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Playing our way into complex adaptive action in religious education

[Drescher's research suggests that the so-called "nones" and those who claim the label "spiritual but not religious" are showing us a complex future where religious institutions will have to participate in shaping religious education around "believing and becoming" rather than around "believing, belonging and behaving." Writing from the very specific space of a Catholic educator who has been using the tools of dialogical organizational development to support local communities I argue that religious educators have much to learn from the scholars of adult development, of complex adaptive action, and of gameful learning. Their work offers us significant hope and opportunity for generative creativity in our diverse contexts.]

Elizabeth Drescher, in her compelling and substantial new study of people who claim the label "spiritual but not religious," writes:

In the new media age, difference is less a distinguishing barrier between groups of individuals than it is an invitation to engage and explore the lives of diverse others. ... new media practices of seeing others, seeing difference, expressing difference, and being in variously distributed relationships with religiously diverse others have an effect on how people regard religious difference in increasingly overlapping zones of private and public life. (2016, 61)

There is a conundrum in the midst of this observation: on the one hand her research suggests that there are a growing number of people who embrace relationality across difference, who are deliberately shaping communities of great and deep diversity without perceiving such practices as being in any way connected to religion. On the other hand, from within my specific space as a Roman Catholic Christian, I believe that it is precisely my religion which calls me into relationship across difference, that my very identity as a Catholic person requires me to embrace diverse relationality and offers me rich resources for doing so. Yet it is not just Drescher who notes that people who claim this label find religious institutions problematic – Pew, PRI, CARA and others do as well. So where does the disconnect lay?

Can we embody religious education that educates *within* and *for* specific religious communities, but also and concurrently *with* and *for* people who are not part of religious communities? Can we reach people who might have very little interest in, or perhaps even hostility towards, religious institutions? I fear that until and unless religious communities can communicate – in all the rich senses of that word – our integral and inextricable commitments to relationship across, among, within, between and amidst various kinds of difference, we will lose even more ground with a generation of people growing to consciousness within the rich and varied landscapes of the US.

In the short essay that follows I will consider these questions, and some possible pedagogical responses, by tracing a particular thread through literatures as disparate as adult development theory (Kegan), dialogical organizational development (Royce and Holladay), and finally, scholarship on games and learning (Schrier, McGonigal). Perceiving a pattern in these literatures offers new hope for pedagogical designs that can be generative.

Personal adult development

Robert Kegan's research is very clear about the challenges human beings face as we develop our sense of selves, and then of ourselves in relationship with other people (1982, 1994, 2016). Rather than an image of a staircase, with individual autonomy as the goal at the top of the stairs, Kegan argues that human development is a process best envisioned as an ongoing spiral that draws us ever more fully into creating an understanding of self, and through that creation into deeper relationship with others. Kegan has posited five "orders of meaning-making" which correspond to what we can see in front and around us, versus what we are oblivious to because it "holds" us.

Asking the question, for instance, of whether a fish knows what water is, helps to explain what it means to be "held" by a specific idea or meaning-frame. The fish doesn't know the water is there, because that environment is all encompassing, it surrounds and immerses and "holds" the fish, without that water the fish dies. A fish is "held" by the water, rather than "holding" it. Similarly, an infant does not know herself as apart from her primary caregiver. She is wholly dependent upon them and does not begin to see herself as "separate" until the very real agony of "separation anxiety" sets in. Her primary caregiver "holds" her -- both literally and figuratively -- at this early stage of life.

Unlike many earlier developmental descriptions, Kegan's research demonstrates that adults can continue to develop throughout the lifespan, growing ever more complex and inter-related forms of knowing. He notes that most adults achieve what he labels a "third order" form of meaning-making, although he also argues that our current cultural landscapes require at least a "fourth order" form of meaning-making by which to thrive. (His book *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* is particularly eloquent on that subject.)

