“Becoming the Sexpert: How to Teach Sex Ed, According to Young Adult Women Who Were Raised Catholic”

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Young adults naturally find themselves in spaces where they can reflect upon what they were taught as children and, especially as romantic relationships become serious and the possibility of parenting looms near, how they think they might raise their own children. Parenting is both an implicit and explicit teaching role, especially in religious formation and education. In these still-theoretical space, when critical thinking skills are well-developed and the day-to-day realities of parenthood are not yet known, young adults are able to share their idealistic views about how they envision their teaching role for children. In so doing, they also naturally reflect upon their own experiences of education and, often, what they wish had been different.

This essay is part of a larger qualitative project that interviewed fifteen young adult women who were raised Catholic about how they learned about sex and sexuality in the Catholic context of their youth and how they think those educational experiences affect their lives today. Interviews followed a pattern of asking each woman what they had been taught and to share formative stories, and then asked them to evaluate that education. One of the most fruitful questions I asked to get at their insights was “If you had a daughter, how would you want her to learn about sex and sexuality as she grows up?” The data shared in this essay is largely pulled from their responses to that question.

Of the fifteen women interviewed, six no longer identified as Catholic. The remaining nine varied widely in their level of interest in and commitment to Catholic culture and practices. Two of the women interviewed identified as something other than heterosexual—one identified as queer, and the other as queer or bisexual. Twelve participants were white or Caucasian, and of
the three women of color, two were Asian and one was Tejano, also referring to herself as Mexican. Participants came from a variety of urban, suburban, and rural contexts and were all attending college at the time of the interview, a mix of Catholic, Protestant, and unaffiliated schools. As is customary and most appropriate in qualitative projects, I privilege the voices of these participants by letting them speak for themselves, which often mean relaying their responses in their own words.

In this brief essay, I will share representative stories of these women’s best and worst teacher experiences, then present what they had taken away from these experiences to inform their ideal role as a sexuality educator of their own, still theoretical, children.

**Best and Worst Teachers**

"This is so sad and so bizarre, but I vividly remember looking up sex in the dictionary. Because no one was going to tell me, it wasn't something I was going to ask." This quote from Nora, a highly traditional Catholic turned agnostic, sums up the way most of these women felt when it came to their teachers in sex and sexuality—they didn’t know who they were, or didn’t feel safe enough to ask them questions. Of course, these women knew that their parents were supposed to tell them something about the subject, but it was rare that they felt confident enough to ask directly—they sensed the awkwardness and responded accordingly.

Several participants did, however, share stories about non-peer teachers who they felt had done a good job in teaching them about sex and sexuality. Two of those stories are highlighted here.

Rose, a 19-year-old ex-Catholic with progressive Evangelical ties, talked about finding a trustworthy resource in the mother of a friend who wasn’t afraid to admit her own history of
mistakes or stereotypically sinful behavior. Rose went to her for advice after breaking off a long-term relationship and trying out a friends-with-benefits arrangement with someone else:

I call her up, we talk about things, we go out and have coffee and I just give it to her point blank. And she goes, "Okay. I've been there too. Let's talk about what you're feeling." And just didn't look at me different, just looked at me and said, "You know what, I'm not judging you for it." She's like, "Who am I to judge you? It's all the same. As long as you don't feel bad about it, don't feel bad about it…If you feel like your relationship with God is sound, it is." … She's like, "I don't believe in that shaming.

Because I was there…I was Catholic for awhile and honestly, when I had [my son] and when I got raped and all this stuff, they weren't there for me…They looked at me like I was wrong, I was diseased, I was tainted. So I totally get where you're coming from."

And so it was that helping support…it was like, I didn't want a lecture, I just wanted someone to listen to me.

We see here that this conversation involved mutual vulnerability and that this teacher’s ability to listen first while suspending judgment allowed Rose to feel safe enough to ask for honest feedback.

Lily, a 18 year old college student and practicing Catholic, references another non-parent teacher who she regarded as making a positive difference in her and her boyfriend’s relationship. Her high school chaplain, who was a monk she describes as open-minded and personable, sat down with her boyfriend for a conversation that he later related to her.

[My boyfriend] was thinking about everything, just like, we were reaching one of those points in our relationship. And the chaplain kind of gave him his view on sexuality and everything. … He said that he doesn't think that premarital sex is a sin. … But that's not
saying that like all of it, oh, it's okay, let's all do it. He says that it is an expression of love. But if you're just going around hooking up, or like doing porn or whatever, then that's not what it was made for. Because that's just focusing on the physical pleasure aspect of it. But the thing is is that, when you love someone so much, it's not only a physical connection, but like a spiritual and emotional connection, like you're making yourself totally vulnerable to this one person. And that's why he says that, if it were up to him, it would be waiting for marriage. Because your spouse is supposed to be your lifelong partner. So ideally, it would be really nice if they were the only ones to know you that way. But he was just like, "If you really, truly love the person, then it's an expression of that love."

