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A Hermeneutic Case Study Approach to Exploring Continuing Ethos in Religious Institutions

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Introduction

Institutions founded on a religious vision, mission, and ethos currently confront numerous threats to their foundational values and ethos. Many of these institutions are losing, or have lost, their foundational ethos. Burtchaell (1998) and Benne (2001) are two contemporary researchers of significance who have engaged with this issue in relation to American educational institutions. Independently of these two writers, we addressed the issue in an educational institution in Australia. Using a case study in documentary analysis approach, we explored the continuation of the ethos of Nano Nagle and the Queensland Presentation Congregation in the documents of St Ursula's College, Yeppoon (Hanley, 2002). The research confirmed that there was a clear continuity of foundational ethos at the college, evidencing that it is possible for institutions to avoid succumbing to the secularising trend so palpable in present religion-based schools, colleges and universities.

In this paper, however, we neither debate the issue of the continuation of ethos in religion-based institutions nor make judgments from a particular standpoint concerning the issue. Rather, we suggest a way for a religious institution to conduct a critical investigation of the issue. We propose to qualitative research methodology for examining the extent of continuation of ethos within an organization or institution. This includes the generation, application and evaluation of hermeneutic principles, within a case study approach to the analysis of documents which originate in a variety of historical / cultural milieux. We recommend the methodology because it is reasonably economical, rigorous, effective and communicable to administrators, policy makers and staff in a religious institution.

The Focus of the Research

The research at a particular religious college, partly as a response to the decline in the number of members of religious orders who work in Catholic schools, investigated the extent to which the foundational charism of an order and its founder was continuing, even when no Religious worked in the order-owned

school. In brief, the research consisted of identifying values implicitly or explicitly referred to in three sets of key documents and determining the extent to which a commonality of values existed across the three collections. The research addressed intangible ethos while using hard data, in the form of published documents, to explore the ethos in a rigorous hermeneutic approach within the context of a case study.

A Case for Case Study

Case study theory was used in order to construct parameters for the research. Merriam describes the case study as "intensive holistic description and analysis of a single unit or bounded system". The case study concerns itself "with how and why [and] does not require control over behavioral events. ... [It] focuses on contemporary events." (1998, p. 12) As such, the research sought to explain, describe and explore the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 1994, p. 138). The case study approach is particularly appropriate for the chosen research topic since it assumes a single objective reality that can be investigated by following the traditional rules of scientific enquiry, and considers context to be an essential part of the phenomenon being evaluated (Yin, 1993, p. 64). Yin also points out that the case study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (1994, p. 13).

The boundaries of the case are kept in focus, that is, what is and what is not the case (Stake, 1978). What is happening within these boundaries (the emic) is vital to the purposes of the study. Hamel (1993) adds that case study takes its shape as part of an inductive process. In our study, boundaries were established by restricting the case study to the analysis of selected documents and by confining the selection to those College documents which were current at the time. The approach was inductive as the 'object under study', St Ursula's College, was considered in the light of remarks made in these selected documents. Merriam refers to the "single unit or bounded system" (1998, p. 12) in case study. In our study, the unit or system was St Ursula's College, or more specifically, its official public documentation. Furthermore, Merriam (1998) as stated previously, points out that the case study does not require control over events, and implies that such control may not even be desirable. Yin's definition and description of case study have direct application to this type of research: A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (1994, p. 13).

The case study inquiry copes well with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points. One result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion and another result benefits from the prior development of

theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

In our project, the contemporary phenomenon under investigation was the collection of current official public documents of St Ursula's College. The "real-life context" in this case was the College itself and the purposes for which the documents were written. In this case therefore, the boundaries between phenomenon and context were not clearly defined and, it might be argued, were virtually non-existent. Thus Yin's definition of case study is appropriate to this type of project. The research incorporated multiple sources of evidence, namely current official public documents of the College, the letters of Nano Nagle as published in Walsh (1959), and official documents of the Queensland Presentation Sisters. The data from these three sources converged in a triangulating fashion and this triangulation process was informed by theoretical propositions regarding case studies as noted above.