In Kegan's theorizing "third order" meaning-making is structured around

cross-categorical thinking—the ability to relate one durable category to another... As a result, thinking is more abstract, individuals are aware of their feelings and the internal processes associated with them, and they can make commitments to communities of people and ideas (Kegan, 1994). Kegan and his colleagues (2001) noted that in this order of consciousness, "other people are experienced ... as sources of internal validation, orientation, or authority" (p. 5). How the individual is perceived by others is of critical importance since acceptance by others is crucial in this order. Support is found in mutually rewarding relationships and shared experiences, while challenge takes the form of resisting codependence and encouraging individuals to make their own decisions and establish independent lives.ⁱ

While "fourth order" meaning-making requires

cross-categorical constructing—the ability to generalize across abstractions, which could also be labeled systems thinking—is evident in the fourth order of consciousness (Kegan, 1994). In this order, self-authorship is the focus. Individuals "have the capacity to take responsibility for and ownership of their internal authority" (Kegan & others, 2001, p. 5) and establish their own sets of values and ideologies (Kegan, 1994). Relationships become a part of one's world rather than the reason for one's existence. Support at this stage is evident in acknowledgment of the individual's independence and self-regulation. Individuals are encouraged to develop further when significant others refuse to accept relationships that are not intimate and mutually rewarding.ⁱⁱ

And “fifth order” meaning-making requires that:

...individuals see beyond themselves, others, and systems of which they are a part to form an understanding of how all people and systems interconnect (Kegan, 2000). They recognize their "commonalities and interdependence with others" (Kegan, 1982, p. 239). Relationships can be truly intimate in this order, with nurturance and affiliation as the key characteristics. Kegan (1982) noted that only rarely do work environments provide these conditions and that long-lasting adult love relationships do not necessarily do so either.ⁱⁱⁱ

Supporting movement from one form to another proceeds along a spiral path which Kegan identifies as being one of “confirmation, contradiction and continuity,” with “confirmation” having to do with seeking deep understanding of the internal logic of a particular way of making sense in a specific social location. He believes that you cannot support transformation in constructive and generative ways without first entering into a form of deep empathy with a person. The next step – contradiction – arises either organically in the course of a person’s journey, or might be introduced through the intervention of a teacher/coach, who draws attention to the contradictions that exist in a particular meaning frame.

Kegan points out, however, that simply encountering contradiction is not enough for true transformation. The rupture of meaning that emerges is so unsettling that people can find themselves fleeing into either relativism or fundamentalism, both of which are essentially refusals to transform meaning-making, to move from cross-categorical thinking to cross-categorical construction. The final element necessary for a transformation to a new order of meaning-making is a process Kegan terms “continuity,” by which he means a form of holding space which allows for the new structures of meaning-making to consolidate. Such continuity can often be described as a larger community into which someone is invited, in which their previous form of making meaning is acknowledged and valued, while at the same time the new form is cherished.

So, now, consider how people experience religious institutions. In the broader “implicit curriculum” of popular culture, religious institutions are often represented as being narrow, constricting, even oppressive. Polls – particularly of younger people – suggest that hypocrisy is one of the complaints often voiced about religious institutions. Yet any human institution, let alone personal relationships, will fall prey to hypocrisy at various points. Why is this the label so problematic for religious institutions?

Kegan helps us to see that when religious institutions develop “holding spaces” for people, they create a difficult paradox: on the one hand, a space which is clearly demarcated, enforcing sharp boundaries for who is “in” and who is “out” can feel very comfortable for people making third order meaning. On the other hand, the very element which makes it comforting – sharp boundaries – also becomes an obstacle for people who are in relationships with people who don’t “fit” within those boundaries.

This tension – between belonging to a community that excludes some of your friends, or choosing your friends over the community – is at the heart of much of the polling concerning why young people don’t find religious institutions a place of belonging. How might we provide

both sufficient “confirmation” of the pain of this “contradiction,” while offering sufficient “continuity” to grow past it? The pedagogical key lies in understanding how these communities embody and communicate their core beliefs.

