Perception on the Role of Religious Educators: Basis for Understanding the Pedagogical Approach in Catholic Religious Education

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ABSTRACT

The role of religious educators is important in promoting an effective and systematic way of teaching the faith. How religious educators describe their role is a good indicator of how they teach Catholic Religious Education (CRE) to the students. This qualitative study aimed to provide a systematic pedagogy of religious education relating to the essential components of faith, David Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT), and the National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines' pedagogy of faith for Filipinos today. Based on the perceived role of religious educators, the study presented the process of teaching CRE systematically while keeping the themed roles of religious educators as evangelizers, witnesses to faith, and formators.

Keywords: Catholic Religious Education; Pedagogy; Experiential Learning; Religious Educators

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Introduction

Education plays an essential role in people's lives as part of their intellectual, social, emotional, mental, and academic progress. Even the Catholic Church gives high regard to education not just for her capability of imparting education but also for her duty of proclaiming salvation, revealing Christ to all who believe, and assisting the people to attain the fullness of life (Flannery, 1984). Besides, Catholic universities are effective instruments of individual and societal cultural progress with special attention to ethical and religious dimensions (Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 1992) while leading the faithful to Jesus, the Light, and let them be in a continuing journey to that same Light (Rosales, 2020). The fact that the Catholic Church in the Philippines, which comprises 80% of the country's total population based on the 2015 Report of the Philippine Statistics Authority, caters to quality education and becomes faithful to its mission even to students of different religious affiliations. The ever-growing mission of the Church to evangelize through faith-based educational subjects such as theology and religious education, or simply Catholic Religious Education (CRE) as expressed in this study to give more emphasis on the theology and religious education of the Catholic Church, has been seen as a direct way of helping students to grow humanely and spiritually. But this mission of the Catholic Church in progressing the lives of every person about Catholic religious education has been at stake because there are sufficiently trained teachers, as CBCP (1992) mentioned.

The perception of religious educators on their role is a big factor in bringing the Gospel message to their students. Though there are difficulties encountered in teaching Catholic religious education, it cannot be denied that their perceived role greatly influences their pedagogy as they teach CRE. Thus, the way they perceive their role as religious educators leads to a more visible way of how they will teach it. But this comes with a greater sacrifice of leaving some points to be understood because of their own perception. Though many religious educators have been familiar with different teaching styles and theories, some might not be applicable because even the Church demands that teachers give light to the students by explaining the lessons through dogma, morals, and worship.

Different theories have been defined in the past decades, focusing on the appropriate pedagogies, learning theories, and processes that helped educators transmit knowledge to students in various disciplines. As learning occurs, we cannot deny that experience always plays a role in easily understanding the concepts taught by educators, especially in the field of Religious Education, where many students take most lessons through concepts only. One of the most relevant pedagogies for Catholic religious education is the experiential learning theory developed by David A. Kolb, which emphasizes the learning cycle and styles that are helpful in developing a pedagogy for Catholic religious educators. Educators may also find experiential learning as a tool to help students apply learning to real-life experiences and, simultaneously, learn from their faith-based experiences, which may lead to reflective learning as they engage in life-long learning for faith purposes (Hedine, 2010). This experiential learning cycle is in line with Vatican II's catechetical methodology focusing on human experience, which can present a Christian view of the human person and the community that supports the renewed interest in personal fulfillment, freedom, and dialogue (Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 2017).

By looking at the current situation of religious Catholic education in the Philippines, many educators and learners have experienced problems with how the subject should be taught and learned. Because of the different perceptions of educators in teaching CRE, some focus on the practice of the Christian way of living, others on doctrines, dogmas, and concepts, while few could merge both the Christian way of living and doctrines, dogmas, and concepts to an affective and effective manner in the life and experience of the learners. This work aims to rethink the way educators view their roles as Religious Educators and appropriate Catholic Religious Education in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory to conceptualize a learning cycle that may improve Catholic Religious educators' pedagogy in the Philippine context without removing the perceptions of the teachers that they were used to. This may also help educators teach Catholic