Hermeneutics: Analysis and Interpretation of Texts

Interpretation and analysis of texts have a long tradition in Catholic culture. Houtepen states that, "… from the very beginning … the church of Jesus Christ is [*sic*] a hermeneutic community" (2001, p. 6). Furthermore, the analysis and interpretation of texts – hermeneutics – is not restricted in Catholicism to scripture and official teachings. Houtepen also points out that:
"Who Jesus is and what the message about the reign of God really implied, cannot be fixed in definitions of faith, but can only be disclosed in the stories told, both by Jesus, like the parables of the kingdom, and by people who have met the secret of the reign of God in some new and liberating experiences of a gratuitous presence of God" (2001, p. 5). It is worth noting Houtepen's claim and inferring from it that the community still has stories to tell and that these stories, like all stories, may be analysed and interpreted. We propose that Houtepen's claim applies to documents in general and not solely to those that tell a story as that term – story telling – is generally understood.

Houtepen points out the necessity of interpreting texts. He claims that, "… for modern philosophy in general, *language* and *texts* became the main theme of reflection, the only 'objective' domain of the human spirit that can compete with the objects of science" (2001, p. 4; emphasis in original). If Houtepen is correct, evidence of how St Ursula's College reflected on its mission as expressed in its Mission Statement and its other core documents could be found in the language in which the College explicitly and implicitly expressed this mission in its official documents. Moreover, according to what Houtepen is claiming, this language may be analysed and interpreted in a manner that as far as possible is "objective".

Such a process is not simple. Schaberg, writing about her own methodology in interpreting the stories about the birth of Jesus, points out some of the potential difficulties associated with interpreting texts: "Authors have many

intentions when they write, and all are not equally conscious or equally important to them. Some intentions may fall short of being achieved. A written work assumes a life of its own and takes on different meanings and functions beyond the author's intention, acquiring new meanings for different readers in different times." (1995, p. 7) The problem posed by Schaberg has particular relevance for interpreting the letters of Nano Nagle. The letters accessed were the only ones available and they were found as an appendix in Walsh's 1959 work *Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters*. Besides the issue of availability, it was recognized that the selection of these letters already had been through a decision-making process before the current research occurred.

In the first place, Nano Nagle wrote letters for her own purposes and those who received them must have made some decisions about which letters they considered important enough to keep. Second, when Nano's letters were collected after her death, presumably some person or persons further decided which letters should be retained. A third layer of selection may be presumed to have taken place when Walsh decided which of these letters would be placed in his biography of Nano. The fourth layer of selection occurred when a decision was made as to which of the letters in Walsh would be included in the data for the current study. Thus, it is eminently probable that Nano's letters have acquired 'new meanings for different readers in different times' and that our interpretation of what she wrote may differ from her original intention. Such is the nature of hermeneutics.

This probability, however, did not invalidate the process of interpreting her letters or the Presentation documents or the documents of St Ursula's College. As Silverman points out, the aim of text analysis and interpretation "is to understand the participants' categories and to see how these are used in concrete activities such as telling stories … assembling files … and describing 'family life'" (2000, p. 826). When analysing and interpreting Nano's letters, the intention was to identify the categories of aspects of the mission of St Ursula's College and the Presentation Congregation that were present implicitly or explicitly in her letters, and that were replicated in the documents of these two organisations. It was important that documents for analysis and interpretation, especially those of the Congregation and the College - were recognized and accepted for what they were and what they were used to accomplish, and that they were treated as social facts (Silverman, quoting Atkinson and Coffey, 2000, p. 826).

Before proceeding it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the term "document". Scholars differ somewhat in their use of this term. While Atkinson and Coffey appear to use "record" and "documentary data" interchangeably, Hodder (2000, p. 703) suggests that documents are prepared for personal rather than official reasons and include diaries, memos, letters, field notes, and so on. Documents require more contextualised interpretation. Churton (2000), on the other hand, does not appear to be as restrictive in his understanding of the term

and implies that documents may include public as well as personal texts. Our research aligned with Churton's general understanding in referring to the official public documents of St Ursula's College.