Are they “bounded sets”? That is, do they communicate who they are by requiring belief in particular notions prior to belonging? Or are they “centered sets” where one can enter through permeable boundaries, and experience the community before choosing to make a deeper commitment – becoming as part of belonging? Hear the resonances from Drescher: “Rather than traditional modes of “believing, belonging and behaving that have fueled much recent discussion” “narratives that emphasized experiences of being and becoming” (14) are at the heart of her interviewees’ responses.

A community which defines itself in such a way that one can enter it to explore, rather than having first to make a specific belief commitment prior to entrance, is a community whose social patterns resonate with contemporary forms of informal learning. In addition, for people who are evolving from third to fourth (even to fifth) order forms of meaning-making, a “centered set” community offers more room for movement. One can go deep into the heart of the community, and also explore its emergent edges. A “bounded set” community, on the other hand, allows for exploration within its borders, but if one crosses over the border one has left the community.

Many communities can function in both of these ways. Which kind of “set” will be encouraged? Religious communities who can draw on the former dynamic, who are comfortable with adapting in such cultural spaces, are growing and thriving. Communities who rely on the latter, bounded set, find it very difficult to do so in our contemporary contexts.

In my own Roman Catholic community the former process – inquiry, loose association, centered belief -- is the embodiment of the best of “RCIA” educational practice (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults). But the very same learning process, RCIA, can embody the opposite “bounded set” mentality, with poorly trained educators enforcing strict interpretations of specific teachings and ignoring the communal apprenticeship that forms the heart of shared inquiry.

Adaptive change

Turning from an examination that is more focused on the person – that is, on adult development – to one which focuses on the organizational, offers similar conclusions through the lens of complex adaptive theory. A “complex adaptive system” is:

a system consisting of many interacting agents, where their interactions are not rigidly fixed, preprogrammed or controlled, but continuously adapt to changes in the system and in its environment. Examples are ecosystems, communities and markets. The bonds between such agents are relatively weak and flexible, so that there is still a lot of freedom for the system to adapt. On the other hand, the agents do depend on each other, and therefore their individual freedom is limited. (Heylighen)

In complex adaptive systems, perceiving change – let alone intentionally offering catalysts for it – is not easy, particularly given that such change is more likely to be “dynamical,” than static or even dynamic. Dynamical change is “complex change that results from unknown forces acting

unpredictably to bring about surprising outcomes” (Eoyang and Holladay, 62). Given this description, how are leaders to function? Are there any pragmatic steps to be taken?

Several promising avenues have arisen from multiple research projects. Three in particular are pertinent here: standing in inquiry, spotting patterns, and creating exchanges. To “stand in inquiry” is to seek to be as non-judgmentally descriptive as possible. Eoyang and Holladay put it this way:

- know your “stuff,” but remain open to and actively engaged in learning more
- be comfortable with ambiguity and vulnerability of holding questions
- ask questions more than you give answers
- turn judgment into curiosity
- turn disagreement into mutual exploration
- turn defensiveness into self-reflection (39)

These steps echo similar commitments at the heart of a variety of recent practices for fostering engaging public conversation that is “respectful” “civil” “whole” and so on.^{iv} Drescher’s interview process embodies this kind of stance.

Spotting patterns requires inhabiting this stance while being open to learning from and with a very wide group of knowers -- precisely the advice being offered by those scholars focusing on “dialogical organizational development,” or to use Kegan’s terms, an “everyone culture.” Or to use my own favorite phrase, “the more diverse the knowers, the more robust the knowing.” Patterns often require enough distance – whether in meta-reflective terms, or in geophysical terms – to begin to perceive a pattern in what otherwise might appear to be discontinuous or disconnected.