Even secondhand, Lily highlighted this conversation as the best experience she had in sexuality education. In this chaplain, she and her boyfriend found a trusted adult who was considerate of their feelings within the relationship and who avoided pat answers, talking about better and worse options. While Lily and her boyfriend decided to hold off on sex for the foreseeable future because of the risks involved, her experience with this teacher was such that she felt empowered to make that decision with her boyfriend if the question ever arose.

It is interesting to note here that neither of these positive teacher examples came from parents. A majority of participants had difficulty talking to their parents about sex and sexuality, but not many were able to find other adult resources to fill in the information gap. In both of these examples of excellent teachers, participants highlighted how they felt more so than what they were taught—feeling heard, respected, and empowered made them recall these teachers as good teachers.
Sadly, “worst teacher” examples were more prevalent throughout this research. Again, I will share two of the most indicative stories. Valerie was a 20-year-old not-quite-Catholic at the time of our interview—she originally identified herself as Catholic on her demographics form, but explained in her interview that she had no intention of resuming Catholic practices or being involved in a church and would not want to raise her children Catholic. She was the product of a lifelong Catholic education, out of which emerged this story about a sexuality education moment in elementary school:

They wanted us to ask questions, but wouldn't necessarily answer them….Yeah, they would have this kind of open forum like, if you didn't want to ask it out loud you could write it down on a piece of paper kind of thing and hand it in so it was anonymous, but like, some of the questions they wouldn't answer.

When pressed for more details, Valerie admits that what she actually remembers is a teacher pulling a piece of paper from the anonymous question box, opening it, stating that they would not answer the question, and then putting it aside. She remarked in her interview, somewhat surprised by her own insight, that she did not know if it contained an actual question, a rude remark, or some overly personal inquiry that the teacher declined to comment upon—the possibility had not occurred to her before. However, the significant detail about this encounter is that Valerie perceived that her teachers were hiding information from them, failing to be as open and honest as they had claimed they would be. She experienced the situation as one where adults deliberately withheld information that students requested. This suggests a serious lack of trust between herself and the authority figures that were supposed to be providing her with information and guidance.
The second example of bad teaching is somewhat more personal. Jessica was 22 and a practicing Catholic when I spoke with her, also the product of K-12 Catholic school, and she related some of the most poignant stories of any participant. She described her high school self as very inquisitive, especially about religious matters, and said she would often keep asking questions if the original explanation didn’t make sense to her. One such story about her interaction with her high school religion teacher, a newly ordained priest, continued to bother her many years later.

...I would push back to the point where my professor [high school teacher], the priest, wrote me a letter. And in the letter, said that I had the potential to be a saint, but currently I was "maliciously suspicious" towards the church... It has stuck with me. But as a junior, I don't think I was malicious! Or suspicious. I was just very much unsettled with what I was being taught, or like really trying to figure out like why. Like, why does every sexual act have to be unitive and procreative? What is the reasoning behind that?

During Jessica's interview, she was clearly distressed that her high school teacher had so dramatically misunderstood her intentions and did not seem to have entertained the thought that he had called her malicious precisely because he did not know how to answer her questions, or thought she shouldn't be asking them.

From these two examples we see some facets of what makes a “bad” religious educator in the sphere of sexuality. First and foremost is a lack of trust in the relationship, and a lack of reciprocity. In the latter example, whether intended or not, the teacher ended up shaming Jessica by implying that her constant curiosity was in fact evidence that she was a bad Catholic. Both of these are also examples of truncated conversations, where the learner anticipated a chance to gain more and new information and was disappointed by what they received instead. With these
examples in mind, we can turn to the information participants offered about the type of teacher they wanted to be as soon as they got the chance.

When I Have a Daughter

Each participant was asked to reflect on their ideal sexuality education experience not only for themselves, but in a situation where they became the primary educator. “If you had a daughter, how would you want her to go learn about sex and sexuality as she grows up?” Two major themes came up in nearly every interview; the first was the idea of being the first teacher of any daughter they had. Lily expresses this desire, saying:

I would want them to find out from like me and my husband or their father or whatever. Like, I want them to hear it from us first, rather than anywhere else. Instead of like seeing stupid boys do stupid things, just like, “What are you doing?” Like, “That’s how that works?!”

Lily, as one might guess, is referencing the fact that she learned about oral sex from middle school gossip, and not from a trusted resource. Melanie, a more traditional Catholic 21-year-old, echoes a similar sentiment, though her fear is less about grapevine sex ed and more about her daughter feeling prepared for “the talk” at school:

I think I would talk to her about it when she got more of the middle school age, or whenever I knew that they were going to address it soon at school or whatever. I would probably try to talk to her before that so she doesn’t go to school and come home and be like “What is this that you didn’t tell me?”

