Reflections on pedagogical hospitality and remote learning

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Abstract

Teaching involves teachers acting as hospitable hosts who create learning spaces that welcome their students into learning. Much of the literature on pedagogical hospitality works from the assumption that the teacher is the host and the students are the guests. However, in the period of remote learning during the Covid19 pandemic, this was reversed when teachers became guests as well as hosts as they 'entered' their students' homes, albeit remotely, to teach. This experience of being a guest is similar to the experience of Special Religious Education (SRE) teachers as they enter Australian Public School classrooms to teach about their Christian faith. This article explores pedagogical hospitality during remote learning with reference to the experiences of SRE teachers who experience being guests of the classroom teachers where they teach.

Introduction

Teaching involves teachers acting as hospitable hosts who create learning spaces that welcome their students into learning. Smith (2018, p. 95) asks his readers to reimagine teaching as an act of hospitality where the classroom is a "hospitable space". Parker Palmer (2017) draws on such a space when he describes pedagogical hospitality as the place where teachers treat their students with compassion and care, inviting them into a place where they can both listen and be listened to. Derrida's (2000) seminal work on hospitality explored welcoming refugees and others across individual and national borders helps with this reimagining. He defines hospitality as inviting and welcoming the stranger who is "treated as a friend or ally, as opposed to the stranger treated as an enemy" (p. 4). Each of these notions of hospitality underscore the importance of welcoming our students which is equally important during times of remote learning like those that took place during the school lockdowns of Covid19. This paper explores pedagogical hospitality in remote learning with reference to the experience of Special Religious Education teachers.

Like hosts at a dinner party, teachers carefully plan for involvement of all their student-guests to ensure that everyone feels welcome to participate and no one is left out. This hospitality takes two forms described by Derrida as unconditional and conditional hospitality. Unconditional hospitality is the perfect hospitality we aspire to that welcomes all people without question or condition, where there is a "welcome without reserve and without calculation, an exposure without limit to whoever arrives" (Derrida, 2005, p. 6). In contrast, conditional hospitality describes the reality of hospitality where both the host and guest/s have specific roles, rights and obligations attached to their behaviour. When a host offers conditional hospitality, s/he chooses who to welcome, how long they can stay and what they can do while they are guests (Westmoreland, 2008). Pedagogical hospitality is a mix of these two kinds of hospitality. On one hand, teachers graciously and expectantly welcome all students into their classrooms, regardless of who they are, but they also have conditions of entry that include their behavioural and learning expectations for each student.

Pedagogical hospitality

Providing a welcoming and open space for all students regardless of who they are, what they have done, or what they believe; eloquently speaks of God's love and welcome to all. Throughout the biblical narrative, God is a hospitable God who defends the cause of the orphan, the widow and the alien (Ps 146:7-9) and prepares an eternal table and rooms for His guests (Ps 23:5, Jn 14:2-3). By attempting to provide unconditional hospitality, teachers are able to enact God's hospitable actions towards the outsider, foreshadowing the heavenly feast (Smith & Carvill, 2000). When a Christian offers hospitality, s/he is demonstrating the welcoming nature of God. Consequently, Severe (2013, p. 7) suggests that "hospitality is a primary avenue the gospel is lived within the teaching profession".

Asymmetrical power relationships are inherent in hospitality (Derrida, 2000). Whenever a guest is invited to cross the threshold, go through the door and inside, a subtle, unequal power relationship is implied (Hung, 2013). This is because to be hospitable hosts, "must have some level of control over their home" (Mallia, 2018, p. 49) where they expect their guest to act in certain ways (Ruitenberg, 2015), The simple existence

> *"during the Covid19 pandemic, … teachers became guests as well as hosts as they 'entered' their students' homes"*

of the threshold and door "means that someone has the key to them and consequently controls the conditions of hospitality" (Derrida, 2000, p. 14). Therefore, regardless of how generous and welcoming the host is, being the one who welcomes means the host controls what takes place, reminding the guest of their place in the relationships.