From Drescher’s work we have evidence of a growing movement of people across the US context at least who embrace diversity as a rich source of engagement and growth. I believe the #BlackLivesMatter movement offers similar evidence, as does the NIOT (Not In Our Town) movement.^v Is there a pattern emerging here? And if so, how might we nourish and encourage it?

Complex adaptive theory suggests that we need to find ways to support “exchanges across containers” as one way of doing so. “Containers” is a word that harkens back to Kegan’s description of “holding environments.”

Three different types of bounding conditions exist in human systems. Each can function as a container for the system's self-organizing. 1) A system may be enclosed by a defining external boundary, like a **fence**. Membership and physical spaces are examples of fence-like containers. 2) Agents in a system may be drawn toward a central attractive person or issue, like a **magnet**. A visionary leader or a motivating goal are examples of magnet-like containers. 3) Agents in a system may be attracted to each other by mutual **affinity**. Gender and cultural identity are examples of such affinity containers. (Eoyang, vii)

A “fence” is similar to the bounded set space I described earlier, which creates identity by defining who is “in” and who is “out.” In complex adaptive theory, this kind of external boundary can be described with various degrees of permeability – some offer health and living breath, others end up killing the organism.

A “central attractive” node, or “magnet,” is analogous to the “centered set” description I offered. Here, too, the dynamic can be healthy, offering a “heart” that keeps the rest of the system or organism alive, or unhealthy, drawing all of the resources into the center and not allowing the organism to grow and change.

The third category which Eoyang identifies here – “mutual affinity” – has resonance with Kegan’s description of “orders of meaning-making.” It is here that I believe religious educators need to be as thoughtful, self-reflective and engaged as possible, because mutual affinity can be a space of growth and support, or a dangerous form of self-enclosure.

Returning to the example I used with Kegan, the RCIA can embody a pedagogical process in which it offers a “central attractive” force, supporting it with a permeable “fence” which can nourish a new kind of “mutual affinity” – think “continuity” from Kegan’s ideas – or it can strive to build sharp walls and mutual affinity that is very narrowly defined. Complex adaptive change theory helps push educators in the former direction by emphasizing the creation of “exchanges” across containers. One example of such a practice within religious education would be to note that there is strong evidence that engaging in multi-faith relationship building can strengthen particular religious identity while at the same time also strengthening respect for other faith traditions (Hess, 2013).

I believe that the pattern made visible in #BlackLivesMatter and the NIOT organizing may be an example of creating “exchanges” across containers in ways that offer *both* contradiction and continuity in Kegan’s terms. “Contradiction” because these exchanges often confront long-held biases (white privilege, for instance, or Christian privilege) but hold out the possibility of entering a larger community by learning to move beyond them, to come to a new “narrative” about one’s identity amidst diversity.^{vi}

Drescher’s work could be engaged as a direct “exchange” across the containers of “institutional religious practice” and “spiritual but not religious” practice. Her book uses categories and descriptions that arise from theories and theologies that occur within institutional religious practice, to make sense of practices outside of those contexts. She is offering an “exchange” that invites those within religious communities to value the practices to be found in, and the people who inhabit, a “none” or “SBNR” space.

But is the exchange mutual? That is, in what ways is Drescher making institutional religious practice accessible to those who define themselves as “spiritual but not religious”? Her book is brand new, so perhaps she has an answer to my question from her research that will appear in later work. For the purposes of this paper I want to lift up one such mechanism for supporting mutual exchange which is not a part of her book.

Gameful learning

I have written elsewhere about the affordances offered by digital storytelling for faith formation (Hess, 2014, 2015). Here I want to explore briefly the specific affordances offered by what Walz and Deterdine label “gameful learning.” Scholars who are studying the pedagogical implications

of games, particularly video games, have begun to identify what Thomas and SeelyBrown (2011) have called a “new culture of learning,” in which several dynamics are shifting. Just as Drescher calls attention to a shift from “believing, belonging and behaving” to “believing and becoming” in the groups she studied, scholars observing the “new culture of learning” describe a distinction between “community” and “collective,” where “In communities people learn in order to belong, but in collectives people participate in order to learn” (Thomas and SeelyBrown, 56). I believe there is clear resonance here.

