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Christian educators respond to the challenges of the pandemic

By Stephen J. McKinney, Ursula Lawler, Eileen O’Sullivan and Jayne Guiney

Abstract

Four Catholic educators reflect on working and engaging with children and young people during the restrictions and lockdowns imposed by the effects of Covid-19. The four educators are from Ireland and Scotland and are part of the GRACE project (Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education). The responses are all very different, but all share an anxiety about the limitations of online communication and learning and teaching and the effects on the wellbeing of the learners. Ultimately, the responses are grounded in Christian hope and propose that this is the time to rediscover the power and the importance of the physical encounter in Christian education.

Introduction

This article has its origins in the activities of the GRACE project (Global Researchers Advancing Catholic Education) that has been initiated by Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick. The project planned a conference for 2019 in Kylemore which had to be cancelled as a result of the effects of the pandemic. The project then invited interested parties to meet synchronously with a group of people with similar research interests. The groups focussed on different themes. The responses in this article are provided by the four members of the group concerned with the themes of *Spirituality, Social Justice and Catholic Social Teaching*. The group began to meet by zoom on the 23rd of November 2020 under the guidance of Sr Ursula Lawler of the Presentation Sisters. The group is composed of Sr Ursula, a lecturer in Christian Ethics at MIC. Eileen is a lecturer in the Pedagogy of History in the Department of Learning, Society and Religious Education, MIC. Jayne is a teacher at a Catholic primary (elementary) school in West Limerick. Stephen works at the School of Education, University of Glasgow which has a mission to prepare teachers for Catholic schools.

The online discussions have focussed on the challenges of being Christian educators during the pandemic. We all understand ourselves to be Christian educators in a number of senses: we educate children and young people in Christianity professionally as academics and teachers and we are Christians who also educate in Christian life by personal example and witness. We have all been deeply perturbed by the changes in the connectedness with our students and colleagues and seek to understand this in terms of our Christian faith. We have drawn on many different sources including scripture, theology, Christian anthropology and poetry. As Christian educators, we offer four responses to the challenges of the pandemic.

Response 1: Ursula – Sowing hope and working for justice.

In January of this year, I experienced a faltering in the energy that had initially propelled me through the abrupt transition from face-to-face lecturing to fully online course delivery. I was not alone in this experience. Emerging research has highlighted experiences of alienation as lecturers practised talking to a screen with no visual feedback apart from occasional comments in the chat box.¹ Students, for their part, suffering from screen-weariness and screen-wariness, resisted turning on their webcams. It was against this background, that the counsel of Pope Francis in *Let Us Dream*, widened the horizon of interpretation within which I situated my experience of online education.²

The starting impulse for my reflection was Pope Francis' counsel against discouragement. To act against discouragement "you have to commit to the small, concrete positive actions you can take, whether you're sowing hope or working for justice".³ Christian education, I believe, is most fundamentally about sowing hope and working for justice. As declared by Vatican Council II, the goal of true education is to form people in seeking God and in the service of humanity.⁴ In sum, Catholic education, should "imbue ... students with the spirit of Christ".⁵ Christ came that we "may have life and have it to the full".⁶ A question now arises for today's (online) educator: how is this spirit to be imbued when 'distance', 'restriction', and 'lockdown' are the defining marks of social life? Covid-19 made face-to-face education impossible but, reflecting on the words of Pope Francis, I came to see each positive engagement with online classes, as a small, positive, concrete act of hope and justice; it signalled a refusal to allow 'restriction' and 'lockdown' to be the measure of life, and a determination that there would still be access to education and academic awards. Living well in any age requires fresh thinking, the generation of new ideas, and an array of skills and competencies; and facilitating the pursuit of degrees, diplomas and certification is a particular service in sustaining this human resourcefulness.

This broader horizon of meaning renewed my energy for and commitment to the online educational enterprise. It leaves open, however, the question of the extent to which this mode of delivery is sustainable given the reality of embodied human nature. As human beings we do not *have* bodies; rather we *are* bodies, or more precisely, embodied spirits. Our bodies are our means of being in the world, and it is through our bodies that we communicate with one another. We commonly speak of 'connecting' online, but the reality of embodiment means that for human beings "communication is much more than connection and is most fruitful where there are bonds of trust: communion, fraternity and physical presence".⁷ Communication is of paramount importance for education. If communication is most fruitful where there is physical presence, then it suggests something essential may get left behind in a move from face-to-face education to a fully online mechanism of educational delivery.