In these cases and others, the idea of being the first teacher of their daughters was heavily tied to being the most trustworthy resource and the best place their child come to with questions. In so
doing, they also make strong statements about the honest relationship they want to have with their daughters, which is the second major theme of these responses. Rose speaks at length how important this has been in her relationship with her mother, and why she believes it creates the best scaffold for a young person to make smart sexual decisions:

Ideally, I’d like to be the one to talk about it with her, because I want to start that relationship early and have her be comfortable to talk to me about it, just like I am with my mother. I think honestly it’d be more of that open forum. “Hey, what questions do you have? Let’s talk about these things.” ... I think more than anything, I don’t ever want to be that kind of parent that’s like “Hell no, that’s not right.” I want to talk about things. And I’ve always kind of said it to my friends that this is my view in it: If you’re mature enough to come and talk to me and look me in the eye and have that conversation, I’m going to trust you to make the right decision… Number 1 thing I want you to be safe, I want you to talk to me. I want, I don’t want my child to just be out with anyone. I want it to be within the spectrums of a committed relationship, which obviously like, I’ll feel comfortable to talk about my own experiences. Because I think that’s important. I think that’s the foundation of starting that relationship and being like, “Hey, I’ve been there too. I grew up once.”

The mutual vulnerability that Rose espouses in her ideal mother-daughter relationship echoes the type of experience she had with her friend’s mother in her earlier teens.

In Jessica’s response to the same question, we continue to see how highly many participants value the idea of learning conversationally, to the point that they believe it would be the best way to teach an adolescent.
I would try to like open up that dialogue, and say like “You know, if you have questions, talk to me. If ever you feel pressure, you can come talk to me.” And I think I would put less of an emphasis on kind of that black-and-white like “Don’t do this, don’t do this, don’t do this.”

While there are many more examples that could be shared, when comparing these answers to the content of what the participants were taught about sex and sexuality, it is clear that they intend to make a significant break with earlier methods. As Melanie asserts, “I wouldn’t just hand my daughter a book, I think I would sit down and have a conversation and not, try and be as non-awkward as possible so she felt she could actually talk to me.” Even though some participants such as Jessica, Bridget, and Lily claimed that they would not have wanted any more involvement from their own parents in their sexuality education, their responses to this question indicated that they still did not believe their parents’ hands-off methods were ideal—they just could not imagine having a conversation about sexuality with their parents that would have been comfortable and informative. By and large, these women felt ready to change the course of sexuality education in the next generation.

**Sex Ed as Religious Ed**

For all that these women lacked the style of sexuality education that they wanted, they were remarkably clear about how it should have looked. Again and again participants described conversational learning spaces where they would feel safe, unjudged, and could forthrightly mull over their complex ideas and experiences around sex and sexuality. Tess summed up this idea beautifully when talking about her tight-knit group of friends from high school: “[I] talk to [them] about everything. And it's just anything, absolutely anything, they're always there.” Her use of the phrase “they’re always there” implies the longstanding and trusting relationship that
undergirds this learning space. Several used versions of the phrase “open lines of communication” to elucidate what they wanted from friends or parents or what they wanted to offer to future daughters. Rose, as we saw, repeatedly used the phrase “Let’s talk about things” when describing how she wanted to form a trusting relationship with a daughter. Participants knew, almost instinctively, what they needed in order to learn well.

Both feminist and pastoral theology spheres highlight the importance of practicing safe conversational learning, especially for women. Eunjoo Kim, a scholar on preaching, argues that women are often more holistic learners and want to integrate their rational understandings with their present reality, and that such holistic learning, “requires a learning environment in which students feel a sense of trust and security to be vulnerable” (Kim 171). Creating such environments requires practice, something that these participants had little of.

One can and should still be impressed that, when left to their own devices, these women naturally gravitated towards the kind of learning environment that Thomas Groome strongly encourages—one free of strict knowledge control (Groome 168), one where individuals can openly express what they are doing, how they feel about it, how they think their religion informs their practice, and how they might want to change in the future. One also hears echoes of the process that Anne E. Streaty Wimberly recommends in her story-linking process, particularly in the need for attentive listening followed by affirmation of what is shared (Wimberly 127). The strong inclination of participants to attempt something like “shared Christian praxis” when they came into safer spaces acts as affirmation of Groome and Wimberly’s approaches, signifying how these models are just as applicable to questions about sex and sexuality as any other topic of religious education. In short, there is great potential for supporting a new generation of parents in their role as the first teachers of sexuality education when we regard sexuality education as a
form of religious education and try to use the wisdom and practices that we know have real potential for life-giving religious formation.
Works Cited

