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Chris Hackett

University of Notre Dame Australia, chris.hackett@nd.edu.au

Shane D. Lavery

University of Notre Dame Australia, shane.lavery@nd.edu.au

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FORMATION OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: THE RETREAT LEADERS TRAINING PROGRAM

This article reports on the formation of pre-service teachers for religious education through an experiential learning program called the Retreat Leaders Training Program (RLTP). First, the article examines the need for formation for pre-service RE teachers, especially as the formation relates to the development of three forms of teacher knowledge: content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and experiential content knowledge. Second, the article reviews the literature on the role of experiential learning in professional formation and the contribution live-in retreats may make in this formation. Third, the article presents the Retreat Leaders Training Program as an example of the formative influence of a retreat based on experiential learning. Fourth, feedback from pre-service teachers undertaking the 2011 program is reported. Lastly, the article discusses the outcomes of the RLTP and the significance of the program as a key ingredient in the formation of teacher knowledge for religious education.

Formation of pre-service teachers for religious education

Teaching in the twenty-first century requires pre-service teachers to have the requisite content, pedagogy and aptitude to teach competently (Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Education, 2007; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012, p. 5). Teaching is more than subject matter or technique; it is as much about the quality of relationships between the teacher and students (Palmer, 1997). The professional formation of pre-service teachers would therefore necessitate the development of a strong commitment or vocation towards teaching (Department of Education and Training, 2004; Teaching Australia, 2009; Hackett & Lavery, 2010b). The same is true for teachers involved in religious education¹. In the case of Catholic schools in Western Australia, Religious Education (RE) teachers are required to have tertiary study, training in teaching the RE curriculum and be committed to espoused Catholic beliefs and values taught (Director of Catholic Education, 2008; Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 100). Furthermore, they “need up-to-date spiritual and religious formation” to take on the demanding task of teaching Religious Education (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009, para. 98). Hackett (2010) has proposed that the quality of teaching in RE is related to the degree to which teachers not only have deep content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge but also experiential content knowledge. That is, teachers can model what they teach because they have lived what it means to be a Christian today:

Everything that has to do with their own theological and pedagogical formation, and also in the course syllabi; and they should remember that, in this area above all, life witness and an intensely lived spirituality have an especially great importance (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982, para. 59).

The formation of pre-service teachers for religious education would suggest that they have the opportunity to experience not only teaching RE but also the practices that assist Christian people to grow in faith, such as through prayer, worship, ritual, service and community. As Pope Benedict XVI (2011) recently affirmed at a meeting with young university professors: “teaching is not just about communicating content, but about forming young people. ...To awaken their innate thirst for truth and their yearning for transcendence.” Indeed, this religious awakening can only happen if the teachers have experienced the same for themselves and share this experience by word and example to their students.

Role of experiential learning in professional formation

Experiential learning within adult and teacher education has become popular, especially as a means for discerning professional careers (Hedin, 2010). The approach relies on participants drawing meaning or learning from experiences in which they are directly involved. Dewey (1938) suggests that learning arises when a person reflects on the significance of an experience that engages him or her. Learning from experience is more than just doing activities, as T. S. Eliot (1941) put it, "We had the experience but missed the meaning" (Section II, para. 7). There is a need to reflect deeply about the context of the experience and how it may influence a person in the future. The approach allows a person within the present (experience) to evaluate what he or she learnt from the past (experience) and plan or make decisions about the future (experiences). The experience is more than an event, it involves the whole person – cognitively, affectively and spiritually (Steinaker & Bell, 1979). The experience is not only personal and meaningful but also occurs by interaction with others and can potentially be transformative (Roberts, 2008). A live-in retreat has the potential to offer such experiences as participants are immersed fully in the program (Ribbe, 2010). The value of live-in retreats with a focus on religious or spiritual experiences continues to be recognised (Henderson & Scanlin, 2004, Knowing that Positive Change occurs is Important, para. 2).

