THE *REAL* vs THE *VIRTUAL* UNIVERSITY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TEACHER:
An interpretation of contrasts in participant engagement in learning between face-to-face and fully online teaching

Abstract

This article is about learning and teaching in postgraduate courses and professional development programs. Much has been written about how children and adolescents might learn in religion classes, and about how religious education might contribute to their spiritual and moral development. But there is not so much about religion teachers' own religious education and professional development, particularly from the perspective of those whose role is to educate them religiously (English, 2002). The article reflects on 35 years' experience in the field. It is like an educational 'reverse engineering' – putting what was judged to be best practice into theory. It will propose an 8 level framework of participant engagement in study of RE that has been found to be useful for interpreting differences in contexts, participants, and course structure. It results from insights and intuitions drawn from experience, and as yet is not related to the literature of adult learning. But it might become a starting point for research on issues related to the professional development of religion teachers. The focus is on educating professionals in religious education and not on their theological education; nevertheless, the pedagogical principles that are developed may well prove to be relevant to any tertiary postgraduate or professional development program. The estimates of teaching, engagement and learning proposed here may be contested; nevertheless, they raise issues that warrant further consideration in relation to policy and priorities in the development of postgraduate religious education programs.

Introduction

Australian Catholic University, like other universities, has extensive fully online unit offerings where there is a *virtual* lecturer/teacher. The students do not usually meet the lecturers or hear their voices; they may have no interaction with lecturers other than

through receipt of assessment marks, rubric performance grids. and perhaps brief comments for some, but probably not all, of their written work (Note: this does include the use of a program like Adobe Connect where lecturers and students can see and hear each other in an online, classroom-like situation). Fully online units have complemented, and in some instances, replaced the traditional teaching of face-to-face units where by contrast there is a *real* teacher. Various reasons for having fully online units that have aired in university circles include:- flexibility, meeting the needs of distance education students, the perceived value of 'electronic' learning, the economy of large over small class sizes, the range of units available, increased profitability, changes in staffing such as the casualisation of the academic workforce. This article develops a conceptual scheme in terms of *student engagement in learning* for two purposes: Firstly, to interpret the variety of ways in which students might engage in learning in postgraduate study; and secondly, to compare and contrast the profiles of engagement in learning in face-to-face and fully online units. This sort of analysis can be a prelude to interpreting the learning potential of different teaching formats and for informing priorities and policy in program development. Also it can be a useful starting point for empirical investigation of students' perceptions of postgraduate religious education.

An eight-level model of participant engagement in learning about RE at tertiary level
An eight level scheme has been devised for analysing the processes of teaching and student/participant engagement. Engagement, a construct now commonly regarded as a key element of learning (Churchill, 2011; Clouder, 2012), will in simple terms be considered as:- the mental activity of participants in thinking about the content being presented; it may include understanding the content or having difficulty in working out what it means¸ as well as some emotional response and some thoughts about how the content relates to professional experience; it may involve a new insight or it may confirm or challenge previously held ideas. Engagement may or may not be expressed in verbal comment or question, and/or in written notes or material for forthcoming assessment tasks. The expressions of engagement, in addition to their value for participants, can also be helpful for the lecturer as indicators of participants' understanding.

The eight points of engagement explained below have been identified in the teaching of face-to-face units in postgraduate programs (it is presumed that a similar scheme could be applied to undergraduate teaching). The scheme simply suggests the variety of modes that may figure in any student's engagement. The strength of engagement at any level will vary according to the individual. While the sequence is linear and logical, not all levels may operate in a particular instance. The levels are not necessary stages in a developmental sequence, even though the full sequence may be followed by some students. Compared with this list for face-to-face teaching, the profile of engagement tends to be different in fully online units and in school-based professional development events.

