



Pieces of a jigsaw: developing a theoretical framework for research in religious education

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1 Purpose of the reflection

For many doctoral students and researchers in religious education the major stumbling block they face is how to develop the theoretical framework which will allow them to articulate the underlying assumptions they bring to their analysis of context, identification of a research question, and the generation of the conceptual framework which will give shape to the design and process of the research project. It can be challenging to name our own ontological, epistemological, and anthropological assumptions and the resulting impact of these on how we understand the purpose, scope and task of religious education. My concern with how to manage this complex task is well expressed by the words of a student who stated that: “I feel that I have been given lots of pieces of a jigsaw but as there are no edges or an overall design to follow, I’m not sure how to fit them all together or even if they are supposed to fit together”. The purpose of this reflection is to share one approach to developing a theoretical framework which takes account of the particularities of religious education. It is my intention that this might be of assistance to emerging researchers who are trying to put the pieces of the jigsaw together.

2 The complexity of the contexts observed

It is a truism to suggest that research questions are formulated in situ and in response to the complexity of the contexts observed but it bears repeating. For the purpose of this reflection ‘context’ refers to the situated practice of religious education as a critical encounter between the experience and insight of education, and the experience and insight of religion. This juxtaposition suggests that these two concepts inform each other, act as a corrective to each other, but ultimately benefit each other. The use of the word critical indicates that this encounter is intentional and draws on both religious and educational principles to create the possibility of a critically reflective engagement between the person and religion for the purpose of understanding the content of religious faith, as well as people’s commitments to religious faith and practice. In this sense, religious education can be defined as a

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hermeneutic and communicative interpretation of religious traditions and people's engagement with these. In its consideration of the multi-textured understanding of all the possible relations between religion and education, religious education has to attend to questions of truth claims in the context of an increasingly constructivist and social view of learning. Given the complexity of this context, religious education finds its natural research home in the social sciences so is necessarily interdisciplinary and influenced by research traditions in a number of domains. However, in many contexts religious education is also a theological activity which has its roots in the traditions of practical theology. These distinct, and occasionally contradictory, research traditions emerge from differing ontological and epistemological assumptions as well as varying expectations about the nature of research findings. Navigating such terrain is a daunting task for the researcher.

3 Ontological and epistemological assumptions

Ontology deals with the questions of being and existence. It asks about the nature of reality and experience and what can be known about these. A realist response contends that the world is 'out there', and that it is one single reality that can be described objectively, as there is a direct correspondence between it and the person's perception of it. A realist approach to research in the social sciences has been challenged by a nominalist response to the question of being which understands human experience as more subjective and relativistic than realism allows for. A nominalist response holds that there are no universals and no abstract objects; nothing exists outside the activity of the knower. Given that religious education research draws on sometimes contradictory traditions in education and religion it necessarily has to articulate its underlying ontological position. Many researchers, attentive to religious truth claims in dialogue with the stances of the social sciences situate themselves within a critical realist frame (Wright, 2016). Influenced by my practice in religious education I begin instead from a nominalist approach, albeit nuanced by my theological training, for researching in religious education.

Nominalism informs the perspective of the constructivist, who argues that the person's view of the world is always interpretive. According to Blaikie (2007, p. 22) constructivism refers to the "meaning giving activity of the individual", whereas social constructionism argues that because of inter-subjectively shared knowledge, meaning-giving is social rather than individual. However, these two concepts are not easily distinguishable, as individual meaning making occurs within social contexts and social contexts are comprised of individual meaning makers. Constructivism assumes that there are cognitive processes and conceptual frameworks which enable an individual to construct reality. A constructivist response to the ontological question considers that the human person is internally and continually constructed when new information comes into contact with existing knowledge that has emerged from experience and from the meaning assigned to experience. This meaning is only accessible through the symbols and language people and groups use to describe, explain, and interpret their inner lives.

Burningham and Cooper (1999) distinguish between contextual and strict constructivism. Strict constructivism maintains the belief that there are multiple realities and that all are equally meaningful. Such a belief is open to charges of relativism and a denial of any objective reality. It therefore makes no ontological claims. There is no reality other than what is socially constructed. In contrast to this mode, contextual constructivism recognises the possibility of objective reality and its influence. It lives within the tension between

nominalism and realism and is comfortable with the possibility of objective truth. However, for the contextual constructivist the knowledge of this truth is only accessible through the construction of human experience, thought, and language. Contextual constructivism best describes the ontological assumption that informs my research approach in terms of its design, its decision making, its interpretive framework, and ultimately its conclusions.