religious education as an all-inclusive subject in a pluralistic society without compromising the quality of the Catholic faith.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach in research, where the primary data on the perception of religious educators was gathered through a qualitative survey questionnaire to understand their views on their role as religious educators. The data was gathered from 99 Religious educators from Catholic schools, colleges, and universities in the Philippines through Google Forms. The respondents were 57.6% female and 42.4% male, where 33.3% are in leadership or management roles while 66.7% are in regular teaching positions. Different works of literature and studies on pedagogy based on experiential learning and the mandate of the Church on teaching religion were also reviewed to see how their perceived roles can be applied in teaching – leading to the appropriation of their perception of their roles as religious educators to a systematic way of teaching Catholic Religious Education.

As conceptual research, it tries to derive a new concept by rethinking the Catholic Religious Education pedagogy through the perceived roles of the Religious Educators, essential components of faith, National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines' pedagogy of faith for Filipinos today (CBCP, 2017) and Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. The first focus of this study is to categorize the perceptions of the respondents as to how they view their role as religious educators. The CRE pedagogy and Kolb's ELT will be the secondary focus of the study in determining the merging points of the two concepts in line with the essential components of faith and the perceived roles of religious educators.

The Catholic Religious Education (CRE)

Religious education in a secular world is a non-confessional subject that discusses different religions and belief systems in a pluralistic society interested in spiritual and moral dimensions (Rossiter, 2020). Baring (2011) mentioned that a fundamental difficulty in the Philippine system regarding religious education is the struggle for meaning, making "religious education" always associated with Christianity and was conceived in a confessional term. For this reason, Catholic Religious Education would be a proper term to be used in this study to differentiate it from its pluralistic understanding. In its education document Gravissimum Educationis, the Second Vatican Council notes that the Church is concerned with authentic human development by having a role in the progress and development of education (Kroeger, 2012). The Catholic educators' task focuses not only on human development but also on guiding the youth along the path of sanctity – leading to holistic development in a person's human and spiritual aspects. Currently, many Catholic religious educators in the Philippines teach the subject based on what is presented in the textbooks used, sometimes without considering the use of various contextual catechetical materials provided by the CBCP, such as Catechism for Filipino Catholics and National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines for a more contextual discussion. By virtue of being a Catholic institution, students must be developed into Filipinos who are makaDiyos, makatao, at Makabayan hindi makasarili (God-centered, person-oriented, patriotic, and not self-centered), excelling in many aspects but most of all becoming, like Christ, for others (CBCP, 1992).

The Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (2015) sees Catholic schools as indispensable allies of the Catholic Church in the mission of evangelization. The problems of Philippine Catholic educational institutions are the dichotomized perception and the lack of appreciation for both educators and students of faith and life (CBCP, 1992). Consequently, Cornelio (2018) views that Catholic schools' instrumental character for success in life, the subject "Christian Living Education" as how many books refer to Catholic Religious Education, becomes an add-on or secondary to the mainstream subjects such as Mathematics, Science, and other major subjects in the Basic Education Curriculum, giving less time and weight for the subject that should be the mainstream in Catholic Schools. In addition, not all religious educators are sufficiently trained in teaching theology and religious education, which may lead to a mere transmission of doctrine divorced from morality and worship. As mentioned

earlier, some Catholic religious educators focus on the practice of the Christian way of living, others on doctrines, dogmas, and concepts, while few were able to merge both the Christian way of living and doctrines, dogmas, and concepts – and this provides an idea of differentiating theology and education and how can they be merged to give way to a profound Catholic Religious Education. It is also a fact to consider that not all students in Catholic schools are of the same faith-confession and teaching Catholic Religious Education purely in a faith-based approach would marginalize other non-Catholic students (Del Rosario, 2017).