Whether documents are public or private, official or personal, they are all written for specific purposes. It is this aspect of the nature of a document that allows it to be analysed and interpreted. Hodder states that a document is "a form of artifact produced under certain material conditions … embedded within social and ideological systems" (2000, p. 704). St Ursula's College is one such social and ideological system; social because it has a clearly defined social structures in terms of roles and responsibilities and ideological because the College claims to perform its functions according to principles enunciated in its core documents.

To a certain extent, it was assumed that the meaning of a text is independent of the text itself. As Hodder states, "… meaning does not reside in a text but in the writing and reading of it. As the text is reread in different contexts it is given new meanings, often contradictory and always socially embedded" (2000, p. 704). We suggest that a very simple yet telling example of meaning residing in writing and reading may be found in the nursery rhyme *Humpty Dumpty*. If a person is asked to draw the character Humpty Dumpty it is very likely that he or she will draw an anthropomorphic egg. This "meaning" has been ascribed to the rhyme and its central character over many years in many children's books. When examined logically, this meaning makes a nonsense of the rhyme, raising many questions such as why and how would an egg be sitting on a wall, and why were the King's cavalry and infantry so desperate to put an egg back together? If Humpty Dumpty represented a cannon or other large weapon, however, the rhyme would make much more sense! What was perhaps a rhyming account of the accidental destruction of a powerful weapon in the English Civil War has, over time, become the story of an unfortunate egg.

This idea of some independence of meaning further suggests that interpretations of documents, particularly those documents considerably removed in time (such as Nano Nagle's letters), may differ from the meaning originally ascribed to them by the writer. A difference of meaning, however, does not necessarily invalidate current interpretation. As we pointed out previously, such is the nature of text interpretation or hermeneutics which "is concerned with examining the relationship between two realms, the realms of a text or a work of art on the one hand, and the people who wish to understand it on the other" (Henn, 2001, p. 47). Our purpose in interpreting Nano's letters was not so much to work out what she meant in late 18th century Cork, but what her letters meant to St Ursula's College in Yeppoon at the start of the 21st century. In this regard, we heeded Jeanrond's assertion:

All interpretations of literary works which wish to be called 'adequate' (in terms of how they understand the texts) must be faithful to the texts themselves and not to any extra-textual authority, such as 'I understand Samuel Beckett's

texts better because I am his cousin or because I am studying at Trinity College, Dublin where Beckett himself was once a student'(1991, p. 82).

Jeanrond's message is clear. We needed to be careful not to claim or assume that, because one researcher worked in a Presentation College, he necessarily would make more accurate interpretations of what Nano's letters mean or should have meant to the community at St Ursula's. Accurate interpretation can eventuate only from careful work.

Accurate work is not a simple task and must incorporate the importance of the contexts of writer and interpreter/analyst. As Hodder points out: "In both texts and artifacts the problem is one of situating material culture within varying contexts while at the same time entering into a dialectic relationship between those contexts and the contexts of the analyst" (2000, p. 705). The varying contexts at play in our research project were the context of Nano in 18th century Cork, the context of the Presentation Congregation in the late 20th century, and the contemporary and localised context of St Ursula's College. According to Hodder, it is to be expected that interpretations of the texts set within these contexts vary as time passes since "[t]ext and context are in a continual state of tension, each defining and redefining the other, saying and doing things differently through time" (2000, p. 704).