Point of learning engagement	Brief description
E1	Initial presentation of content
E2	First active signal of comprehension
E3	Sustained class discussion and exchange of views

E4	Informal participant discussion
E5	Follow up study of unit materials
E6	Completing the assessment tasks: Written assignments, group projects, etc.
E7	Lecturer assessment feedback to students
E8	Active participant response to lecturer assessment feedback

Engagement E1. Initial presentation of content. This is where the participant makes first contact with the content. In the face-to-face situation this will be through the lecturer's verbal presentation, supplemented variously with written handouts, overhead transparencies, powerpoints and audiovisual and Internet resources.

It is not enough for a lecturer to 'cover the territory' in the content. Just re-cycling what they know about the topic from the vantage point of knowing more about it than the students is not adequate. Good lecturing will present a *wise 'take', slant* or *particular interpretation* of the content – with its own bias. This can help participants get an idea of the 'topography' of the content and issues from the lecturer's considered viewpoint. This helps them see more easily, clearly and vividly the main points in contrast with the lesser points. It gives them an accessible, ready-made 'handle' on the content, something that is very difficult for the new student to acquire just from reading, because they are not familiar enough with the academic literature to readily discern what is valuable and useful from what is not. Everything in a published academic article or book can appear infallible to them at this stage. In a sense they can vicariously use the lecturer's position on particular content to develop a coherent, evaluative, integrating perspective on the issues being considered. It is important for the lecturers to explain the reasons for their stance or bias so that eventually the participants can articulate their own professional view. And this can be consistent with, or in disagreement with that initially proposed as a pedagogical aid by the lecturer.

Using this approach to content can be helpful in proposing critical thinking as an important aim of postgraduate education. A lecturer without a well thought through take on content does not yet know the field well enough. And this handicaps the students because initially they can be overwhelmed by descriptions of content making it more difficult for them to develop their own critical interpretation.

This approach can not only alert participants to key points in content, including hints about what to look for, it can help protect them from spending too much time on writings and ideas that the lecturer thinks are problematic and not so useful. This approach can valuably enhance the efficiency of students' ongoing study of the academic literature and helps ensure that they are not swamped with too many ideas, some of which can be confusing; this helps them learn how to decide quickly what reading may be relevant for them and what may be irrelevant. But because the lecturer's slant has been explained to them, they are not being seduced or indoctrinated into it; and they will have to test its value for themselves. While they may be somewhat dependent on the lecturer's interpretation initially, as they grow in self-confidence and experience, they become more independent in their thinking. Experience and student feedback suggest that this is a helpful way of promoting critical, independent thinking about the content.

In the face-to-face class, the lecturer can make use of audiovisual presentations and the Internet in creative and effective ways. In addition, a unit website can be set up that follows up, and further resources participants' engagement with the unit. It has been found helpful to put audio and/or video files of the lectures on the site, together with all audiovisual presentations and handouts, as well as additional readings, so that participants can 'replay' the parts they want to; and this also provides a way of helping those who of necessity missed any of the program to catch up by listening to the lectures and submitting notes as evidence of their engagement with the content covered while they were absent.

Engagement E2. First active signal of comprehension. Participants can signal first comprehension of the ideas just presented in a number of ways. In their own minds, they can consciously agree or disagree with what has been presented, together with the thinking that supports their judgment. This can be expressed through a confirmatory or dissenting statement to the lecturer and class group – and at times through comments made under their breath or to the person beside them. Or it could be evident in a question of clarification, an example of professional experience, or in comments about related issues. This comprehension is also signalled in the writing or typing of notes.

Lecturers (and teachers generally) will commonly use participant comments and questions to gauge the level of immediate comprehension of their presentation. But more than this, they can be attuned to appraising comprehension in a relatively subconscious way. While continuing their presentation, almost by second nature, without consciously thinking about it, they will scan the expressions on the faces before them; they pick up quickly on nods and any other expressions of acceptance or the faintest signs of disagreement or puzzlement. Quickly they will sense if the group is interested and if things are going over well. This does not mean just noting group agreement, because they know that on some issues their presentation will be bound to be contrary to the views of some and challenging for others. Comprehension and understanding of the issues is the priority, and not that participants should agree with the lecturer's interpretation. Nevertheless, it is valuable for the lecturer to get some idea of whether the group accepts and agrees with what is being said, or whether they are contesting it.