In teaching the Catholic Faith through catechism, as adopted by most Catholic Religious educators, the National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines (CBCP, 2017) proposed a pedagogy of faith for Filipinos today. It mentions three parts of catechizing or educating through integration, inculturation, and community-forming that incorporate fidelity to God, fidelity to all human persons, and fidelity to the Church. Integration is the first principle that refers to all authentic catechesis' holistic, unified character. The first level of integration is life integration, which aims to close the gap between concrete catechesis and how faith is actually lived. It is followed by the structural integration that incorporates the three essential components of faith – doctrine, morals, and worship. The dimension integration is the process that integrates the multiple dimensions with each of the three components of faith. The next level, source integration, is the creative use and adaptation of the primary sources (Scripture, Tradition, Human experience) to the concrete catechesis taught to students. Subject integration focuses on the students' assimilation and interiorization of the catechetical instruction being given. Lastly, environmental integration is the broader application of subject integration that roots the catechesis in its total socio-religious, socio-cultural, and environmental context. The second principle mentioned by NCDP is inculturation, which expresses the Christian message through images, symbols, and rites indigenous to Filipino culture and the cultural values, attitudes, and practices in the light of Christ and basic Christian dimensions. Inculturation will help students understand the Christian message in a local context and respond to Christ's call in a uniquely Filipino way. Through inculturation, students can become means of spreading and deepening the Christian faith as part of the laity's missionary role. This principle of inculturation relates the Gospel message to the listeners, Christian moral lessons to the students, and sacramental celebrations to the faithful. The third principle mentioned by NCDP is community-forming, which focuses on the faithful's interpersonal activity that aims to nurture and bring to maturity each Christian community's faith member – leading students to encounter Christ. Thus, with these three principles for the pedagogy of faith, students may become fully matured Christians, achieving the objectives of promoting knowledge of faith, moral formation, engendering vibrant prayer life, fostering community life, and initiating students to missionary life (CEAP, 2015).

Many educators and educational groups propose various methods for teaching Catholic Religious Education, but touching the hopes and dreams of the Philippine Church through catechetical methods seems at hand. However, to fully appropriate faith-based topics provided by Catholic Religious Education, the concept of experiential learning in education must also be viewed and analyzed.

Experiential Learning

As an essential part of the learning process, experience gives students a different horizon, eager to learn yet cannot fully comprehend the concepts and theories educators teach them. Many have tried to develop experiential learning theories in different fields, such as education and management. Most notably, David A. Kolb's experiential learning theory has been applied and studied for its most widely known model to explain the process (Kuk & Holst, 2018). Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) provides an intellectual foundation for the practice of experiential learning as a response to John Dewey's call to have a theory of experience that will guide educational innovation (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). The process of learning in ELT focuses on the learners' experience before grasping the concept of the lesson. Kolb's theory is a synthesis of the great scholars' theories of human learning and development, emphasizing the central role of experience in learning. These scholars were called

the "foundational scholars of experiential learning", namely, William James, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Kurt Lewin, Carl Jung, Lev Vygotsky, Carl Rogers, Paulo Freire, and Mary Parker Follett (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). The influential bases of Kolb's ELT were Lewin's model of action research and laboratory training, Dewey's model of learning, and Piaget's model of learning and cognitive development.

The experiential learning theory proposed by Kolb (2015) differs from the behavioral theories of learning where the process bases on traditional methods of learning and focuses more on a rational idealist epistemology denying the experience of any role in the process of learning and cognitive theories that emphasizes cognition over affect (Kolb et al., 2001). Kolb's theory focuses on the proper relationship among learning, work, and other life activities and the creation of knowledge itself. It involves a framework that would help design courses that meet diverse learners' needs (Murrel & Claxton, 1987). It is then that learning in ELT is defined as a process "whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 2019). He theorized that learners need four different kinds of abilities to be effective – concrete experience (CE) abilities, reflective observation (RO) abilities, abstract conceptualization (AC) abilities, and active experimentation (AE) abilities. With these four abilities, learners involved themselves freely and without bias in new experiences (CE), reflect on and observe experiences from many perspectives (RO), create concepts integrating their observations into logically sound theories (AC), and use the theories to make decisions and solve problems (AE) (Morris, 2019). Kolb's ELT is described as a dynamic view of learning based on the dual dialectics of action/reflection and experience/abstraction (Kolb & Kolb, 2013) where knowledge comes from the combination of grasping and transforming experience, turning it into a cycle. On the one hand, grasping experience is the process of taking in information portraying two dialectically related modes of concrete experience and abstract conceptualization. On the other hand, transforming experience deals with how an individual interprets and acts on the information grasped, portraying two dialectically related modes of reflective observation and active experimentation (Kolb, 2015).

