this aim teaching methods and the communication of the teacher play an important role. Knowledge of the communication process on the one hand and the receiver on the other hand has become an imperative.

1. Introduction

Religious Education is without doubt the most controversial subject in the curriculum of our secondary schools. Few problems of education in modern times have aroused more interest and controversy than that of Religious Education in the State schools. Few problems of education in the Transvaal have inspired more concern and controversy, even cynicism, than that of the teaching of religion in the English-medium schools of the province. To what can the paucity of observable results be ascribed then? Can it be laid at the door of the teacher, or the syllabus or the methods employed?

After making these statements and asking these questions. Staples (1984:1) concluded:

No education system can rise higher than the quality of its teachers.

It is thus clear that the role of the teacher is crucial, especially in a subject arousing so much controversy as Religious Education.

2. The Teacher

Analysis of the Gospels reveals Christ as the ideal teacher - after all, that was His mission on earth. His love and respect for the child guides the way for the educator. His gentleness, patience and masterly example which constituted

Analysis of His teachings clearly shows that He possessed the five essential attributes of the ideal teacher, i.e.:

- knowledge of his subject
- knowledge of his pupils
- skill in conveying his knowledge
- a character and a way of life worthy of emulation and
- he practised what he preached.

3. The Teacher as Facilitator of Learning

Every child has a religious potential and it is the responsibility of the teacher to help in the developing of this potential. Religious experiences play an important role. By recognising the special relationship between God and the child, the teacher can create opportunities (without interfering) for religious experiences and in doing so, the child's religious potential will develop to its fullest (Roux, 1991:32).

To create these opportunities to develop the child's religious potential, the teacher should manage and monitor the teaching and learning act. Successful teaching - which implies instruction and learning - must be intentionally planned and structured with a view to enhancing the quality of learning outcome. (Louw 1993:36).

According to Slabbert (1992:439) learning quality has been the concern of educationalists for many decades, but it has become more so since the restructuring of schools started. This is also the concern of Religious Education (RE) as confirmed by Kerry (Hull, 1982:161-170) when he investigated the demands made by RE on pupils' thinking. He made a suggestion that teachers could make more opportunities to improve the quality of pupil's thinking during verbal transactions in lessons. He found that much of the content, even of a cognitively demanding subject such as RE, is reduced by the teachers to an informational level in the classroom. Malan (s.a.: 34) also warns against content centred RE:

We may even be challenged to alter our view of the Bible. Instead of using it as a textbook of which the detailed content is to be mastered, we may regard it as a book revealing a message which expects a response.

Improving learning quality, constitutes moving from learning 'what' to learning 'how'; from learning content to learning competencies. Competencies rather than content have become an imperative because our educational challenge is to prepare students for an unknown future in terms of content and structure. To have the learning content or structure as an aim, as if its place in our future world is secure, is not only unwise but also a denial of reality. The attainment of competencies will enable the students to comprehend a

continuously and rapidly changing world. In the changing society, pupils will have to make responsible choices as far as values are concerned. (Slabbert 1992:439). It is the task of the teacher to supply the pupil with the necessary 'tools' to make such choices. The School Council Working paper (UK) comments in this regard as follows:

With regard to RE in secondary schools, education is concerned with teaching 'how' rather than teaching 'that'. Tutors are not textbook but specialists in the art of learning. Their chief function is to teach their students the skills of disciplined inquiry. Tutors should choose the 'representatives' ideas of a subject and select material and learning experiences to illustrate these. Like Confucius they should learn to give students one corner of a topic, but refuse to go on to the next until from the one they have discovered the other three corners. (Schools Council Working paper 1971:74).

The aim of teachers in RE should therefore be to make use of methods whereby the pupils can acquire the ability to handle problems in understanding biblical material. The teacher should supply the tools and teach them how to handle these tools and the raw material of learning.

A method very suitable for RE students to acquire the skills as mentioned, is cooperative learning, especially in a multicultural setting. Cooperative learning is not mere group work. It involves requirements such as: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face to face interaction; cooperative skills and evaluation (Slabbert 1992:439). The following methods of cooperative learning are described by Slabbert (1992:440).