Through this scanning, even if there is no student comment, a lecturer/teacher can often tell if their explanations are being understood or not. Their group comprehension 'antennae' are always working in the background. If they detect a problem, they can adjust to address it immediately. They can refer to other ideas and perhaps anecdotes to make their point more clear. They can ask the class questions like "Are you following this argument? Is that point clear? Does it require further explanation?" Another OHP might be introduced to the presentation to help clarify the argument – powerpoints are not so flexible. E2 sensitivity on the part of the lecturer can be important for adjusting and fine tuning the content and pedagogy during the course of a presentation.

Perhaps only a few participants will voice comments in E2, but others can still identify with or distance themselves from what is said. Students can participate in a type of group comprehension process. E2 is an active, cognitive step beyond their first contact with the content. This point of engagement can be very important, perhaps even having a *pivotal position in the participants' learning*.

E2 is not only crucial for the students/participants, it is *a key point of learning for the lecturers/presenters*. Indicators of positive group comprehension can confirm the value of proposed interpretations and explanations. If there is not good comprehension of their

ideas, then they may have to 'go back to the drawing boards'. They are always being educated in the views that participants have of the issues; much is learned from their experience and ideas. This helps lecturers maintain relevance. It can keep them in touch with what the practitioners are thinking about the profession.

As noted later, the use of a virtual classroom program like *Adobe Connect* changes the engagement dynamics for a fully online unit because it allows students and teachers to see and hear each other. Currently, use of this approach is more the exception than the rule in fully online units, even though the situation is changing in various universities.

Engagement E3. <u>Sustained class discussion and exchange of views</u>. Either in a segment structured by the lecturer or as may emerge spontaneously from participant contributions, a higher level of sustained discussion and exchange of views between students and lecturer indicates a new kind of engagement. This sort of *creative forum* goes beyond the comprehension and clarification signalled in E2. This is where participants are extending, synthesising and applying their new learning, relating it to their professional experience, and commenting on issues and potential implications. At times there can be personal disclosures that are emotive.

Where this forum goes well, it helps develop a sense of group identity, cohesion and consensus on key purposes and issues in the content. Where it does not work out – E.g. where one or two dominate to the annoyance of the group, or where there is belligerence and defensiveness, it is better to conclude this segment quickly because it will add little to productive engagement and learning. And it could breed discontent in the group.

E3 is also a valuable point of ongoing learning for the lecturer. At times it may lead to adjustment of the content and pedagogy in the unit. Wisdom is needed to judge whether the direction in a forum is consistent with the content just covered, a new but valuable tangent, or a tangent that is not relevant to the unit and something of a waste of time. Skill is needed in managing and contributing to such forums creatively and productively; the lecturer needs to be sensitive to, and respectful of participants, and affirming of their contributions; but at the same time they have to be ready to intervene and cut short individuals who appear to be undermining or 'vandalising' the learning environment. Sometimes it only takes one or two discordant individuals to sabotage what would otherwise be an informative and enjoyable forum – and in turn this can have a negative influence on sense of group identity.

E3 is easier to manage with a small group. It becomes more difficult with a large group but can still work if the comments are good and the discussion is well managed. Participants can join in vicariously through identification with the comments of the few speakers.

Breaking up the class into discussion groups is said to be an opportunity for 'processing' content and for expressing feedback. It gives participants a more active role; and it is considered to provide a helpful break from the lecturing mode. But as long as there is sufficient scope for feedback and discussion in the main group, even if limited, it can be a waste of valuable time that could be better spent on teaching. It should not be a substitute for teaching or a 'pit stop' for the lecturer. Hence my preference is never or rarely to break up for group discussion for a long period followed by group feedback. If used, I would set a group task that should be an integral part of the lecture sequence. Much the same could be said about the strategy of getting the class to stop and read an article (Note: this is not the same as the useful pedagogy of 'walking' a group through printed handouts that have detailed information which can be followed up in the students' own time.)