This asymmetrical power also exists in teaching. However, pedagogical hospitality emphasises the need for teachers to reduce this imbalance by helping their students to become more than just guests, but co-hosts in the learning. Wright (2017) identifies three pedagogical principles for religious education that could be appropriate for any classroom: creating space, encountering others and listening for wisdom. She points out that underpinning these principles is a lived pedagogy where teachers enable students to flourish by being willing to be both hosts and guests in their classrooms. Similarly, Ruitenberg (2015) reminds teachers that they do not own their classrooms but must welcome their students and humbly make a place for them. This humble welcome is a consequence of the host understanding that he or she is indebted to others who have shown them hospitality in the past. Such a recognition of indebtedness makes more sense for the Christian who recognises that God has shown hospitality by inviting us to a relationship with him, making Himself known and enabling us to know Him. Paradoxically, while God is omnipotent, he humbly chooses to "make himself nothing", graciously sending His Son to earth—who is born in a stable, "takes the very nature of a servant" and "becoming obedient to death" (Phil 2:6-8).

> *In the classroom, teachers can control … in their students' homes they … work within the constraints of the household's conditional hospitality*

Pedagogical hospitality and remote learning

Remote learning changes the pedagogical hospitality relationships because teachers are not only hosts but become guests as they 'enter' their students' homes, albeit remotely, to teach. Rather than being hosts to students who cross the threshold into their classrooms, teachers find themselves sitting with their students who are working at kitchen benches, dining room tables, lounge chairs and desks in their homes. If teachers are teaching synchronously, they may encounter parents who wander in and out of the learning space because they are helping their child or as they get on with their daily lives. Teachers may, as happened to me on my first day of remote learning, become unwilling listeners to a family argument, or, as other teachers described, watch as their students are interrupted by pets, siblings, the radio, or any of the myriad of distractions that constitute their home lives. In the classroom, teachers can control many of these things, but as guests in their students' homes they must graciously work within the constraints of the household's conditional hospitality.

An initial exploration into pedagogical hospitality began during doctoral research into the pedagogy of Special Religious Education (SRE) teachers (Chalwell, 2015). Using participant interviews, reflective journals and document analysis, a constructivist grounded theory methodology investigated the beliefs and experiences of a group of respondent SRE teachers in state schools in two Australian states: New South Wales and Victoria. Twenty three teachers, who between them taught fifty eight classes in thirty two city, urban and rural primary schools, participated in the study to answer the research question: How do SRE teachers' beliefs and experiences influence their pedagogy? These SRE teachers were chosen through purposive sampling to ensure a broad range of experience and expertise. Included in the study were teachers from their first year of SRE teaching to over forty years of teaching, male and female teachers, teachers aged between twenty two and ninety one, teachers with formal education and/or theological qualifications, and teachers working at schools with between 34 and 620 students in them. The findings of this study inform subsequent comment on the context and practice of SRE teachers while comments on remote learning are anecdotally sourced from formal supervisory interactions as well as informal collegial experiences during school Covid19 lockdown during March and April, 2020, providing a narrative of Covid19 adapted practice.

Volunteer SRE teachers provide Christian education in state schools in many parts of Australia. They have a stronger sense of being guests in schools than school teachers because they are not part of the school staff, they borrow another teacher's classroom, and they only stay in the school for the duration of their lessons. In addition, students and parents can choose to not participate in SRE lessons and can make this choice at any time during the year. As guests of the school and the classroom teacher, SRE teachers have to teach within the constraints of a host and guest hospitality relationship. This is captured by Jane[1] who describes how her experience of being a guest in the classroom means that "it doesn't matter now nice the teacher is… my teaching is very different when they are there".

