

Sabbatical report from Ray Scott, Principal of Aquinas College

Firstly, my thanks go to the Ministry of Education for the opportunity to take Sabbatical Leave in 2014, and also the flexibility to allow the leave to be taken in two parts, the last five weeks of Term 1 and the additional five weeks towards the end of Term 3 and beginning of term 4. This enabled our Deputy Principal to also take up the Sabbatical Leave he had been awarded in Term 2. My thanks also go to the Board of Trustees for agreeing to this arrangement which allowed both the DP and myself to take up our respective sabbaticals. Finally my thanks go to the staff and students of Aquinas College for the way in which they have continued with the quality teaching and learning that characterises our school.

During the first part of the sabbatical my wife, kris, and I travelled to Europe to firstly visit Rome – an opportunity prompted by a Tauranga parish priest (Fr Michael Gielen) being in Rome at the time to study. His experience and local knowledge helped greatly in visiting many of the significant sites of the Roman Catholic Church. We also travelled to other parts of Italy, visited family in Croatia and stayed with a teaching colleague and his family in Japan. The time in Rome especially provided great personal professional growth in terms of Catholicism in its broader, international context.

During the second part of the leave I had a focus on visiting schools of interest regarding changes that are currently occurring in modern learning and how modern learning environments in schools might assist in 21st Century learning.

We are living in times of considerable and ongoing change. In fact it is a common refrain that we are in the middle of a revolution – and this revolution extends not just to the world of education, but to all aspects of our day to day lives, be it our family, social, work or leisure activities.

However, a problem with revolutionary times is that there is often no clear path for people to tread. In the educational world there are many blazed trails that individuals or groups leave as they strike out in a particular direction, but often there are questions around the value and/or effectiveness of the path being struck.

As mentioned earlier, during the second part of my sabbatical I took the opportunity to visit schools in New Zealand as well as Aquinas College in Melbourne.

My intention was to talk with principals and other key staff in schools regarding some common issues and trends occurring in schools. Broadly speaking my areas of interest were:

- Maintaining and strengthening the Catholic Character of our school.
- Modern (or 21st Century) Learning and Modern Learning Environments
- & in particular the use of ICT for classroom learning, including the “platforms” being used and how schools are initiating and using BYOD for learning

However, the changing nature of schools and new trends in teaching and learning are secondary to a more fundamental aspect of any school community. This was reinforced in each of the schools I had the opportunity to visit. My experience and belief regarding what makes a successful school hinges on strong and positive relationships that exist amongst the people in the college community – the

students, the staff, the families and wider community connected with the college. These relationships set the tone and culture of the school, including ownership, belief and pride in the college, all members of the community having a positive attitude towards learning and the willingness of each person to strive to do their very best in all aspects of college life. These relationships extend from the sense of welcome people receive when they contact or enter the school, to the collaborative, relaxed but purposeful attitudes brought to all learning situations. A critical element that is common to these relationships is good communication – this extends from our conversations with each other to the use of ICT to keep all members of the community informed.

Maintaining and strengthening our Catholic Character

Catholic schools are highly regarded in the wider community. To a large extent this is due to our Catholic Character which provides the umbrella that encompasses all of the activities at the college. Our “touchstones” provide the core values and ways of being that extend into the college community as well as providing the everyday context for all at the school.

We must also remember that for many of our students their experience of church is what they encounter at the college. Hence it is crucial that we do all we can to maintain the strength and integrity of our Catholic faith story. This occurs first in our relationships with each other and our everyday interactions, which need to be based on a deep respect for each person in the community.

Our Catholic Character does not simply happen – it is the “heart” of the school & needs to be worked on and kept at the forefront of the school community at all times. This includes:

- Each of us providing every day the example of what it is to be a good man or woman. This happens through our actions, more so than our words. “Being the best that we can be” has been our theme in 2014, & is talked about in the mission statement of the school (...constantly strives for excellence”). In Catholic teaching it goes back to Iranaeus in the 2nd Century who talked about “The Glory of God is man (or woman) fully alive” – something we aspire to through our holistic approach to education.
- Maintaining the clear set of values and beliefs that are at the centre of the teachings of Jesus. For us this centres on the “touchstones” of the school – Family, Scholarship, Service, Prayer, Joy and Truth. This needs to happen in each classroom every day, as well as in other part or full school gatherings and parent/community meetings.
- Make these values visible not only through our actions but through symbols and signs around the school.
- Ensuring that the Catholic Character is evident in all curriculum areas, through the content of the courses where appropriate &/or the attitudes and values shown in the classroom.
- Maintaining our regular celebrations of mass and other liturgies/prayers to build student knowledge of the Catholic faith and traditions.
- Maintaining and strengthen engaging RE programmes as required by the Bishops’ Council.
- Providing other opportunities such as Retreat programmes in a manner that meet the needs of young people in today’s world. (Eg Using the expertise and resources of the Diocese and wider community, as well as our own staff)

Modern (21st Century) Learning (ML) and Modern Learning Environments (MLE’s)

What is ML and how can MLE's assist in learning today?