4. Methods of Co-operative Learning

4.1 Think-pair-share:

The teacher poses a question to the students who first have to think of a response individually, then pair with a partner to discuss the question and reach consensus on the answer and then to share the answer with their classmates.

4.2 Co-op Co-op:

The elements of this method, which is a very structured version of the group-investigation methods, which will be discussed later on, is as follows:

- student-centred class discussion
- selection of student learning teams
- team building
- team topic selection
- mini-topic selection, preparation and presentation

- preparation of team presentations
- team presentations
- evaluation

4.3 Jigsaw:

The elements of this method are as follows:

- a task or passage of text material is divided into several component parts of topics;
- each group member is given a topic on which to become an expert;
- students who have the same topics meet in expert groups to discuss the topics, master them and plan how to teach them;
- students return to their original groups and teach what they have learnt to their group members;
- a test or quiz is taken individually;
- team recognition is given.

4.4 Student team learning:

The students meet in their teams to attempt to master a set of worksheets. Then students take individual quizzes on the material. The scores the students contribute to their teams are based on the degree to which they represent an improvement on the student's own past average. Team recognition is given.

4.5 Learning together:

Students work in small groups to complete a single worksheet for which the group receives praise and recognition.

4.6 Group investigation:

Students in small groups take substantial responsibility for deciding what they will learn, how they will organize themselves to learn it and how they will communicate what they have learnt to their classmates.

In RE these methods will facilitate the quality of learning for the following reasons:

- It provides a social support mechanism for learning. Pupils have to exchange ideas, ask questions, explain to one another, clarify ideas and concepts. In a multicultural setting, pupils in a team may have different viewpoints about religion which can lead to a meaningful discussion.
- It provides opportunities for students to challenge one another's ideas which in turn improves the quality of learning.

- Different approaches to solving problems are experienced and merits valued.
- Through explaining to another, concepts become clearer to oneself.
- It creates the opportunity of practising and returning the ability to grow in communication within the norms of the subject (RE).
- Groups can often handle challenging situations that are well beyond the capabilities of individuals at that development stage.
- It offers opportunities of success to all students because they help one another to acquire a common goal.

Even the most fundamental aspect in learning quality is achieved through co-operative learning: it places the responsibility for learning where it belongs - on the students (James, 1989:89).

5. The Teacher as Communicator

Within the educational setting, communication has only two aims:

- to establish a relationship between the learner and what has to be learnt. This relationship is the posing of the problem, and the communication here is recognised by challenging, evoking and provoking;
- to maintain that relationship. This communication is characterised by support and encouragement. It is remarkable to see from the work done by Kraft (1991), that within the frame of reference of the above-mentioned, Christ did just that.

He led his receivers to discover who He is (Mark 8:27-30) rather than to simply tell them who He is. He raised questions (posing the problem) that have to be wrestled with, than simply provide answers. He is apparently more concerned that we exercise our creative powers to arrive at meaningful answers, than that we all come to the same answers. He seems to respect us and our ability as learners, more than contemporary educational techniques would seem to when they encourage teachers to merely develop and pass on their conclusions rather than to help students struggle towards their own understandings.

The role of the teacher in the learning situation is therefore to establish a relationship between the pupil and that which is to be learnt, and to facilitate the maintenance of this relationship.

For Fueter (Hull, 1982:188) this should be the aim of RE, i.e. giving pupils the necessary tools for making their present or future religious choices as meaningful as possible. They should learn to assume their own religious philosophy and verbalise it. The role of the teacher is to enable the pupil to come to decisions based on reflection. Religious choices will only become conscious when they are communicated to others. An experience of which we

cannot speak, will remain in the limbo of the subconscious. The mastery of words and the understanding of symbolic actions is therefore an essential element of Religious Education. Teachers should create the type of environment where the pupils can express themselves.

To realise this aim, the teacher must not only plan his lessons for specific methods suitable for dialogue, but he must also have the necessary communicative skills as well as knowledge of the communication process. One of the basic requirements of the communication in the RE lesson is that it should be pupil (receiver) orientated.