The SRE teachers' experiences of being guests bear similarities to online classroom teachers' experiences as they teach remotely in their students' homes[2]. Firstly, like SRE teachers, online classroom teachers teach in spaces that are not their own, where other adults (in this case, parents) are more

[1] Names and SRE teacher quotes in this article are pseudonyms of, and statements made by, participants in my PhD research.
[2] For the rest of the article, I will refer to SRE teachers, classroom teachers and online classroom teachers to distinguish between the three types of teachers.

involved in what is being taught. This is particularly pronounced when online classroom teachers teach about issues and ideas that might not be consistent with the beliefs of the home especially during Christian Development lessons, Chapel services or devotions. Secondly, SRE teachers often have limited access to school resources, a similar experience of teaching where online classroom teachers cannot control the resources students have available during their learning. Finally, like SRE teachers, online classroom teachers' students can more readily 'opt-out' of learning by not engaging in the lessons. The strategies SRE teachers have developed to manage their guest status in each of these situations may be helpful during remote learning and beyond.

Teachers are not teaching in spaces that are their own

Classroom teachers act as hosts to their students as they cross the threshold into their classrooms. Good hosts invite their guests to 'make themselves at home' and make sure their home is inviting to their guests. In the classroom, this transfers into ensuring that the attitude of the room is inviting and generous where students feel respected and comfortable with asking questions and sharing their ideas and opinions. It also means ensuring that practical things such as the temperature of the room and the availability of seats and desks for all students are accommodated. Throughout these actions, classroom teachers retain their power, implicitly and explicitly saying "you are welcome if you …"

In contrast, SRE teachers' experiences in the classroom are closer to being guests because they teach as the guests of both the schools where they volunteer and of the teachers who often stay in the room while they teach. As guests, they are humbly reliant on the welcome that they are offered. If it is positive, they are welcome to the resources of the school, are provided with appropriate spaces for teaching and are supported in their teaching. Conversely, in a less welcoming environment, SRE teachers must accept the classrooms they are allocated even when they are inappropriate. This is illustrated in how Nerida describes having no control over the rooms that she is given to teach in, that are "sometimes really pathetic and not conducive to learning".

In addition to accepting the teaching space they receive, SRE teachers must also accept the intervention or interruption of the classroom teacher even when it is not welcome. This interruption can take two forms. Firstly, the classroom teacher might intentionally interrupt the teaching to add his/her own thoughts or intervene in a behavioural issue. For example, Jane describes a classroom teacher who listens with "half an ear" to her lessons, "popping up with something" to add to the lesson.

Secondly, classroom teachers might interrupt the SRE teacher by their lack of consideration for what is happening in the classroom. For example, Shirley describes how while she is teaching, the classroom teacher will act as if there's no one in the class and "have a conversation with another teacher in the room" while she is teaching.

Remote learning bears many similarities to the experiences of SRE teachers. Like SRE teachers who work in spaces that they do not control, remote learning takes place in students' homes where online classroom teachers have limited control over the space. While online classroom teachers and schools may develop protocols and expectations of student participation in remote learning, ultimately, they share control with the parents who welcome them as they teach remotely in their students' homes. As hosts, parents determine where their children learn, whether other things are taking place during the learning, and the level of interruption the students experience. In this conditional hospitality that remote classroom teachers experience, parents can be a support and encouragement, but their presence may also be less positive. They may distract the students by, for example, talking during a lesson or explaining a task in a way that is not helpful.

As hosts of the classrooms, classroom teachers not only control the physical space they teach in, they also create the ethos of the learning environment. In contrast, SRE teachers are guests of the existing ethos of the classroom. As they enter classrooms to teach about their Christian faith, they encounter an environment that can range from being positive to hostile to their beliefs. SRE teachers recognise that they may be challenging the worldview of both their classroom teachers who are listening to their teaching and the students' parents who hear the stories after school. For example, in a classroom where Patricia knows the classroom teacher does not agree with her beliefs, she describes being aware of her guest status when she sees the classroom teacher "look up" when a student asks a "curly question, and then [the teacher] nods and goes back to what she is doing". In such a circumstance, there isn't the camaraderie that can sometimes happen between SRE teachers and classroom teachers. In a similar way, Elissa worries about teaching Christian content that her students' parents will disagree with. She acknowledges that there may be lessons "that almost end up disrespecting [parents' beliefs; and] at worse, they can think that it might be brainwashing".