A key facet of experiential learning is the quality of reflection that can be achieved. Learning from experience results when a person comprehends that experience and then seeks to transform the experience from a concrete understanding to an abstract concept (Hedin, 2010, p. 111). These concepts then provide the basis for new experiences. Learning will be transformative when the reflection of experience occurs with a revision in a person's frame of reference (Taylor, 2007, p. 173). In a group, individual experiences can be shared but the group can evaluate (and re-evaluate) the frame of reference of these experiences. New understandings may emerge that challenge a person's point of view and new learning occurs. However, an experience may be so profound that there is an impact upon a person whilst still immersed in that experience. This significant experience is sealed upon a person's being that affects his or her actions and attitudes (Ribbe, 2010). Hopefully, in a safe, supportive learning environment such an experience will be positive and inspiring. Such experiences also have a place to be considered and shared as testimony.

Live-in retreats and experiential learning

One way to provide experiences of these practices is through the live-in retreat. On a live-in retreat, a range of personal, spiritual and religious experiences may be offered. These experiences may be reflected upon by the individual and also discussed in groups. Through this reflection and sharing, new insights may emerge to deepen a person's spiritual or religious formation. For many pre-service teachers, there is an opportunity to deepen the well of their spiritual and religious experiences from which to draw and share with their future students (Taylor, 2008). The notion of retreat is an ancient one (Debuchy, 1911). Jesus himself took moments out of his hectic life of ministry to be alone, to pray and to consider his vocation (Mk 1:35; Lk 9:18). He exhorted his disciples to do the same, to take a break from "all they had done and taught", to spend some time together as a group (Mk 6:30-32; 45-46). The live-in retreat is characterised by participants coming together at an 'off-site' location, sharing and discussing aspects about themselves and their faith, and participating in a number of activities including worship and prayer. This form of retreat was initially called 'communitarian retreat' or 'Christian Living Camp' during the 1960s when first introduced to Catholic schools in Australia to distinguish it from the traditional silent, testimonial retreats previously held (Tullio, 2010). The format of the retreat holds much in common with the camp activities promoted by the Christian living camp movement in the USA (Ribbe, 2010). There were five essential characteristics to these camps: "(a) experiences; (b) temporary community; (c) outdoor environment; (d) trained leaders; and (e) focused spiritual objectives" (p. 147). For many young adults today the live-in retreat may be the only form of religious retreat they have experienced from their schooling. The experience of such retreats has remained one of the highlights of religious education in Catholic schools (Flynn & Mok, 2002; Maroney, 2008).

The use of a retreat as a professional formation tool has become more common place. Businesses, professional associations, university faculties, school leaders and teachers have found the opportunity to get away, to discuss issues deeply, to learn new ideas and skills, and to plan for the future to be invaluable (for example, see Lynn, 1999; Bergeron & McHargue, 2002 ; Intrator & Kunzman, 2006; Smith et al, 2007). Since 2008, the School of Education on the Fremantle campus of The University of Notre Dame Australia has used the live-in retreat as a means of providing professional development for pre-service teachers. It is called the Retreat Leaders Training Program (RLTP) and is one of the key components of the ASPIRE program that seeks to promote the vocation of teaching through leadership, service, care and reflective practice (Hackett & Lavery, 2010b). ASPIRE complements the training of pre-service teachers by providing “purposeful activities” (Arnstine, 1990, p. 235) that allow them to consider their identity and integrity as a teacher (Palmer, 1997). Such purposeful activities when voluntary increase the intrinsic motivation and concentration of participants (Larson, 2000). The RLTP has a twofold purpose within ASPIRE. Firstly, the RLTP provides practical skills in ways to contribute to school live-in retreat activities, including leading small groups. Secondly, the program provides a retreat experience to reflect on the vocation of teaching, especially in religious education. In essence, the RLTP is a retreat experience within a retreat training program. The program focuses on experiential learning to assist the personal and professional formation of pre-service teachers.