6. Pupil/Receiver-orientated Communication

In our modern society, knowledge of the pupils that are taught, is of the utmost importance. Kraft (1991:67) emphasises the importance of this aspect by saying:

The more we learn about the communication process, the more we become aware of just how crucial the receiver of the communication is to the process. Whether we are attempting to deeply influence people via interpersonal interaction or simply convey information via lectures or sermons, the receiver has the final say over what the results will be. It thus behooves us to learn as much as we can about what is going on at the receptor's end when we attempt to communicate.

According to Kraft (1991:68-80) the teacher must realise that:

- pupils have certain needs. Wise teachers seek to discover those needs and adapt their messages so that the pupils perceive the message as relevant to their needs. The teacher must keep in mind that he is dealing with the pupils' reality, no matter what the objective reality may be;
- in a subject like RE one of the tasks of the teacher should be that of counsellor. Some of the needs of the pupils will be of a personal nature. The teacher should therefore, via his credibility as a person, gain permission to enter the pupil's private communication space. Felt needs of this nature are the touchstones from which life- change can be recommended and accomplished. The Christian method is designed to change life;
- pupils are part of reference groups. The peer group plays an important role especially when values are concerned. The teacher will have to consider the group and appeal both to individuals and to the group with full recognition of their significance to each other;
- pupils are already committed. Apart from the fact that they are committed to groups they are also committed to values and beliefs. When the teacher appeals to them for commitment to God through Christ, he is inviting them to move from one commitment to another.

(This implies Christian Religious Education). This is not an easy task unless the pupils are not satisfied with the fruits of their existing priorities.

■ pupils are active learners.

i) They are interpreting the learning content. The teacher must do his utmost to make sure that everything he does in presenting the learning content, will be interpreted in a way that enhances the intended meaning.

ii) Pupils construct meaning of the learning content. Meaning is not transmitted from person to person within oneself but constructed on the basis of one's interpretation of the words and other communicational symbols one receives. These communicational symbols are crucial in teaching RE, especially the teachers non-verbal communication, such as relating to the learning content, perhaps in R E more than in any other subject. The subject must therefore be lived and be taught enthusiastically.

iii) Pupils are granting or withholding permission for the teacher to enter their personal communicational space. The responsibility of the teacher to earn this permission. In the present secular society this is more demanding than a few decades ago. Factors like the religious credibility of the teacher, the attitude of the pupils towards religion in general, the potential threat of the message, the place and time of the interaction and even the mood of the pupils, greatly affect the tolerance for a message.

Pupils can perceive the message as a threat in so far as it threatens the maintenance of their equilibrium. For many, almost any change, especially in religious areas, is perceived as a threat to their equilibrium. When people are threatened they automatically reject any message that seems to require change on their part. Others though will gladly accept almost any message recommending change. And in between are those who accept certain messages that require change and reject others. It is felt needs that often seem to demand change while it is the relationship with the reference group that provides the major symbols of equilibrium. Pupils will ask questions like: What will accepting the change cost me personally and socially? The message is then often rejected because the cost is considered too high, and not because the message is judged to be unworthy. The teacher should in any case avoid emphasising doctrinal knowledge alone. The major quest for most peoples of the world is for more spiritual power to provide them with freedom and a measure of control over the vagaries of life.

iv) The teacher of RE should allow for feedback. This is especially crucial to ascertain how the pupils interpret the message.

Feedback helps making the pupils part of the interaction process. It is only through dialogue that the teacher will not only identify the needs of his pupils but will also be able to relate to his pupils.

Thus, to effectively guide the communication in the classroom, the teacher must:

- enter and work within the pupils' frame of reference;
- present both himself and the message within the pupils' range of tolerance;
- give maximum attention to attaining, maintaining and creatively using his credibility; and
- seek to be relevant.

7. Conclusion

When teaching RE, the skill in 'conveying' knowledge is to a great extent determined by the methods used but mostly by the interaction between the teacher and the pupils

The greatest relay of truth is through interpersonal relationships because they provide minimal distortion with maximum interaction. You can impress a person from a distance but you can only impact up close. We communicate our values by what we are, not by what we say. (Kesler, 1985:296).

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