Engagement E4. <u>Informal participant discussion</u>. Sometimes a significant learning from a unit crystallises in participants' minds as they leave the room for a break. More of engagement E3 can occur informally in conversations during breaks. Some may use this opportunity to follow up questions with the lecturer.

Participation in a face-to-face unit is a social event. People can make new friends and renew old acquaintances. It is an opportunity for both social and professional networking. Informal social as well as professional exchanges help build up group identity and sense of consensus. This can generate feelings of enjoyment of the experience. This is not unlike what Durkheim called 'collective effervescence', when he referred to the euphoria that can develop in an assembly that shared activities, values and rituals (Schilling & Mellor, 1998). This is evident when participants talk about how much they are enjoying the experience. The group good feelings help affirm people's professional commitments. It is encouraging to be with a group that is enthusiastic and interested in the profession. And in turn this can enhance the group's focus on the work in hand, as well as serve as a new level of confirmation/reinforcement of the value of what is being studied. Where a group is together for a number of units, for example in a diocesan cohort, E4 can be even further enhanced.

In fully online units, online forums, blogs, wikis and chats are intended to achieve something in the direction of E3 and E4, but they tend to be poor substitutes.

Engagement E5. <u>Follow up study of unit materials</u>. Usually during the delivery of face-to-face units, the focus is on content and issues, with minimal but relevant attention to explaining the assessment tasks. After the teaching segments are completed, the students then start to address the assessment tasks. Here there is a new point of engagement in following up the lecture notes, handouts and provided readings, as well as new research (through library and or Internet), all directed specifically towards completing the assessment tasks. This is where a well-stocked unit website can be helpful in resourcing the students' study.

Because the lecturer knows that the group has experienced all the content in E1, the assessment tasks do not have to cover *all* the unit content, as long as unit objectives are met. The assessment questions can address issues raised in the unit that warrant further study. This question is also pertinent for assessment in fully online units where the tasks may sometimes have an additional role in trying to make sure that participants actually cover all the unit content.

Engagement E6. <u>Completing the assessment tasks: Written assignments, group projects, etc</u>. This is a point in the whole postgraduate educative process to which students devote a lot of attention and energy – it is like the focal point of their learning for the unit. They have to express themselves, demonstrating their understandings of content and issues, their capacities for critical interpretation and evaluation, and their structuring of sustained arguments. And this has to be done within the academic conventions of indicating evidence and references.

It is paramount that the *assessment process should be an important, integral part of the student's learning*. Ensuring that assessment questions are oriented to prompt further learning is therefore crucial. Above all, the assessment needs to be perceived as a valuable opportunity for students to consolidate, organise, synthesise, and integrate what they have learnt in their study of this unit, helping them get a wiser, panoramic perspective

on the topic. Lecturers need to emphasise these constructive purposes in the assessment tasks. But the effectiveness of learning through assessment tasks also needs another essential element – *systematic, relevant and helpful feedback from the lecturer*, as considered in E7.

Engagement E7. <u>Lecturer assessment feedback to students</u>. After the move away from norm referenced to criterion referenced assessment, the time-consuming development of complex assessment rubrics has become more prominent. The rubrics help identify the intended outcomes in terms of multi-level performance indicators. In the assessment of student work, they help profile student achievement across a grid of performance indicators (E.g. a 16 x 6 table). Student comments to me about their experience of this aspect of assessment have not been favourable. While the purposes and values of extensive assessment rubrics may be explained, and while they may help students become more aware of desired levels of performance, they are not always regarded as very helpful when it comes to interpreting what an assessment report means and in suggesting how they might improve their work next time. Some have likened their 'rubric report' to getting medical results from multiple health scans without any wise interpretation of what it all means by their doctor. Hence they may be inclined to see the emphasis on rubrics as an exercise in useless complexity; it tends to be more judgmental than constructively diagnostic – the latter quality in feedback seems to be essential if students are to derive full learning potential both from lecturer comments as well as from the assessment task as a whole.