Interpretation can be best regarded as a series of simultaneous processes rather than as an isolated event. Following Hodder's (2000, p. 711) notion that observation and interpretation are theory laden, our research identified three areas to be evaluated during the interpretation of texts, namely the contexts, similarities and differences, and the relevance of general or specific historical theories to the data at hand. In the area of context, three different sets of data were compared – Nano's letters, Presentation documents and St Ursula's College documents – to address the focus question for the research: To what extent did the current official public documents of St Ursula's College continue the ethos of the Presentation Congregation and its founder? The recognition of similarities and differences in the diverse texts, the second area identified by Hodder, was also important to the work. In a process of continuation of ethos it is vitally important that people respond similarly in similar situations even though the similar situations may occur, apparently paradoxically, in different milieux. The pertinent question to explore concerning these different milieux was: "How is the current situation at St Ursula's College significantly similar to and different from the situation in Cork in the late 1700s? This exploration involved a definition of the boundaries of the context under examination, in this case the values applied in certain situations. Hodder's notion of the relevance of historical theories in interpreting texts could not be ignored. One of the major objectives of our research was to develop and propose a theory of continuation of ethos. This theory, Hodder would seem to suggest, must be valid and relevant to the case study which was undertaken.

It is one thing to interpret texts; it is another to claim that one's interpretation is definitive. Tabbernee alludes to this problem in claiming that: "There are no uninterpreted texts. All texts … are the products of interpretative communities and are read (and interpreted) by people who belong to and whose perspectives are shaped by interpretative communities" (2001, p. 19). Interpretative communities, such as in the instance of this case study, St Ursula's College, are products of their context. Thus the way in which the letters of Nano Nagle were interpreted in the context of St Ursula's College, a relatively small country boarding and day school, may be different from the way in which they might be interpreted in the context of a large metropolitan day school, even though both schools may be Presentation Colleges. This difference is to be expected and is a natural result of the writing/reading process, wherein the gap between the 'author' and the 'reader' inevitably widens allowing the possibility of multiple reinterpretations of the written text (Hodder 2000, p. 704). An interpreter cannot be completely 'objective' in the sense of being able to determine exactly the original intended meaning of the text under examination, and therefore the interpreter needs to adopt a self-critical stance when interpreting text (Schaberg (1995).

The Document Collections

Walsh's work, *Nano Nagle and the Presentation Sisters* (1959), contains 16 letters written by Nano Nagle over a fourteen year period. It would be reasonable to assume that she wrote more letters than these sixteen during that period of time, and, as was pointed out above, the very act of retaining some letters while not retaining others is in itself an act of text interpretation by the various people involved in the selection processes. A number of these letters did not specifically give an insight into Nano's values nor of the ethos of the group of women she assembled around her. Some were what might be colloquially termed 'newsy'. Others, however, very clearly identified some of her values either explicitly or implicitly. The second group of documents used in the research was called "Presentation Documents". This data set was quite small in comparison with the other two groups, namely Nano Nagle's sixteen letters and the forty one documents of St Ursula's College. The documents were titled *Presentation Values and Principles of Presentation Education.*

These two documents were chosen for inclusion in the data bank for a number of reasons. First, the documents were written specifically for the guidance of the two secondary colleges, St Rita's and St Ursula's, that at the time of their writing were owned and governed by the Queensland Presentation Congregation. When the documents were written, St Ursula's College had a member of the Congregation as its principal and other Presentation Sisters were living and working at the College. This historical context leads to the second reason for including them in the data bank. As has been pointed out above, there

are no longer any Presentation Sisters at St Ursula's College. However, the College community considered the two documents to be important, and one document, *Principles of Presentation Education*, is found at the commencement of the *Staff Handbook.* This positioning, in itself, is an indication of the significance of the document. Its presence in the Handbook also indicates that there is a desire to continue the Presentation ethos at the College, even in the absence of Congregation members. The third reason for the inclusion of these two documents was that they formed a link between Nano Nagle and the College. They represented the Congregation's understanding of how Nano Nagle's values can be applied in a contemporary context.

The third set of documents formed the focus for our research. The set was comprised of a selection of forty one official and current public documents of St Ursula's College. All the documents were 'official public documents' of St Ursula's College because they were authorised by competent persons, in most cases the College principal or her nominee(s), or in the case of policy documents by the Board of Directors of the College. They were public documents because they were open to scrutiny by a wide range of people. They included official policy documents, excerpts from the staff handbook, College newsletters and promotional materials.