Formation Model for the RLTP

The experiential model of formation adopted for the RLTP is based on the assumption that teacher formation is founded on three forms of teacher knowledge: content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and experiential content knowledge (Hackett, 2010). These three forms of knowledge are required if a teacher and, especially an RE teacher teaches young people through learning experiences and example. The three forms are not discrete but interrelated to one another; as Pope John Paul II (1984) remarked, “To teach is not only to facilitate learning but also to reveal who we are by living what we believe” (para. 3) and reiterated by Pope Benedict XVI (2009):

The very person of the Catholic religion teacher constitutes this bond: to you, in fact, in addition to the duty of the human, cultural and didactic competence proper to every teacher, belongs the vocation to make it clear that the God of whom you speak in the classrooms is the essential reference point of your life. (para. 7)

The interrelationship between these forms of knowledge is reflected in the identity and integrity of the teacher (Palmer, 1998, p. 10). When many young adults today lack adult religious formation, an expectation that, as RE teachers, they can manage the demands of promoting religious education in schools would be challenging (Hackett, 2010). As the Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) warned, “This is what makes the difference between a school whose education is permeated by the Christian spirit and one in which religion is only regarded as an academic subject like any other” (para. 43). The School of Education, Fremantle at The University of Notre Dame Australia provides a teacher education course that provides opportunities for developing the three forms of teacher knowledge that includes a focus on experiential content knowledge (Hackett and Lavery, 2010b; Chambers and Lavery, 2012). As part of the course, education students can access units and programs in the three forms of teacher knowledge. For example, in theology, there are units that emphasise content knowledge; in Religious Education methods, an emphasis on pedagogical content knowledge; and, there are programs or opportunities that can provide experiential content knowledge through participation in liturgies, leadership, service-learning, school placements and retreat leadership training.

Table 1 outlines the three forms of knowledge within the context of the RLTP. In essence, the program reflects a “retreat experience within a retreat leaders training” program. The sessions are designed to provide content about retreat activities, for the participants to become involved in these activities and develop a degree of competence in using these activities on their internship.

Table 1: Three Forms of Teacher Knowledge in Retreat Leaders Training Program (after Hackett, 2010)

Content Knowledge <i>(Knowledge of School Retreats)</i>	Pedagogical Content Knowledge <i>(Competence in leading School Retreats)</i>	Experiential Content Knowledge <i>(Personal experience of School Retreats)</i>
• What is a retreat?	• How to organise a retreat	• To experience a retreat
• Games	• How to run games	• To participate in games
• Group dynamics	• How to lead small groups	• To participate in small group activities
• Christian Prayer	• How to organise prayer	• To pray
• Second Rite of Reconciliation	• How to organise a Second Rite of Reconciliation	• To experience a Second Rite of Reconciliation
• Mass	• How to prepare a Mass for students	• To experience a small community Mass

The RLTP – aims, cohort, structure

The Retreat Leaders Training Program provides important professional skills in school retreat programs for final year pre-service teachers. The aims of the RLTP are:

1. To understand the nature and purpose of school retreats;
2. To provide practical retreat experiences;
3. To develop leadership skills pertinent to coordinating and facilitating retreats;
4. To appreciate the significance of the faith paradigm; and,
5. To experience ritual and prayer as they relate to a retreat program.

Within the context of these aims, the program's theme is 'Confidence in the Future: Meeting the challenges of engaging young people in school retreats and camps - a place and a space to retreat, to share the past and discuss the future'. Between 2008 and 2011, 79 pre-service teachers undertook the RLTP. The majority have been young adults: 59.5% in the 20-24 years age bracket and 21.5% in the 25-29 years group (Table 2).