Increasingly, it appears to me that the detailed assessment rubric in schools as well as universities is being regarded by teachers, students and parents more as a bureaucratic instrument of centralised quality control than one that is geared to enhance student learning. Coupled with the emphasis on assessment rubrics and moderation, is a university pressure on lecturers to spend less time on assessment feedback because of larger workloads and increased productivity requirements. This combination of factors tends to undermine the actual quality of lecturer assessment feedback with negative consequences for student learning. Moderation of the results of assessment is important for checking grading levels between lecturers; the relationship between work standard and grades allocated needs to be consistent across postgraduate units. But the moderation usually never looks at or evaluates the written responses that lecturers give to their students.

My preferred approach is not to make the rubric the main focus of assessment feedback; to do this can tend to sabotage further student learning from their lecturer's feedback. I find a more helpful and productive approach in providing a *diagnostic, conversational feedback that is an ongoing and integral part of the students' learning process*. It draws attention to specific aspects of their work, depending on its quality. Comments are focused directly and constructively on the main points of strength and weakness in their work. The following summarises <u>characteristics of assessment feedback</u> that have usefully informed what is said to students, helping make the assessment process consistent with, and subservient to the educational purposes of the unit.

- *Diagnostic*. Lecturer assessment feedback needs to be focused and constructive, and not vague and general. The aim is to 'diagnose' student contributions, confirming valuable insights, identifying both strengths and weaknesses in their arguments. There may be suggestions about further issues and implications that could be considered. Problems or inconsistencies in thinking and interpretation of material are pointed out and at times explained, showing what an example of critical thinking on this topic looks

like. This approach encourages students to make their own 'professional diagnosis' of educational situations, issues and problems.

- **Affirming**. Whatever can be affirmed in students' work should be. Affirmation and confirmation of their ideas can be very important in helping them measure progress in both their learning and writing. Lack of self confidence is a perennial problem with students.

- **Learning.** Comments are tailored to the learning needs of the student that tend to show up in their work. For example, in some instances they will be directed towards improving the student's writing – grammar, sentence and paragraph construction, topic sentences, developing an argument, making use of headings. At other times, comments will explain a point that the student has misunderstood. Follow up positive responses can be made to promising student insights. Above all, the assessment feedback should confirm and extend the participants' learning.

- **Interactive and dialogical**. Where lecturer comments are offered in the vein of 'continuing the conversation', many students come to experience the assessment process as interactive. Some students who may be new to postgraduate study or lacking in confidence take up the option of submitting a draft essay plan for review, to see if 'they are on the right track'; not many do this; but for those who do, it is helpful for their progress and particularly for their growing self-confidence. A small number phone in for help with problems they are experiencing with the assessment tasks; this is time saving and usually solves problems more quickly than through email communication. Others appreciate the constructive feedback and new ideas for further consideration; this is particularly evident when students send further communication as a response to the feedback they were given on their assignments.

- **Extending**. Feedback often *extends* participants' knowledge and understanding of the topic.

- **Criterion referenced**. While ultimately a numerical grade for a student's assessment task is given, the interactive emphasis in the assessment feedback that is concerned with trying to achieve the *stated purposes* of the unit, helps students come away with a more balanced appreciation of the whole process. They have experienced that it is more about their learning than with putting them in a particular grade box.

- **Critical.** The assessment feedback needs to be seen by students not as mere criticism of their work. It has to be an informed critique that encourages them to become more critical and evaluative in their thinking about the topics under consideration. It can help them become more discerning, not only about the topic, but also about their own writing, arguments and expression.

- **Creativity**. Assessment tasks are intended to encourage creativity in thinking and in expression. And so should lecturer feedback – especially in applauding where this has been demonstrated. Even to respond to insights that are interesting and useful can be helpful. Occasionally, a novel or creative direction might be suggested for the student to take.