However, when SRE teachers, like Bart, find a classroom teacher who is a Christian there is a meeting of likeness, a sharing in a common spirituality that acts as a modifier on the guest/host relationship. The SRE teacher is no longer Derrida's (2000, p. 7)

> *"The strategies SRE teachers have developed to manage their guest status … may be helpful during remote learning and beyond"*

"stranger"; someone who is "unknown, where I know nothing of him" but an ally and friend. Several of the SRE teachers comment on this experience; Nicole describes how the "whole atmosphere will be quite different" when there is a "Christian principal who is one hundred percent behind you".

Remote learning is similar to SRE teaching because when online classroom teachers enter their students' homes the values and beliefs that they hold and share in their classrooms may be different to the values and beliefs of the home. This is particularly the case as online classroom teachers share their Christian faith through prayer, Bible reading, Christian Development lessons and Chapel services. For example, in my Year 6 class where we start the day with a Bible reading and prayer, I have been strongly aware that this may be the first time that these things have taken place in a student's home. This has made me hesitate and consider carefully both what I am saying, and how I am saying it.

> *"start[ing] the day with a Bible reading and prayer, I have been strongly aware … this may be the first time that these … have taken place in a student's home"*

Teachers don't always have access to resources

Part of the responsibility of a classroom teacher is to organise the necessary resources for a lesson. This may include organising the furniture in the room, providing paper copies of necessary work, and distributing other necessary hands-on resources. When teaching at school this is a relatively simple organisational component of teaching. However, as guests of the school this is often not the case for SRE teachers. SRE teachers are reminded that they are guests when they must ask permission to use the classroom facilities and resources. This is exemplified in Ruby's description of how it is helpful when the "school is on board" because she can "ask for things that help you teach better". Because of this, many SRE teachers do not use the school's resources, preferring to make do with whatever they can carry in to the lesson. This can create a situation where, as Bart explains: "everything has to be portable, get up, put down, everything is rushed".

Regardless of the friendliness of the welcome, this experience is encapsulated in Jane's description of what it means to be a guest:

> Being a guest, there's no assumptions. I'm not assuming and teaching the lesson as if it's my classroom. We're the guest, we're the volunteer. We have to ask to use things.

As guests in students' homes, online classroom teachers also have limited access to the resources they would normally use in their teaching. As has already been stated, classroom teachers cannot control the spaces where their students learn. As a result, students may be learning at a dining room table, desk or sitting on their bed. In addition, because classroom teachers are not physically present, like the SRE teachers they must 'make do' with whatever we can 'carry in' to the lesson because students may not have the required resources available to them. For example, recently in a maths lesson I asked students to bring a ruler and paper to the lesson. However, three of my students did not have a ruler in the house that they could use. This further shifts the power balance, as online classroom teachers rely on the resources available in their students' homes and/or their students' willingness to ensure they have them with them during the lesson. To adjust to this situation, online classroom teachers need to create resources that can be accessed online or modify their lessons for a situation where there is less access to resources.

Students can more readily opt out

It is important that teachers establish a supportive and safe classroom environment where students are motivated and challenged in their learning. Coe et al (2020) describe aspects of hospitality when they emphasise the importance of teachers developing trusting, empathetic and respectful relationships with their students, and developing a learning climate characterised by high expectations and high challenge. These acts of hospitality are supported when teachers develop lessons that engage and support the learning of all students so that they are motivated and challenged in a safe space. For SRE teachers, the need to create engaging, interesting lessons is magnified because participation in SRE lessons is voluntary and students (with their parents' permission) can opt out of SRE lessons at any time during the year. For John this means always "having something that they really connect with so they go, 'yeah, I still want to come to SRE'". Ruby identifies the tension that this desire creates:

> if they are having a good time they will want to come and bring their friends. So there's a tension to walk. You don't want to turn it into a thirty minute slot of games and child minding; at the same time you want them to walk away saying, 'that was fun and I learned about Jesus'.