Whether this is a “new” dynamic, or a return to quite ancient patterns of practice, more and more people are being socialized into forms of learning that are deeply participatory and improvisational. Consider a video game like “World of Warcraft (WoW),” for instance. Played by more than 5 million people all over the world, WoW is a multi-user online role playing game which has demonstrably multi-generational participation, and which invites people to learn it by playing it.^{vii} Like any form of improvisation, that play takes place within a specific set of rules – in this example, within the software code which shapes the environment and governs how people “level up” in various ways – but that set of rules exists to structure the space and the possible actions, without specifying which action must take place at a given time, or within a strict sequence.

I am convinced that gameful forms of learning have much resonance and congruence with the pedagogical ideals that are embedded in the RCIA. This process, which can take at least a year to move through, and often much longer, gathers people in small groups (both inquirers and long time members) for periods of inquiry, of catechesis, and finally of mystagogy. The process is structured, an environment is “shaped” – a deeply liturgical one, marked by specific blessings and practices – but within that shape it is widely receptive to the questions and movements of the people engaged with it. It is at once participatory and improvisational.

Of course, as with any human endeavor – and certainly, any pedagogical frame – human beings can distort the process, and turn it into an instrumental mechanism rather than a communicative practice of the sort envisioned by Scharer and Hilberath (2008). Still, the “play” which marks the first phase of RCIA has the potential, at least, to embody dynamics similar to the “food, faith, friends and Fido” of which Drescher writes. It offers a space and shape for mutual exploration of a kind that Kegan’s research, Eoyang and Holladay’s research, suggest would be fruitful.

To take this idea one step further, McGonigal (2011), a key scholar at the intersection of games and futurist exploration, suggests that people who play a lot of video games are “virtuosos” at urgent optimism, weaving a tight social fabric, optimizing relationships to do hard meaningful work, and building epic meaning. I am convinced that these are dynamics at the heart of Christian meaning-making (cf. Hess, 2015), but how often do we make those claims explicitly in language that is accessible to those outside of our communities? How often do we deliberately emphasize porous boundaries, rather than sharply demarcated ones?

Spaces of “play,” of structured human interaction understood as a “game,” can be particularly helpful as we seek to do this in a world marked by extensive polarization. Schrier, whose exhaustive literature review of “knowledge games” is instructive, notes that more generally, games:

can help people tap into their intrinsic interests and desires... Providing choices in games has been found to increase motivation and perceived control. ... People like to solve problems and overcome challenges in games. ... People want to connect with other people, whether directly or indirectly, and participate in the community or affinity space around or within a game. ... People are curious. ... People want to contribute and help. ... People want to experience a story, narrative and/or emotional experience. (88 and ff)

Her research documents that games both support and situate communal learning, and that “games can encourage argumentation and the consideration of multiple perspectives.” Such game play can “support reflection on its emergent preconceptions, as well as consideration of players’ own identities.” (103)

Over the centuries there have been a few theologians who have considered Christian practice from the standpoint of play, but rather than seeing the serious implications of play, contemporary theologians have been more apt to decry their potential to trivialize religious meaning-making, or to situate it in a negative light. Given the vast growth of the video game industry I fear that theologians may make a mistake in this arena similar to the one made earlier last century when rather than offering a balanced approach to engaging televisual media, theologians rejected most of it out of hand and sought to turn people “off” of that medium, rather than helping them to create in it themselves.

Drescher calls attention in her work to the place of “food,” “family,” “friends, and “Fido” in the meaning-making processes of the people whom she interviewed. I would add “fun” to that list, keeping the alliteration, and noting that games are one way in which we can build “exchanges” across the containers of those “within” religious institutions, and those who define themselves as “outside” of such institutions.