- **Engagement**. Through all of the above aspects in feedback, hopefully the assessment process can be made engaging for the students – something they can value and look forward to rather than dread. Both completing the assessment task and the lecturer feedback should try to *engage* the student further with the content and issues in the unit. That means seriously addressing, thinking about and evaluating what has been put before them as content, and discussing this in an insightful way. Making the *study relevant to professional practice is a valuable element in this engagement*. But participants need to be alerted to the situation where just 'describing your own experience' is not really engaging with the content because it can be a shallow substitute for engagement because a lot of assessment time and space can be wasted describing experience that is not relevant to a serious evaluation of the issues raised in

the content. Reference to one's own experience needs to be an integral part of serious engagement with unit content; such engagement will probably give the best insights and the most usable and practical of implications.

- *Pastoral*. What is often a key element in the teacher-participant relationship, as well as in participants' learning, is attentiveness to what could be called their 'personal wellbeing context'. Some will seek consideration from the lecturer because of stress and/or trauma in their professional and/or personal lives. This may often take the form of a time extension; giving them a longer, less stressful, less anxious period for completing assessment usually results in better and more extensive learning, as well as being beneficial personally. Also at times, components of alternative assessment, like oral assessment, can be used.

Needless to say, E7 is a key point for lecturer learning, showing what the students appear to have learned from the unit. This is useful for ongoing revision of the ideas and materials that will be used. It is also a valuable window into the thinking of contemporary practitioners.

Many unsolicited emails from students after the completion of units testify to the importance they associated with systematic, constructive assessment feedback. It is the most common recurring theme in such emails. This was taken as affirmation of the value of the approach considered above, as well as confirmation that the overall assessment process can be one of the key areas of engagement and learning in a postgraduate unit.

A relatively unacknowledged problem in university assessment has been the 'farming out' of student assignments to outside personnel who act as *markers* – a term that does not incline one to think of constructive and educative feedback to promote student learning. This practice appears to be another result of excessive lecturer workloads which are then said to be alleviated by 'getting them out of marking'. It seems to be removing lecturer's responsibility for a fundamentally important part of student learning; it tends to inhibit the professional relationship that should develop between lecturer and students; it cuts off lecturers from contributing to student engagement and learning through E7 and leaves them with little direct insight into how their students are completing E6 – that is, how they are comprehending the content and otherwise achieving the purposes set for the unit.

Engagement E8. <u>Active participant response to lecturer assessment feedback</u>. Sometimes the lecturer assessment feedback to students is not the final chapter in the ongoing learning conversation. On their own initiative, some students will communicate further, talking about the issues that were raised in the appraisal of their work. This is like a further, optional extension of the engagement in E7. How much further this conversation about topics and issues goes depends on the students. As a response, the lecturer may send them further reading or links that may be relevant. Sometimes it is the students who send in documents, segments of writing, links, downloaded presentations and even song performances that they think the lecturer may find interesting and useful. Some pertinent and useful materials have been acquired in this way.

A number of students send an appreciative email when they have completed the unit. This is like a 'signing off', confirming that they have found the work insightful and helpful for them professionally. This is a positive evaluation of their learning, and an affirmation of the tracks taken in the unit presentations and assessment.

School-based professional development programs in Religious Education
While the main focus of this paper is postgraduate university courses, it is pertinent to

consider how the engagement scheme may apply to learning in school professional development programs. The one-off, school-based or diocesan professional development program is different from the postgraduate unit in that it may have E1 to E4, but usually nothing beyond that. Preparation of a PD website that has audio/video files of the talks, similar to resource websites for postgraduate units (as noted earlier), can help consolidate and extend learning from the day, or at least provide resources that may be used by teachers later. But the extent to which such sites are used has not been determined. Usually there is some evaluation sheet completed that informs the school authorities and the lecturer how the program has been perceived by the participants.