Such ontological assumptions are also influenced by Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* (1962), which may be thought of as the way that the being of the person exists in an agential relationship with historical reality. Heidegger placed an emphasis on language as the vehicle through which the question of being can be unfolded. *Dasein*, that being which we ourselves are, is distinguished from all other beings by the fact that it makes issue of its own being. *Dasein* always finds itself already in a certain spiritually, materially, and historically conditioned environment in which the space of possibilities is always somehow limited. The person is in the experience and knows in the experience. Inquiry therefore is always contextual, always interpretive, and always personal. This ontology attributes a creative role to individuals and acknowledges the free and active participation of the individual in her or his own human becoming.

Epistemological assumptions about the nature of human knowing emerge from one's ontological assumptions. Constructivism holds that the only reality that can be known is that which is represented by human thought. What appeals to me is that contextual constructivism does not go so far as to suggest that there is nothing to be known; rather it asserts that, what there is to know can only be known through the active construction of the knower. Another dimension of my epistemological assumptions is a preference for the verb knowing rather than the noun knowledge. Knowing is dynamic, evolving, and open-ended, whereas knowledge assumes a level of given-ness, finiteness and completion.

These assumptions about being and knowing give rise to my view of research in religious education as essentially an act of interpreting a situated reality. It is impossible to understand any social construct without attention to context and its informants. Constructivism recognises that individuals develop subjective meanings of their contextualised experience. These meanings are multiple and varied, which Cresswell (2017) argues leads the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meaning into a few categories or ideas. The task of the researcher is to try to understand the many and various ways that meaning and textured knowledge are constructed and communicated in particular contexts. I would suggest that research concerned with understanding and communicating the nature of religious education within a specific context finds a sympathetic home within a contextual constructivist paradigm.

4 Educational and theological assumptions

Explicating their own educational and theological assumptions is probably the first place that most researchers begin, however these should emerge from and be consistent with the epistemological and ontological frames of reference. From a contextual constructivist stance education can be described as an ontological task that is concerned with the flourishing of the being and agency of the person. This ontology attributes a creative role to individuals and acknowledges the free and active participation of the individual in their own human becoming as they engage with a tradition or what society has learned about itself and about the world.

The theological assumptions of this approach to research are predicated on a contextual-constructivist approach to the nature of reality so is always informed by the dynamic and open-ended inquiry of the experience of faith. The purpose of theology in this instance therefore is to “critically unpack the revelation of God that takes place in human experience” (Lane, 2003, p. 15).

As explicated by Lane, human experience has three basic elements. Firstly, experience involves a human subject capable of seeing, thinking, feeling and discerning. This gives rise to the notion of a conscious encounter between the subject and the external world of matter and spirit. In encountering the external world, the individual receives whatever is there but is not responsible for producing what is received. This encounter with whatever is there leads to a process of interaction between the subject and reality. It is in this process of response, refraction, and critical reflection that the person moves beyond a surface engagement to an interpretive mode. The person then interprets the encounter within the overall horizon of understanding that is available to them through their cultural, historical, and religious contexts. The activity of interpretation is central to this turn to experience and is consistent with contemporary approaches to education. This theological approach emphasises a hermeneutics of conversation and recognises the possibility of truth in each text, person, event, discourse, and symbol system that is encountered and understood.

5 Methodological assumptions

Methodology addresses the issue of how to go about finding out whatever it is that is believed to be known or can come to be known. Having identified the research question, decisions had to be made as to which research design is best for addressing the question. Claiming as I did earlier that religious education can be thought of as a hermeneutic and communicative interpretation of people’s understanding of God as expressed in religious traditions and their engagement with these, then it can be argued that research in religious education can be thought of in terms of a form of social inquiry. Schwandt (2003, p. 190) defines social inquiry as “a distinctive praxis, a kind of activity (like teaching) that in the doing transforms the very theory that aims and guides it”. The premise of social inquiry is that theory and practice are linked. The gathering and interpreting of existing data in the light of the research question is for the purpose of understanding the social context in which religious education exists. To that end social inquiry, insofar as it is consistent with a contextual constructivist paradigm is in essence a qualitative inquiry.