The four modes of Kolb's ELT show how people may engage in any given experience, leading to a specific way of approaching, understanding, and acting on a problem (Turesky & Gallagher, 2011). This cycle, as how Kolb (2015) described it, is an idealized learning cycle where the learners touch all the bases – experiencing (CE), reflecting (RO), thinking (AC), and acting (AE). Sharlanova (2004) also explains that concrete experience is where the learners are actively participating in the experience (doing), reflective experience is where learners consciously reflect on experience (observing), abstract conceptualization is where learners try to conceptualize theory or model of what has been observed (thinking), and active experimentation is where learners try to test the plan for the next experience (planning). The learning cycle provides a spiral of learning, combining the knowledge and the experience of the learner to form new knowledge. In the learning process, ELT constructs knowledge involving creative tensions among the four modes of learning that are responsive to contextual demands (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The learning styles that show students' efficacy in a particular part of the learning cycle emerged between the four modes of learning.

The four learning styles of Kolb (2015) emerge when the learning modes are combined – creating four types of learners: Diverger (RO-CE), Assimilator (RO-AC), Converger (AE-AC), and Accomodator (AE-CE). In categorizing the students, the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) is used to measure an individual's preference for a particular region of learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This kind of "typing" or categorizing learners' styles is a methodological breakthrough in the late 1970s (Manolis et al., 2013). Turesky and Gallagher's (2011) description of the learning styles emphasizes the strengths of the learners. Those who fall into a divergering or diverging style possess imaginative and creative abilities, especially in brainstorming. Those who fall on assimilator or assimilating style possess the ability to systematically plan, organize, analyze, create models and theories, and engage in inductive reasoning. Those who fall on converger or converging style possess the ability to perceive or gather new information abstractly and transform or process it actively. Learners who fall on accommodator or accommodating style possess the ability to carry out tasks, initiate activities, and get involved in new experiences.

With the experiential learning theory, learning appeared to be grounded in reality, denied the classroom's artificiality, and focused on the learners and their experience to empower them (Dennison, 2010). The learning modes and styles can be critical elements of appropriating particular subject courses to develop a pedagogy that is fully based on experience.

Results and Discussion

Looking at the answers of the respondents as to how they describe their role as religious educators, thematic analysis was done to categorize their responses. Their perception and description of their role as religious educators were put into context as to how it can be seen as a way of teaching Catholic Religious Education. Thus, this will help the study appropriate their perception to be fitted for a pedagogical concept of teaching. Similarly, the essential components of faith (doctrine, moral, worship) are integrated to help classify the teachers' perception. Then, the Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is incorporated to see how their perception of the essential components of faith may be related to the students' learning style. Lastly, the pedagogy of faith is incorporated to see what part of the experiential learning can be viewed as integration, inculturation, and community-forming. The table below shows the thematic analysis of their answers, the relatedness to the essential components of faith, the application to experiential learning, and how it can be viewed as part of the Pedagogy of Faith.