PD events for religion teachers are similar to postgraduate RE units in that they have the same clientele. However, when there is an event on say Catholic identity and mission of the school, or on young people's spirituality, there is a significant difference when it includes the whole school staff and where the majority of teachers present may not be involved in religious education. This can be problematic from their perspective – they may feel that their contribution to the school lies mainly in their secular subject teaching, and apart from agreeing to support the Catholic ethos of the school, they can feel little affinity with the school's religious mission. They are often supportive, but sometimes individuals will sit at the edge of the group registering disinterest. More rarely they will be mildly disapproving and disruptive.

In this whole staff group situation, it has been found helpful to give special attention to the situation of the non religion teachers. For example: It can be pointed out that Catholic schools are not exclusively Church institutions (like seminaries and theological colleges), even though much of the discourse about Catholic identity seems to presume this; they are semi-state, publicly funded schools where there is accountability to the wider Australian community to show how they contribute to the common good, as well as to the 'handing on' of the Catholic tradition (Rossiter, 2010, p. 16). This viewpoint also makes sense in Catholic schools where the proportion of students and staff who are Catholic is not high – E.g. in some instances it is below 50%. An appeal can be made to the agreed national aims for Australian schools (Australian Education Council and MYCEETYA, 1989, 1999, 2008) that include the promotion of young people's spiritual and moral development as a "responsibility of *all* teachers across *all* curriculum areas" (Metherell, NSW Government, 1990, p.2). No matter what the religious affiliation of staff, all have a professional responsibility to understand how the whole school organisation and curriculum can contribute to young people's spiritual and moral development. This responsibility would apply to staff whether they were in any type of religious school – Catholic, Anglican, Jewish, Greek Orthodox, Muslim etc. Appealing to this professional responsibility has been a good way of engaging staff who are not involved in religious education.

Contrasting the patterns of student engagement in fully online units and face-to-face units
This section begins with the presumption that the face-to-face (FTF) teaching/learning mode is superior to that of a fully online unit because it has maximised the points of learning engagement for students. By contrasting the two formats in the light of the 8 point engagement framework, some of the inherent difficulties faced in fully online units can be better identified and appreciated; and this analysis can in turn inform efforts to maximise their value for students. This discussion can also have a bearing on policy as to whether the priority should be on increasing FTF unit offerings or fully online units.

For lecturers delivering an FTF unit, they know from E1 – E4 that their students have at

least heard and engaged with all the content in some initial and basic way; and they can get a fair idea of how it is being comprehended; and they can adjust their presentations and resources if needed in the light of E2 and E3. They know that the students will then come at the content again in E5 and E6 – like a second major incursion as they study and complete the assessment tasks. Also, as noted earlier, because the lecturers know that students have covered all the content in E1, the assessment tasks do not need to cover all unit content; they can follow up particular issues with some flexibility.

By contrast with school classrooms and face-to-face university units, where creative use of the internet can be integrated into teaching and learning, the common version of the fully online postgraduate unit has less scope for multiple forms of student engagement. As noted in the introduction, here, the student will probably never meet the lecturer, never hear his/her voice, or talk with him/her on the phone. How a lecturer-student professional relationship builds up, if at all, will be different. This is not the same as a unit where there is some FTF teaching and some online work. The students' only interaction with the lecturer may be through what they write specifically for assessment tasks – and in some cases they may not get feedback on all their written contributions. However, in fully online units that make use of the *Adobe Connect* program (or the like), the situation is different – the teacher is 'less virtual'. And this makes up a new category of online unit which is like a classroom where students can see and hear the lecturer and they in turn can be seen and heard; this changes the pattern of engagement. While no consideration will be given here to this option, it is judged that this format would be superior in learning potential to the version of fully online unit described earlier.

In the fully online unit, initial engagement with content in E1 may be exclusively through reading. A number of online units, like some predecessor print-based, distance education materials, look like a large selection of academic articles or book chapters aggregated together with minimal connecting links and some focus questions. Better structured units have a systematic and coherent story-line that runs across all the unit modules, carrying most of the content, with links to some supporting resources/readings. Audio and video files, together with powerpoint presentations can give variety to the content presentation so that the student is not left with just reading 'large slabs of text'.