The experience of SRE teachers bears similarities to remote learning. While students cannot officially opt out of their remote learning, it is much easier for them to unofficially do so than it is when they are in a classroom. They can opt out by selective use of the mute button, having several tabs open on their computer, not showing up for a conference, inventing computer issues or being present but completely disengaged. For example, one online classroom teacher described how she called a parent to discuss how they could solve the problem of patchy internet and discovered that the problem had been invented by her student. In these situations, it is difficult for online classroom teachers to use their repertoire of classroom

management techniques that are effective in the classroom, once again reminding the online classroom teachers of their guest status in remote learning. In addition, the strategies that online classroom teachers use to engage their students may not be effective in the remote learning context, further challenging their role as hosts to learning.

Learning from SRE teachers' experiences

Because they want to retain good relationships in the schools where they teach, SRE teachers work at being "good" guests who behave in a peaceable manner. They are sometimes frustrated at how their hosts treat them and how this affects their teaching, but they continue in the relationship because teaching SRE is so important to them. Shirley illustrates this by explaining how as the visitor she must always be polite, even when the teachers are not polite to her and she, "can have three teachers in the room all talking while I'm trying to do my lesson".

As guests in the classrooms where they teach, SRE teachers are accustomed to having to develop relationships with their hosts in a way that classroom teachers are not used to. The intentional approach they take to improving the welcome they receive reveals their understanding of the conditional hospitality they experience. Their role as guests is typically a proactive one as they try to move from being a stranger who is treated as an enemy, to a friend or ally. This is not done simply to be friendly guests, but because it makes their job easier. Without this relationship, Nerida explains that there can be "a negative attitude or a culture that is negative about SRE that filters down to the kids; it's pretty hard to work in with that". SRE teachers predominantly approach improving the welcome they receive by working on their relationships with individual teachers, the principal and the office staff. This looks different for different teachers. When Joshua felt that his principal was "scarcely welcoming" he made a point of showing an interest in the school to indicate that "I'm not just an interloper". In a similar vein, Shirley helps her classroom teacher with playground duty before her SRE lesson, Ruby ensures that she says hello to the school receptionist, and Renee takes in an occasional special morning tea for the school staff to enjoy. Like good guests, the SRE teachers invest in the relationships they have at school because of the contingent nature of the welcome they receive.

While during remote learning, online classroom teachers are not going to provide morning tea or help with chores around the home, a starting point may be to understand how their students' parents are interacting with the learning and what support may be appropriate for them. Online classroom teachers may need to be more explicit about their timetable for the day and their expectations of students. For example, many online classroom teachers I have spoken to post a timetable for the day on the student platform and also send a copy to all parents to keep them informed. As good guests, online classroom teachers may choose to thank their parents for hosting the learning, at the same time considering how to make suggestions about the spaces that their students are working in. Because online classroom teachers are now guests in their students' homes, they may baulk at having such a conversation especially as they may feel like, in Joshua's words, an "interloper". The traditional lines have shifted, and online classroom teachers can now only gently make suggestions; a situation that will be greatly enhanced when a strong relationship exists between the online classroom teacher and parent. This takes additional time and I have spoken to many teachers who describe how they are in much greater contact with parents than in normal circumstances. This creates a level of cooperation and support that may bear fruit beyond remote learning.

As online classroom teachers are teaching in spaces they do not control, they must accept that they will have to make do with the spaces their students learn in. Like the SRE teachers who come fully prepared for a lesson and who have no expectations of the space where their students will be learning, teaching during remote learning requires a high level of preparation and thoughtfulness about what will be effective in this different environment. Because online classroom teachers cannot assume that students have certain resources, it is important that they find ways to adapt the resources they usually use, develop different resources, or communicate with parents about basic supplies that will be helpful in the lesson.

Just as the SRE teachers work hard to create engaging lessons to stop their students from opting out of SRE, this also becomes important during remote learning. As online classroom teachers work in a new context, they have to develop new ways of engaging their students, using technology, and creating engaging lessons. It is also important that online classroom teachers continue to develop strong relationships with their students, albeit in different ways to normal. For example, one online classroom teacher describes how he builds in time online for playing games and sharing stories with his students. In addition, online classroom teachers have had to learn to gauge their students' engagement in an online world so they can redirect them back to their learning. One online classroom teacher explained how she has developed a protocol for how students face their computers, how much of their body is showing during a conference, and that they must always have the camera on. She also described how she can tell from the reflections in their eyes whether her students are looking at the correct screen when she is teaching.