Table 2: Age Range of RLTP Participants, 2008-2011

Years	Number	Percentage (%)
20-24 Years	47	59.5
25-29 Years	17	21.5
30-34 Years	6	7.6
35-39 Years	3	3.8
40-44 Years	2	2.5
45-49 Years	2	2.5
50-54 Years	1	1.3
55-59 Years	1	1.3
TOTAL	79	100

The RLTP is an 'off-site' two day with an overnight stay and, in 2011, was held at a campsite in the Darling Ranges, 45 minutes south of Perth. To build a sense of community, there is a limit of 35 participants and eight staff as the campsite has enough beds for 45 people with rooms in combinations of double, four and six bed bunks. There is also a meeting hall, kitchen and dining rooms faculties plus the usual ablutions and bush setting (including an outdoor chapel). The staff consists of two experienced retreat facilitators, a campus minister, campus chaplain, site manager and three recent alumni teachers. The program is scheduled a fortnight before the participants go on their final teaching internship or "prac placement". Participants are required to attend pre-arranged sessions organized by the retreat staff. Table 3 highlights the key sessions conducted.

Table 3: Schedule of Sessions for the RLTP, 2011

DAY ONE	DAY TWO
<p><i>1. Community building & trust</i></p> <p>The session focuses on outlining the parameters of the program, including Occupational, Health and Safety guidelines, session times and participation expectations.</p>	<p><i>6. Positive Relationships (Myers-Briggs)</i></p> <p>This session focuses on facilitating and developing positive rapport with and between school students.</p>
<p><i>2. What are retreats?</i></p> <p>This session focuses on participants' past experiences of school retreats and clarifying the nature of retreats with the retreat facilitators.</p>	<p><i>7. Faith & Life Paradigm</i></p> <p>This session focuses on the challenges of sharing faith insights with school students. A feature of this session is the personal faith journey and the place of personal testimony.</p>
<p><i>3. Managing retreat groups</i></p> <p>This session focuses on strategies to motivate and manage groups of school students. The practical organisational aspects of preparing & running a retreat are also addressed.</p>	<p><i>8. Mass preparation</i></p> <p>The focus of this session is the organisation and celebration of liturgy and prayer on retreat. The Mass is prepared by the participants in consultation with the campus chaplain.</p>
<p><i>4. Moments alone (Chinese lantern walk)</i></p> <p>The session focuses on the role of personal reflection and time alone for retreat participants. A feature of this session is the practice of Gospel reflection.</p>	<p><i>9. Mass</i></p> <p>The Mass is held at an outside chapel. Participants elect to be responsible for different parts of the Mass eg. music and singing, readings, prayers etc.</p>
<p><i>5. Sacrament of Reconciliation (Second Rite)</i></p> <p>The session invites students to participate in the Second Rite organised by the campus chaplain and retreat facilitators.</p>	<p><i>10. Affirmation & Evaluation</i></p> <p>The focus of this session is on acknowledging the dignity of others and looking forward to the future with optimism.</p>

Examples of experiential learning in the RLTP

The examples of experiential learning in the RLTP are outlined using Ribbe's (2010) characteristics: range of experiences; community building; outdoor location; expert leaders; and, a focus on spiritual objectives (p. 147) as a framework for describing examples of experiential learning in the RLTP.

Experiences

The sessions are designed to present the aims and practicalities of managing school retreats as well as allow participants to experience key retreat activities themselves. Foremost among these experiences are the faith experiences of prayer, meditation, reconciliation and Eucharist. While the participants are expected to be at each session, they are able to participate to the degree to which they feel comfortable. Clear rules are identified at the start of the program about respecting the environment and each other and to allow a person to "pass" on any activity whether it is physical, emotional, spiritual or requiring some level of disclosure. The assumption made is that participants and facilitators can learn from each other's experiences.

Community building

A key focus of the program is to build a sense of community and trust within the group. The participants are in the final year and come from different teacher education courses, some wish to become secondary teachers, others primary, and others, early childhood. While most of these students do share theology units together, they do not know each other well. Even amongst students doing the same course, it is quite possible that they do not know each other's names. The same may also be the case with knowing the facilitators. Students may know some of the academic staff because they have done units with them; however, the other facilitators may be relatively unknown as well as the alumni teachers, campus minister and campus chaplain. As the group participates in the sessions together, prepares meals, dines together, and enjoys each other's company, the group begins to bond.