Response 2: Eileen - As a Christian Educator, How do I show up in the world?

We are reminded by Marianne Williamson that each of us is '... a Child of God', whose existential nature is 'to serve the World'. When we choose to play 'small', we are falling short of our true destiny. We are, in essence, denying our talents and individual nature, choosing either consciously or unconsciously to coast along, not stand out, blend in, play safe. Many adults may never attempt to contemplate what their place in the world might be, what their strengths are, how they might 'show up' in this world. For many, this internal searching for an answer or a direction on how 'showing up' can take shape, can represent an unsettling process of reflection and a possible outcome that leads to a changed order of their world. It may identify a need for the individual to stop and think about their true nature, as opposed to how they currently live their lives and interact in society, as individuals and as social beings.

Such questions often arise at times of significance or challenge in our lives, when we are pushed out of our comfort zones through circumstances which call us to grow in awareness and reimagine the worlds we occupy. Often, it is times of great difficulty in our lives which provide the impetus for such transformation, albeit unwelcome, frightening and unsettling. Nonetheless, such circumstances can challenge us as individuals to think beyond living the same way, using the same patterns of engaging, of actually accepting that change is a constant reality, and we need a toolkit to embrace and encounter it positively.

It is important to acknowledge that in a pre-Covid existence, such personal challenges and encounters existed. However, with the onset of this pandemic, there is scarcely a person who is not challenged to change and reimagine their life, their patterns of behaviour, their individual and social practices. Some are well equipped with previously honed skills to cope with and ameliorate the stresses that abound. For others, this pandemic and its fall-out represents loss of certainty, security and anything resembling balance, well-being or enrichment. Real and present threats to health, loss of identity or income, a shattering of 'normal' social activities pose considerable challenges that shake us to the very core of our being. We are required to stay home and live a very pared back existence, having lost, at least temporarily, access to the many and varied distractions and life benefits that we relied on for fulfilment and enrichment. These include the daily encounters and connections associated with socialising with friends, colleagues, families; travelling, retail therapy, places to meet, eat and be entertained.

As a Teacher Educator, I find it necessary to reflect on my role as a Christian Educator in embracing such considerable challenges in the context of the daily encounters I am privileged to have in the virtual world that we currently occupy. Who am I left with? Who am I and what potential influence do I have in the lives of people I encounter at a professional level on a daily basis – the students I interact with at a distance, the colleagues with whom I negotiate the path ahead, the planning I undertake to embrace another academic year in a more traditional or in a blended fashion, as future progress with managing the pandemic dictates.

Response 3: Jayne - 'Together' is the central message

As a Christian educator, my role is to help the children to open their minds to scripture (Luke 24:45). Within the Catholic education setting, the ethos calls for faith formation through prayer, liturgical celebrations and sacramental preparation, while being welcoming and inclusive to all. It also underpins my attempts to develop the attitudes, actions and practices that I strive to exemplify and foster with a Catholic education setting. The centrality of my personal faith in my role as a Christian educator inspires me to open my heart to my students and to facilitate the openness of theirs, to themselves, to their neighbour, to their world, to the person of Jesus Christ and to God.

With the closure of schools as a result of Covid-19, many of the pedagogical choices I choose to make were taken from me and with the immediacy of the situation, there was no time to plan in advance for alternatives. Teachers were called to upskill and engage in professional development, often alone, in order to attend to the needs of the children and families in their school community, and also to their requirements as educators. Our response saw the employment of new technology for most, using platforms such as Seesaw, Google Classroom and Zoom. Of course, this approach required certain levels of digital literacy and access to devices which were not readily available to all children. Teachers too faced accessibility difficulties. Together, we navigated issues of poor internet connectivity, a shortage of devices available to families, and parents and guardians attempting to work from home, while facilitating online learning. A new kind of school community was created as we attempted to be present to each other in relationships, which Nel Noddings says are ontologically basic to humanity due to the intrinsic links between identity and our relationship to others.⁸

'Together' is the central message of the response of the Christian educator to Covid-19. While progress was made and barriers were broken, a notable concerning deficit existed when teachers and children were not together. The ethos of a Catholic school is often most tangible

in moments of need, moments of sadness or even in moments of despair. The lighted candle in the sacred space signifies hope and the presence of Jesus Christ in our midst. The shared stories in moments of prayer and petitions for help whispered by a troubled child over joined hands provide comfort and solace when it is needed most. The lack of embodied encounters with the children created an uninhabited space, difficult to restore through screens. The presence which enables relationships to flourish was removed and replaced by digital experiences which sometimes hindered the togetherness which for me, brings joy to teaching.