Table 1. Themes and Appropriation

Themes	Components of Faith	Learning Style	Pedagogy of Life
Evangelizers	Doctrine	Reflective Observation	Integration
		Abstract Conceptualization	
Witnesses of faith	Worship	Active Experimentation	Inculturation
Formators	Morals	Concrete Experience	Community-Forming

The responses of the Religious Educators were themed into three namely: evangelizers, exemplars, and formators. These themes are indicators of how they were able to teach Catholic Religious Education since they perceive themselves as such. Religious educators as evangelizers are faithful witnesses to the indispensable call of the Church to become missionaries of the Word of God (Paul VI, 1975). The respondents have emphasized that their role is to teach their students the tenets of our faith along the teachings of Jesus Christ. Pedrosa and Madrigal (2021) have mentioned that evangelization is the core of becoming disciples of the Lord, hence making it possible to become preachers and dispenser of what Jesus taught. By becoming witnesses of faith, teachers are ought to be living examples of what they are teaching, of becoming and living a true Christian life (Robinson et al., 2021). As formators, teachers ought to remember that their duty is not only teaching the contents but also forming and guiding the students by teaching them morals and helping them practice them in and outside of the schools and even after graduation, to make the person an effective member of the Church and of the community (Magro, 2019). With this, religious educators are aiding the students and the community they belong to.

In appropriating these themes to the essential components of faith, we can see how religious educators, as evangelizers, fit to the employment of doctrines to the students. Doctrine, as knowing the Word of God, the creed, and the concept of our faith, can be appropriated to the learnings tyles of Reflective Observation and Abstract Conceptualization since it covers the reflection and conceptualization of the students in terms of Catholic Religious Education, emphasizing the experience, reflection, and knowledge on doctrine. With this incorporation, the integration of the lessons to become a holistic, unified character of all authentic catechesis, can be made possible.

Being witnesses of faith, religious educators are becoming exemplars of having a true Christian way of life for their students; thus, worship is fittingly placed in this context. As a celebration of faith through sacraments, prayers, or rituals,

worship can be seen as a way how religious educators effectively teach their students and can be appropriated to the learning style of Active Experimentation, leading them to the Filipino Catholic tradition of community worship – rooting from reflection and knowledge going to action. With this, a clear inculturation of what they have learned can be applied to their context as students and as part of their community.

Religious educators as formators can be viewed as an important aspect of teaching Catholic Religious Education because it leads the students to put into action what they have learned through life-long learning and incorporation of the teachings of the Church into their lives. Thus, teachers, as guides towards Christian living, are teaching morals to their students, which can be considered an impactful application to life, leading to the learning style of Concrete Experience. As formators who make the students experience the concepts and doctrines taught, community-forming is being emphasized. By relating to our concrete Filipino Christian community's lights and shadows, learners use their knowledge and judgment towards the action to fully develop the experience – enveloping the knowledge, action, and experience.

The typical way of teaching Catholic Religious Education starts with the doctrine followed by morals and ends with worship. In appropriating the essential components of faith, the sequence is changed to make the students aware of the doctrine and worship before acting upon the morals. The reason for adjusting the sequence also coincides with the fact that experiential learning begins with learners' experiences and ends with a new experience. Prior experience is being examined as a springboard in discussing topics appropriate for the experience and related to the doctrines of the Church. The doctrine taught to learners is related to the Christian faith's mystery through worship – sacraments, liturgies, and rituals. With the obtained and internalized knowledge of the lesson, learners are led to act through morals by living the commandments and Christian virtues.

Conclusion

The respondents' perception themes show closely related ideal characteristics of religious educators – evangelizer, witness to faith, and formators. These three themes are directly applicable to the essential dimensions of faith that have become the guidelines of religious educators for a long time. However, with a twist of understanding how learners have different learning styles, religious educators must consider a correct learning process to fully incorporate the essential components of faith to the students while maintaining their roles as evangelizers, witnesses to faith, and formators. These learning styles of experiential learning are supported by the goals of the Pedagogy of Faith for Filipinos for Today as proposed by the National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines. As an instruction in the faith, Catholic Religious Education must provide the learners opportunities to seek in faith the most profound questions about human life and help them achieve human flourishing (Natividad, 2018). The roles of religious educators are emphasized to understand how they teach Catholic Religious Education. But more importantly, how their roles can affect the learning of the students in the 21st century where learning styles vary, and application of learning is diverse.

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