Outdoor location

An attractive feature of the program is its outdoor environment. The campsite is located on the outskirts of the Perth Metropolitan Area on the foothills of the Darling Ranges. The ambience of the location lends itself to be appreciated. The retreat centre is purpose built for small to medium sized retreat groups while still providing basic retreat facilities (e.g. bunk beds, ablution blocks, meeting hall etc.). Participants can find a quiet place to sit in the natural bushland or visit the outdoor chapel located on the side of a hill overlooking a pastured valley with cattle and horses.

Experienced Leaders

The program uses experienced retreat facilitators from different backgrounds and age groups. One facilitator was responsible for retreats at the Christian Brothers' Amberley retreat house in Lower Plenty, Victoria. Other facilitators have had extensive experience in running retreats for young people as part of youth ministry. Different facilitators led the sessions and participants are encouraged to also take a lead where possible. Some participants have competence in running games or preparing Masses or running youth groups in their local parish. The focus is on promoting a shared expertise and for participants to be trained by "doing".

Focus on spiritual objectives

The objectives of the program are clearly laid out from the beginning. No assumption is made about where participants may be in their faith journey. While the majority of participants are Catholic, others may not be or not practising regularly. For this reason, the program encourages participants to explore the religious and spiritual aspects of the program to the degree to which they feel comfortable. A common key spiritual

objective of the program is for the participants to reflect on their commitment to teaching as they approach their internship. How participants discuss and justify their commitment is left to them to explore.

Feedback from participants – the training; the experience

At the conclusion of the 2011 Retreat Leaders Training Program (RLTP), all 25 participants completed a written review as a means of evaluating and improving the program. Feedback from earlier years has been reported previously (Hackett & Lavery, 2010a). Overall, the 2011 feedback reflected the earlier findings, albeit the program was now held at an off-site country location with a larger cohort. The review asked participants (a) to indicate the best thing about the program, (b) to signify what aspects of the program helped them professionally, (c) whether there was anything that they would like added to the program, (d) what they had learnt about themselves through involvement in the program, and (e) why they undertook the program. Participants were also encouraged to comment on any other issues that they felt relevant. The participants undertaking the RLTP came from all three pre-service teaching courses: early childhood, primary and secondary. Their responses indicated four major ways the RLTP had had an impact. These ways included: the importance of experiential learning; the opportunity for spiritual and faith development; a strong sense of collegiality and community; and, prospects for acquiring and refining professional skills.

Many participants acknowledged that the RLTP provided valuable experiential learning opportunities. Comments included: “the mix of spiritual and personally interactive experiences was well-balanced and gave insight into how to ‘construct’ a retreat”; “I wanted to learn the purpose for retreats from a teacher/adult perspective – it was a great experience for a graduating student”; “actually experiencing a retreat, not just talking about it”; “I’ve experienced retreats from a student point of view, and was wanting to experience it from a different perspective”. A constant focus in the participants’ remarks was “the wealth of experiences on offer” which provided an occasion to “reflect on the usefulness of a retreat”.

Participants outlined how the RLTP enhanced their spiritual and faith development. A number of statements centred on specific activities within the program: “the forest walk to the chapel was magic”; “the early morning liturgy ... was a moment of serenity and contemplation”; “the Mass in the bush was ‘something’”. Participants also remarked on a wider, more generic spiritual understanding: “I learnt about my ability to put God first in teaching”; “I was able to slow down and reflect on my life a lot more during this retreat”; “getting time to be more in touch with my spiritual side – it is what I really need”. One student additionally remarked, “as a Christian, retreats are extremely important”.