The New Zealand Curriculum document talks about students today needing to be confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners. The last decade has seen enormous changes in our understanding of how people learn and, also in the ways we can learn. Almost overnight, we've entered a new, modern world with access to vast numbers of teachers, tools, and resources via our laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Our increasingly connected students now hold the world in their hands...literally. ML centres on how we make use of this new understanding and the abundance of resources to facilitate teaching and learning.

Following on from this Modern Learning Environments should align better with what we know about the brain and student learning. They need to enable traditional pedagogies such as direct instruction as needed, but they should also offer students and teachers other possibilities including:

- **Flexibility of use:** the ability to combine two classes into one for team-teaching, split a class into small groups and spread them over a wider area or combine different classes studying complementary learning areas.
- **Openness or visibility:** modern learning environments traditionally have fewer walls, more glass and often use the idea of a learning common (or hub) which is a central teaching and learning space that can be shared by several classes. They provide opportunities to observe and learn from the teaching of others and be observed in return.
- **Access to resources (including technology):** typically a learning common is surrounded by breakout spaces allowing a range of different activities, such as reading, group work, project space, wet areas, reflection, and presenting. There is often a mixture of wireless and wired technology offering access as and when students need it, within the flow of their learning.

The theory is that working in an open, flexible learning environment where inquiries are shared, interventions devised collaboratively and reflections based on both self and peer observations, leads to a more robust, continuously improving community of practice.

My visits to different schools during my sabbatical confirmed that there are many different pathways being used to provide MLE's and ML. Traditional classrooms can, and are, being used to provide excellent ML experiences. The visits also confirmed my earlier observation that the key factor in any learning environment still hinges on the relationships that are developed between the teachers and their students, combined with an openness of teachers and students to different ways of learning. Research indicates that learning occurs in myriad different ways and top quality teaching and learning still relies on a variety of approaches and experiences. Too great a use of any single mode of teaching & learning, from teacher directed through to student centred, can lead to boredom and disengagement.

Some observations from my visits included:

- There is no substitute for well planned, engaging programmes of learning, where the teachers are passionate about their subject areas, have an openness to their own learning and share this with their students.
- Professional Development for teachers in the area of ICT use in teaching and learning is crucial. PD will come from within the expertise of our own staff or externally as needed. It needs to be a consideration for our budgeting each year. We must also remember that our students are generally well ahead of teachers in terms of their familiarity with, and use of, modern technology! They are also an important resource in this sense and reinforce for us that we are all learners.

- MLE's appear to work well where there is an adequate combination of discreet learning spaces and break out areas for small group and individual work. The visibility of the spaces is an important aspect, allowing for easy observation when classes are split into groups, and for modelling of good teaching and learning.
- Modern, modular furniture is now commonly available which allows greater flexibility in the way in which a room can be configured for different teaching and learning activities.
- "Bring Your Own Device" (BYOD) practices are developing slowly in most schools, often depending on whether the upgrade of IT infrastructure (SNUP) has occurred. Some schools have started with a single device being recommended but the trend is for schools to recommend (& cope with) a reasonable range of devices. The key consideration is to have a machine with the specifications that allow the teaching & learning activities that will occur.
- E-textbooks are becoming more common using BYOD. This is a growing trend and will have cost implications. Some schools have used e-textbooks as a first step in beginning their BYOD practice.
- Use of these devices and the opportunities they provide also has equity issues. There will always be families that will struggle to afford such devices and additional costs associated with them. Schools are aware of this and trying to ensure that access is available for all students.
- Classrooms containing more powerful PC's are still needed for specialist subjects that demand greater computer power than tablets/I-Pads/smartphones etc can provide (at this stage).
- Schools will continue to use ICT infrastructure for memory storage etc. However, some data will increasingly be better accessed through "cloud storage". This includes teaching and learning programmes, assignments etc that can now be made available to students through systems such as Microsoft 365 or GoogleDocs. This "anywhere, anytime" access to school material, and potentially to teachers, needs to be managed carefully.

We are in a time of rapid change in education and this will continue into the foreseeable future. This will continue to bring its challenges for schools and our present structures (organisational and infrastructural), but also provide great opportunities in terms of Teaching and Learning for all involved.

Ray Scott

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