As we move to the return to classrooms, we continue to negotiate the challenges presented by the pandemic, but with new knowledge. Lessons learned highlight the importance of the work of the Christian educator within a web of connectedness. If, as Parker J. Palmer says, knowing and learning are communal acts,⁹ we should continue to strive for relationships between teachers, students and subjects, moving forward with a new appreciation for being together.

Response 4: Stephen - Towards a greater openness to others

As a Christian I am called to discipleship, to follow the example of Jesus Christ as expressed in the four gospels and as guided by the Church. As a Christian educator I am called as a disciple to help others, especially students, to understand the life and message of Jesus and understand and transform the world as a Christian. Gustavo Gutierrez reminds us all that we cannot lose sight of our own discipleship.¹⁰ The pandemic has presented a very real challenge to this discipleship and to this work as a Christian educator. My public Christian worship has been undertaken online as has my work as an educator. The challenges are hard and, like so many others, I miss the Sunday Eucharist, to be physically present and participating with the community of believers.

During the pandemic, the everyday, practical rituals involved in the process of learning and teaching were disrupted.¹¹ We created new rituals using the online tools available to us. This was prompted by pedagogical expediency and many lecturers and students ‘upskilled’ in online techniques with great alacrity and agility. In the early stages of the restrictions and lockdowns, there was some professional solace that as a result of adaptation, reconfiguration, hard work and determination, teaching and learning could still continue. Some academics viewed this as the future of Higher Education. As life continued in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic, it became clear that there were deeper challenges: our daily encounters with colleagues and students were seriously curtailed. We now began to reminisce about them as daily *physical* encounters, where previously we had normally described them as encounters, not physical encounters. Zoom calls, teams calls, texts, greater use of email, Facebook pages, twitter and phone calls became the dominant modes of communication. The greater emphasis on these modes was perceived to be successful but hopefully temporary.

Like others, I have tried to understand the current situation by referring to biblical themes. The ones that seem very relevant include the Exodus and the Exile. The images of the pilgrim people wandering in the desert and the anguish of the exile are quite compelling. These served to understand the social isolation during the pandemic and the sterility of the adopted modes of communication. However, as we begin to return to encounter, to see expressions on faces and hear voices and, eventually, to shake hands and hug, we see Christ in others without the filters and limitations of the online medium. We begin to recover the joy of living in Christian love with others through our communal worship and working lives. At this moment of re-encounter, Pope Francis provides some challenging ideas for the future in *Fratelli Tutti*. He calls for the instatement of a genuine social encounter and the creation of an inclusive social

covenant.¹² As the world opens again in a post-pandemic era, we have the opportunity to move towards a greater openness to others and to an encounter with the other that acknowledges and respects the uniqueness of the other.

¹ Marin, L. (2021) *On the Possibility of a Digital University*. Cham: Springer International Publishing AG. p.71.

² Pope Francis and Ivereigh, A. (2020) *Let Us Dream: The Path To A Better Future*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster. p. 1-149.

³ Ibid., p. 32.

⁴ Vatican Council II, *Gravissimum Educationis* accessed June 24, 2021, vatican.va, 1.

⁵ Ibid., 'Conclusion'.

⁶ John 10:10.

⁷ Francis, *Let Us Dream*, p. 45.

⁸ Noddings, N. (2015) *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, California: University of California Press.

⁹ Palmer, P.J. (2016) *Community, Conflict, and Ways of Knowing: Ways to Deepen our Educational Agenda*, Center for Courage & Renewal, available: http://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/Parker-Palmer_Community-Conflict-Ways-of-Knowing.pdf.

¹⁰ Gutiérrez, G. (2015) Theology: An Ecclesial Function. In Gutiérrez, G. and Muller, G.L. (Eds.) *On the Side of the Poor. The Theology of Liberation*. 1-10. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

¹¹ O'Loughlin, T. (2015) *The Eucharist. Origins and Contemporary Understandings*. London: T & T Clark. Pages 10-13.

¹² Pope Francis (2020) *Fratelli Tutti. Encyclical Letter*. Sections 218-221.