Participants remarked on the strong sense of collegiality and community generated during the RLTP. For example, one participant noted that involvement in the program “gave a strong sense of belonging to a community tied together by the common goal of teaching”. Another person commented on the opportunity to “interact with and build community with other pre-service teachers, many of whom I would only know casually from lectures and tutorials”. A third respondent highlighted “the opportunity to make friendships with like-minded people, meet and hear from current RE teachers, and get to know our lecturers”. Participants were strong on the idea that the RLTP gave opportunities for networking, collaboration, sharing ideas and meeting people beyond the superficial level.

Finally, participants indicated that the RLTP was an effective professional means to develop and refine retreat skills. Comments ranged from specific activities to more general observations. For example, participants commented on opportunities to learn “group activities”, “trust exercises”, “conduct games in an outside environment”, “plan a Mass”, and “run liturgy and prayers”. Respondents also remarked on the more encompassing professional value of the RLTP. Comments included: “it was good to get some formal training on running retreats”; “gained a deepened understanding of the planning and dynamics of retreats”; “discussed what could potentially go wrong and strategies to use”; “the number of resources, ideas, and stories passed around was awesome”. One participant’s statement nicely summarised the pragmatic value of the RLTP: “to learn more about retreats and how to run them so I can be of help when I go out and teach in a Catholic school”.

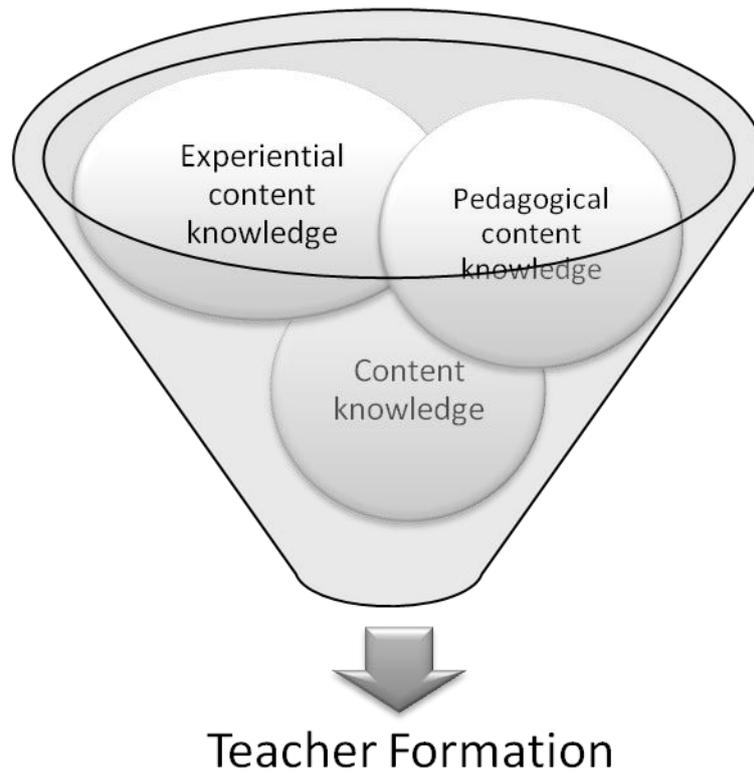
Discussion

Responses from participants from the 2011 RLTP were predominantly positive. There was, for example, a clear emphasis from participants on faith experiences centred on prayer, reconciliation and Eucharist. Participants indicated that such experiences were pivotal to spiritual and faith development. Participants were adamant that the RLTP promoted a strong feeling of community amongst all present. The main reason proffered was that the program demanded constant interaction from participants. The universal expectation was that people contributed to the best of their ability. This expectation to positively contribute also enhanced a sense of collegiality amongst the pre-service teachers. That is, there was an awareness that “we’re all in this together”. Another significant factor that enhanced the sense of community was the off-campus site linked with the over-night nature of the RLTP. Participants’ daily pre-occupations were temporarily replaced with the demands of the program. Finally, participants articulated a strong appreciation that the RLTP provided an effective method to develop and refine retreat skills. This appreciation was particularly important for a number of participants as skills learnt could well be immediately used on their upcoming teaching practicum.