6 Undertaking a qualitative inquiry

Qualitative research generally refers to the attempt to uncover and understand meaning from the analysis of collected data so as to capture the best representation of social reality. A qualitative inquiry method accepts that there are multiple realities and multiple interpretations rather than just one conception of reality or one interpretation, and so is congruent with a constructivist paradigm. The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis and will primarily employ an inductive research strategy focusing on process, meaning, and understanding, resulting in a richly textured descriptive product. An inductive approach expects that knowledge will emerge from the study and perhaps lead to the development of a theory rather than confirming a theory.

Schwandt identifies three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry: interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructionism. Each of these stances is based on the premise that human action is meaningful, but each of them assumes a different perspective on the aim and practice of understanding human action. Contextual constructivism assumes that the task of research is to interpret a context so as to understand it and maybe learn from it, change it or confirm it. Interpretivism and hermeneutics are appropriate epistemological stances for such an approach. Within the interpretivist tradition, the constitutive elements of understanding are empathic identification, phenomenological sociology, and language games. Empathic identification refers to the attempt of the researcher to get an *insider* understanding of the situation or phenomenon being investigated. It assumes that the interpreter or researcher can break out of their own historical circumstances in order to reproduce the meaning or intention of the actor. The work of phenomenological sociology is concerned with understanding how the everyday, intersubjective world is constituted. The aim is to ‘grasp how we come to interpret our own and others’ action as meaningful’. The conceptual tools of this approach are indexicality, which signifies that the meaning of a word is dependent on the context in which it is used, and reflexivity which indicates that what is said is not just about something but is also doing something. The words that are used do not just reflect reality but also shape it. Schwandt defines the third element of interpretive understanding as a language game that has its own rules or criteria for making the game meaningful to participants.

Apprehending these systems of meanings is the goal of understanding. Schwandt says that these three ways of thinking about interpretivism have three features in common. In the first place they view human action as meaningful, secondly they are ethical in their respect for people’s lived reality, and thirdly they emphasise the contribution of human subjectivity without sacrificing the objectivity of knowledge. For an interpretivist, it is possible to understand the self-understandings of people engaged in particular activities or contexts and present these in an objective manner. At the heart of interpretivist thinking is an emphasis on *Verstehen*, that is, the empathic understanding of human behaviour in its own context. In that sense then this type of qualitative inquiry is hermeneutic, that is, it draws on the hermeneutic circle as a method.

7 The positionality of the researcher

Schwandt argues that a fourth way of interpretive understanding is found in the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and Taylor, which have been inspired by Heidegger. This fourth mode offers three perspectives for addressing the positionality of the researcher. The first perspective challenges the notion that the interpreter is in some way a detached or objective observer. The researcher does not have to get rid of bias but must acknowledge that one’s own bias is part of all understanding; the researcher is shaped by a tradition and cannot step outside of it. A second perspective argues that understanding does not just follow from research or engagement, but is the very condition of being human. Understanding is itself a kind of practical experience; it is lived now rather than applied later. Within this framework, understanding is participative, conversational, and dialogic. Meaning is produced in the dialogue rather than reproduced by the researcher. A third insight that is of value is the realisation that it is only in the dialogical encounter with what is alien to us, or what makes a claim on us, that we can open ourselves to understanding.

Any interpretive project is concerned with dialogue, conversation and what Schwandt calls “education understood as an interpretational interchange that is self-transformative”.

This act of interpretation involves making sense of what has been observed in a way that communicates understanding. Such an approach is consistent with the aim of research in religious education which does not perceive understanding as an end in itself, but in the act of understanding is transformative of lives and structures.

8 Conclusion

Theoretical frameworks are ways of explicating what the researcher brings, either explicitly or implicitly, to the research question. At their most abstract level, research paradigms are philosophical positions that emerge from particular ontological and epistemological assumptions. The focus of these more abstract frameworks become specific when applied to a research question. At this more specific level it is possible to begin to speak of a conceptual framework within which the research is undertaken. This framework becomes the overarching structure of the subsequent research project and the lens through which data is collected, interpreted, and evaluated. Clearly articulated frameworks help the researcher to undertake all aspects of the research in an ethical and coherent way and leads to research outcomes which are congruent with one's stance in the world but ultimately not limited by it. The clear explication of the theoretical framework which underpins research in religious education is what holds the pieces of the jigsaw together.

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