The *Remnants* game is one example.^{viii} An alternate reality game built on a series of live-play scenarios, the focal point of the game is to imagine a world in which religious institutions have disappeared, and to play with what emerges from that absence. What would people miss? What kinds of rituals would need to be invented or perhaps reclaimed? In what ways might artifacts be discovered, remnants of past meaning-making, that could be a catalyst for such imagination? Games such as *Remnants* serve a crucial research purpose as well, supporting the kind of sustained inquiry of which the dialogical organizational consultants write.

I do not have the space here to explore this at length, but my final point has to do with what scholars of games – as well as digital storytelling – are telling us about the potential of these spaces of creative play to support learning across difference that is attentive to systemic power dynamics. I began this paper by noting Drescher’s observation that:

In the new media age, difference is less a distinguishing barrier between groups of individuals than it is an invitation to engage and explore the lives of diverse others. ... new media practices of seeing others, seeing difference, expressing difference, and being in variously distributed relationships with religiously diverse others have an effect on how people regard religious difference in increasingly overlapping zones of private and public life. (61)

She made this observation in the context of her work with people who claim the label “none” or “spiritual but not religious,” but the wider literature of digital games, and the even wider literature of “digital literacies” supports this assertion. Further,

...the new ethic of digital literacies is “cosmopolitan” practice ... [which fosters] reflexive and hospitable dispositions and habits of mind necessary for ethically motivated rhetorical and semiotic decision making in relation to wide, interactive, and potentially global audiences.

... cosmopolitanism is the idea that one can become, indeed should aspire to be, a citizen of the world, able to embrace local ties and commitments, but also to extend well beyond them, engaging a wider human community, even across divides of seemingly irreconcilable differences. (Ávila and Pandya, 64-65)

The literature – as well as my own personal experience – convinces me that approaching religious education in playful ways, using game design and game structures as catalysts for creating exchanges across the “containers” of our meaning-making, can offer profound nourishment and hope for reweaving relationship amongst people both within and outside of religious institutions.

The opportunity – and the goal? – here, however, is not about “making religious education fun,” but rather about building this kind of “cosmopolitan” consciousness, and fostering religious identity that is centered *and* open. It is about paying attention to the “confirmation, contradiction, and continuity” necessary for real transformation. It is about developing the ability to “stand in inquiry” in ways that foster perceiving patterns of engagement that support “exchanges” across the containers of religious identity. In a world as polarized as the US finds itself to be, there is real hope to be found in this kind of religious education.

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ⁱ This lovely and concise description comes from Chapter 10, “Development of Self-Authorship” in the book *Student Development in College, Theory, Research, and Practice* by Nancy J. Evans, Deanna S. Forney, Florence M. Guido, Lori D. Patton and Kristen A. Renn. Published by Jossey-Bass, as found in the Tomorrow’s Professor #1110 (<http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/tomprof/posting.php?ID=1110>). Accessed on 29 August 2016.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} See Public Conversations Project (<http://www.publicconversations.org>), Liberating Structures (<http://www.liberatingstructures.com>), the Art of Hosting (<http://www.artofhosting.org>), the Respectful Conversations project (<http://www.mnchurches.org/respectfulcommunities/respectfulconversations.html>), and so on.

^v “Not in our town” is a multi-faith public organizing effort fighting hate (<https://www.niot.org>).

^{vi} Two recent example of public intellectuals offering “attractional” invitations to larger community narratives would be Serene Jones (<http://time.com/4477582/heal-the-spiritual-pain-of-america/>) in the US and Gord Downie in Canada (<https://www.facebook.com/GordDownie/photos/a.10150194211650508.446699.439350080507/10157713670470508/?type=3&theater>).

^{vii} This number is of subscribers in 2015: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/276601/number-of-world-of-warcraft-subscribers-by-quarter/>

^{viii} More information about *Remnants: A World Without Churches*, is available online: <http://www.storyingfaith.org/remnant>.