Use of QSR NUD*IST

Our data suited both criteria for appropriate use of NUD*IST software.

The procedure of coding the St Ursula's College documents was a threefold process. All the St Ursula's documents used in this research project were saved as Word text files. These files were then imported into NUD*IST V.4. Every document was read in its entirety. Irrelevant text units then were deleted. For example, advertisements for winter uniforms or notices about forthcoming netball games might be important information for parents and students, but they were not significant to the investigation of the continuation of the ethos of Nano Nagle and the Presentation Congregation.

The St Ursula's College documents were re-read and, using the NUD*IST program, values were assigned to text units when this seemed appropriate. These values had been previously identified in *Presentation Values* and *Principles of Presentation Education*. Each value was assigned a three-letter code and these three-letter codes became the nodes used in the process. The main purpose of using codes was to save time when assigning nodes to text units. When a text unit seemed to have application to more than one of the previously identified values, it was assigned as many values as seemed appropriate. For example, it could happen that a particular text unit coded as "Servant leadership" might also, if appropriate, be coded as "Caring for members of the College community".

Coding of all the St Ursula's College documents was a lengthy process. In order to ensure that all relevant text units had been suitably coded, three checking procedures were devised. The first procedure involved using NUD*IST's capability of searching documents for words or text strings. Words and phrases that might signal the presence of a reference to a value were used in searching through the data bank of St Ursula's documents. Table 1 is illustrative of words and phrases that were used in this process. The table is not intended to provide an exhaustive list of all the words or text strings used in this process, or of all the values that were checked.

Table 1. Samples of words & text strings (search terms)

Value and source document	Three-letter code	Sample search terms
Aesthetics (The aesthetic dimension of life – *Presentation Values*; strives to develop the aesthetic sense through the active encouragement of the creative spirit in art, music, drama and literature – *Principles of Presentation Education*)	Aes	art, drama, dance, dramatic, music, musician/s, orchestra, ensemble/s, display/s
Criticism (The responsible critique of society in the light of Gospel values – *Presentation Values*)	Cri	criticise, criticism, values, Gospel, society, counter-cultural
Eucharist (Eucharist which celebrates communion with God and others and the lived expression of this communion in service – *Presentation Values*)	Euc	Eucharist. Mass, liturgy, communion, service, service to others
Learning (Intellectual inquiry and the ongoing search for truth – *Presentation Values*)	Lea	subject/s, classes, academic, truth, assessment
Inclusiveness (Encourages genuine acceptance and appreciation of all people – *Principles of Presentation Education*)	Inc	welcome, orientation, inclusive, welcoming, community, culture/s, acceptance, accept
Self-esteem and growth (Promotes the full potential of each person in the school community and a sense of personal worth – *Principles of Presentation Education*)	Ses	Self-esteem, esteem, potential, growth, worth
Resilience (Strives to bring students to an awareness of God's unconditional love so that they will find meaning in life and hope for the future – *Principles of Presentation Education*)	Res	resilience, God, unconditional, meaning, hope, future

The second check procedure consisted of gathering and reading all uncoded text units from all the St Ursula's College documents to determine whether any of them should actually be coded. The word/text string search process was re-applied to the previously uncoded text units. This dual procedure yielded a small number of text units to be coded. The third checking procedure was to re-read all the text units that had now been coded.
After this checking procedure, there were very few changes to be made.

Conclusion

For the purpose of examining the extent of continuation of ethos in a Religious organisation or institution, we believe that the research methodology as described has much to recommend it. It provides a means of conducting fair and reasonable research, even when researchers are intimately connected with the subject matter, and who may be considered to be 'insiders'. It is relatively economical, rigorous, effective, and readily communicable to stakeholders. The use of qualitative research software such as NUD*IST enables the research to be as complete and exhaustive as possible, and allows for accurate triangulation of data. This methodology is strongly recommended for those researchers, administrators or policy makers who are interested in determining the extent to which foundational ethos is being continued in religious institutions such as educational or health care facilities.

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