The few negative comments from participants tended to focus on insufficient free time to relax or to become better acquainted with other participants and staff. In particular, a number of participants believed that the program should be longer. Individual participants also proffered various recommendations to improve the RLTP. For instance, one person believed that there needed to be “more explanation on how to make students comfortable with things like Reconciliation”. As this pre-service teacher pointed out, “it was uncomfortable, even for me at stages, when people were crying – I just think secondary students would need more guidance”. A second participant asked for “more opportunities to lead programs”. Another participant requested “some logistical details on how to go about organising a retreat”, especially, as this participant indicated, “we are in schools from next year”. In similar vein, one other person felt it would be beneficial to provide various “retreat schedules and outline examples” that participants could use.

What was considerably less obvious in participant responses was any reference to their own deep personal reflection, a most important element of any retreat program. A perusal of the Schedule of Sessions for the RLTP (Table Three) highlights a program organised around a myriad of activities. What had not been factored into the 2011 program were specific times of guided individual reflection. It is interesting to note that in earlier years, times for such reflection did exist. The authors are conscious of this omission. It is planned to factor in at least two 30-minute reflection opportunities into future programs. Participants will have occasion to pause and appraise experiences and feelings generated from morning or afternoon sessions. In particular, participants will be encouraged to use the reflection time to consider personal and professional implications. In particular, the authors would like to explore further the personal spiritual and religious insights pre-service teachers may acquire from the RLTP.

Table One highlighted the three components of formation for pre-service teachers involved in the Retreat Leaders Training Program. The feedback from the participants would suggest that, to a very large extent, the experiential components of the program assisted their personal and professional development. While all three components are necessary, the provision of a voluntary, purposeful activity like the RLTP contributes a heightened awareness of what they can do (competence) and reflection about their contribution to teaching, especially in religious education (self-efficacy). The most important ingredient in the formative process would seem to be those activities, both religious and spiritual, that promote experiential content knowledge (Figure One). Knowing what to do and how to do prayer or liturgy; or to develop trust and community are achieved better through the participants experiencing of what it feels like to be a part of a prayer, liturgy, trust walk or community. Spiewak and Sherrod (2012) have suggested that these “affective mechanisms” (p. 176) may be at the heart of the formation of young adults.



(After Spiewak & Sherrod, 2012)

Figure 1: Experiential Content Knowledge as the key ingredient in the RLTP

Conclusion

The Retreat Leaders Training Program has shown to be a viable formational tool in the development of pre-service teachers for religious education. As a model of experiential learning, the RLTP embraces the key components of experience, community building, outdoor location, experienced leaders and a focus on spiritual objectives. Participant responses indicate the value of actively doing as a key way of both experiencing a retreat and at the same time learning how to facilitate a retreat. Providing opportunities for experiential content knowledge as part of pre-service teacher formation in religious education enhances the identity and integrity of these teachers as faith witnesses to their students. In the future, the authors hope to explore the affective, spiritual and catechetical dimensions of the RLTP and its influence on the experiential content knowledge of pre-service teachers.

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*Professor Chris Hackett is the Associate Dean (Religious Education) in the School of Education at The University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle Campus and teaches Religious Education, spiritual, and values education at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

*Shane Lavery (cfc) is coordinator of postgraduate studies, and of the Christian service-learning program, in the School of Education at The University of Notre Dame Australia, Fremantle Campus.

ⁱ The term “religious education” in lower case refers to all activities that occur in a school that contribute to the religious and spiritual formation of a student. In Catholic schools in Western Australia, Religious Education is a specific learning area for the classroom, while outside the classroom there are “liturgies and other activities of catechesis” (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2004). These two aspects would be considered a part of the evangelisation role of the school.