"SRE teachers invest in the relationships they have at school because of the contingent nature of the welcome they receive"

In remote learning, online classroom teachers may be experiencing being guests for the first time. However, they must also continue to work at being welcoming hosts to their students. As always, this is more than "creating a 'nice place' where 'nice people' can be nice to each other" (Andrews, 2015, p. 36.), it takes effort and risk (Anderson, 2011). Chalwell (2018) considering Christian teachers and hospitality asserts that the:

> hospitable work that teachers do in their classroom revolves around the way they treat their students and the way they present themselves. They try to treat their students with unconditional hospitality by remembering their names and welcoming them at the door, looking out for their individual needs, showing them love and care, and working at building strong relationships in the classroom. They also offer themselves to their students by telling personal stories, being willing to answer questions about their faith when it is appropriate, acting in a godly manner, and remembering that their students are made in the image of God. (p. 224)

"teachers work with their students to create a learning community where students not only feel welcome but can also begin to share a welcome with others"

In these ways, teachers work with their students to create a learning community where students not only feel welcome but can also begin to share a welcome with others.

Classrooms are never just teachers' spaces. Rather, they are spaces that are shared by students and teachers. Teachers can work to create a classroom that reduces the power imbalance of hospitality by encouraging student collaboration and decision making to enable students to play hosts to one another and to the classroom teacher. During remote learning this sharing of hospitality extends into the family home, where involvement with parents unexpectedly becomes part of the classroom dynamic. For some online classroom teachers this means explicitly welcoming and including parents in the learning; this is especially the case with younger students. Other online classroom teachers have described how they have increased the level of communication they have with parents; speaking directly to them during their online lessons, emailing and phoning parents to work together to develop strategies for supporting students' learning needs. Teaching within the shared hospitality of remote learning is challenging. Not just because online classroom teachers must share the hosting but also because it requires innovative use of technology, a degree of vulnerability as online classroom teachers try out new ideas, careful consideration of maintaining student safety in an online world, and developing ways for students to share their stories. Perhaps online classroom teachers need to be generous to themselves, taking solace from Hung's (2013) question: "How can a teacher treat her [sic] students with hospitality as much as possible?". That is, online classroom teachers' hospitality will look different, it won't always be perfect, it may be shared with a parent, it may rely on new strategies, it will take effort and risk, but classroom teachers can still offer hospitality as much as possible in this different context.

Hospitality matters because it helps to create safe spaces where students are excited about what they are learning. Hospitable environments give opportunities for students to share and to inspire one another with their new learning; they can share their stories in safety, share different ideas without risk, and listen carefully to one another. This is particularly important as Christian teachers bring Christian ideas and practices into their host's homes. This may be a completely foreign experience for families. It is important that Christian teachers come as humble guests to these homes, confidently, but not arrogantly, being open about their faith. As always, they need to provide opportunities for students to express their opinions and opposing ideas with a generous and kind welcome. Immanuel Kant (1983), in his discussion of universal hospitality, shares a conditional comment about a guest that "as long as he [sic] peacefully occupies his space, one may not treat him with hostility" (p. 118). Consequently, as guests in remote learning, it is important that online classroom teachers behave in a peaceful and generous manner towards their hosts.

In whatever context that teaching takes place, the starting point for pedagogical hospitality for Christian teachers must lie in their relationship with God. Pohl (2002) suggests that "hospitality emerges from a grateful heart; it is first a response of love and gratitude for God's love and welcome to us" (p. 37). Pedagogical hospitality needs to be understood not only in terms of particular tasks, but also as a way of being; "an intentional practice that reflects a process and perspective rather than specific tasks teachers must add to their already overtaxed schedules" (Anderson, 2011, p. 17). However, some tasks are worthy of consideration: devotional time spent with God helps to embed Christian teachers' awareness and joy of God's invitation to them and the students they teach. It keeps God at the centre of all hospitable endeavour and helps Christian teachers in these challenging times to welcome their students to learn.

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