What is often a key learning ingredient that is missing in the fully online unit is the particular perspective or take of the lecturer discussed above in E1. Without this facilitating and guiding perspective, students can find it difficult to negotiate a large new range of academic articles that do not seem to hang together; they cannot initially see the connections. They have no sense of any 'topography' to the content; what they need most here is the helpful perspective of a lecturer to get the mass of material into manageable and comprehensible perspective. A lecturer's organic take on content is not as easy to inject into an online unit as it is in an FTF one where ongoing comments can repeatedly put new content and readings into perspective. Including introductory audio files at appropriate points across the online unit modules can help provide this lecturer perspective.

By contrast with the two major differentiated incursions into content in the FTF unit, the fully online student may sometimes end up with only one – a conflation of E1, E5 and E6, where the student works on content only once while preparing assessment tasks. The typical FTF sequence of 'covering the content and then addressing the assessment tasks' will not necessarily be followed. Here, the assessment task requirements may dominate the student's online study from the start, because the student can be focused strongly and exclusively on only doing work that contributes to 'marks'. Not all online students are like

this; but not to acknowledge the potential problem would be unrealistic. If parts of unit content are not assessable, then there is a natural temptation for the participants – busy educators – to skip them. This becomes a concern for lecturers when they realise that they have no guarantee that their online students will even read all the content; this also raises concerns about the educative value of a unit exclusively in this format and about whether or not most students will satisfy its knowledge/understanding objectives, because the usual form of assessment questions will not be able to verify this.

In trying to address these issues, the online lecturer may see a need to review the role of assessment tasks, especially since this is the only point of contact they may have with students. For example, if it is acknowledged that students will be naturally reluctant to attend to any of the unit materials that will not be assessed, then the assessment tasks may have to take on an additional role of trying to ensure that the students do actually cover all the content – at least once. This means having assessment that covers all the modules in the unit. This could take the form of requiring a short written response to each module (say around 800 words) with the assessment questions phrased in such a way that a participant could not answer them adequately without reading most if not all of the content of the modules. In effect, this would segment the assessment tasks, moving away from reliance on the traditional sizeable academic essays.

There appears to me to be no substantial reason why some units should not have 9 or so short assessment tasks in place of longer essays. Academic standards and critical thinking are apparently not compromised when this is done. The better short responses demonstrate the same sort of critical evaluative thinking as do the better long essays. This approach is like embedding a level of study 'insurance policy' within shorter assessment tasks to help ensure that students engage with all the content in the online unit modules – a priority worth having; but it is argued that this can be done without skewing the assessment in an undesirable direction. In addition, this approach can help make study of an online unit more flexible, module by module; and flexibility is appropriate for fully online delivery.

In some online units, lecturers have students write journal entries (like a personal blog or solo wiki) to function like E2, and many if not all of these do not count for assessment purposes. Postgraduate students tend to regard such exercises as a waste of time; understandably, they are reluctant to write contributions that no one is going to read and for which there is no assessment component. Sometimes, under the same workload pressures as noted earlier in section E7, lecturers may cut back on the demands of reading student work by requiring that they submit only what they consider their best two journal entries to be counted for assessment. But this is not good motivation for completing the other, non-assessable journal entries. Also there is a problem if the journalling is more a note on feelings and impressions rather than the critical thinking and evaluation proposed for short responses in the previous paragraph.

Conclusion
This reflection on experience with teaching and learning processes in postgraduate and professional development programs has provided a way of interpreting how differences in context and pedagogy can affect student learning, particularly in contrasts between face-to-face teaching and fully online units. In turn, this can inform further debate about the structuring, teaching and assessment of units, and empirical research, as well as policy and priorities about unit development and availability – all directed towards developing programs in both formats that are as helpful and as relevant as possible in promoting postgraduate professional development in Australian Catholic religious education.

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