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**How apprenticeship learning in everyday life is challenged by current developments in youth ministry**

**Abstract**

In 2012 I proposed in the *International Journal of Practical Theology* the apprenticeship model as a promising catechetical model for church communities. My observation, however, is that the promising character of the apprenticeship model is challenged by a fragmented application of the original meaning of the model and by current developments in youth ministry practices. Main question in the paper is: how can the original meaning of the apprenticeship model be presented in a clearer way and how can we understand how the very heart of its meaning is challenged by current developments in youth ministry practices? The paper concludes that in its application, the apprenticeship model should focus on the formational power of faith practices in faith communities and the particular role of the material dimension in these communities of practice. This very heart of the meaning of the apprenticeship model is challenged by an accent in youth ministry practices on the individual relationship between youth minister and youngster and the accent on finding individual forms of religious sense in life in favour of the ideal to acculturate a new generation in faith communities.

**Word count:** 3.000 (excluding References in Footnotes and Bibliography)

## 1. Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to two core questions in the 2016 REA Annual Meeting: what is the professional role of the youth minister in the faith community and how does he/she relate to normative conceptions of religious education in the church context? This paper is doing so by discussing the apprenticeship model of catechetical learning environments, a model that is aiming at the religious identity development of young people participating together with the catechist in the shared world of congregational life.

In 2012 I proposed in the *International Journal of Practical Theology* the apprenticeship model as a promising catechetical model for church communities.<sup>1</sup> Two years later, I placed the apprenticeship model next to and compared it with other models in a typology of catechetical learning environments.<sup>2</sup> The model is presented as promising because “... one might argue that the main features of the apprenticeship model (a) meet important challenges of today’s youth culture in relation to the identity formation task of the church and because this model (b) aids the church in its aim to *be a community*.”<sup>3</sup> When it comes to (a), young people seems to be helped with inspiring exemplary believers: in this regard, the apprenticeship model focuses on the important role of the person of the catechist. When it comes to (b), the inspiring exemplary catechist is at the same time a representative of the wider church community and functions as a gateway to participation to that church community.

My observation, however, is that the promising character of the apprenticeship model is challenged for different reasons. In the first place, because the model seems to be used in recent academic and professional reflections primarily focusing on the relationship between catechist and catechumen, instead of the whole praxis, environment or community in which catechist and catechumens are participating. In the second place, current developments in youth ministry practices are challenging the heart of the apprenticeship model of catechetical learning environments, namely the full participation in (practices of) a faith community.

The problem statement for this article is as follows. How can the original meaning of the apprenticeship model be presented in a clearer way and how can we understand how the very heart of its meaning is challenged by current developments in youth ministry practices?

Core concept in my argument is the apprenticeship *model* of catechetical learning environments. The word ‘model’ can be used at least in four ways. In the first place, it can be used as a way to *describe* learning environments in which (religious) learning processes occur. It can be used as a way of *interpretation* of the environments in which (religious) learning is at stake. In this meaning, a model is a try to *heuristically search for explanations and meanings* in how things are going on in learning environments. A third way to use ‘model’ is in a normative sense. In this understanding of the word, a model *prescribes from a particular normative position* how learning environments should ideally be arranged with the aim to actualize religious learning processes. Fourth, ‘model’ can be used as an *instruction, a practical recommendation* for how to arrange learning environments for the enhancement of religious learning. In this paper, I aim at presenting the apprenticeship model in the sense of the second meaning: a try to interpret, to heuristically search for explanations and meanings in how things are going on in apprenticeship learning environments.

## 2. Apprenticeship and apprenticeship learning

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<sup>1</sup> De Kock, A. (2012). Promising approaches to catechesis in church communities: towards a research framework. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 16(2), 176-196.

<sup>2</sup> De Kock, A. (2014a). A typology of catechetical learning environments. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 18(2), 264-286.

<sup>3</sup> De Kock, A. (2012a). Promising approaches to catechesis in church communities: towards a research framework. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 16(2), pp. 188-189.

Apprenticeship, in the first place is a system in which people get trained into a profession by participating in the actual practice of the job, “on the shop floor”, learning from observing and imitating more experienced workers. Facilitating apprenticeship learning is, like in the medieval guild system, facilitating a development from apprentice (novice) through journeyman to master (expert). The participation of the learner into a practice is not only developing himself but also developing the practice itself. Learning processes in an apprenticeship are thus dynamic, in the sense it is not only changing the learner but also the practice or community in which the learner is developing himself.

Apprenticeship learning is based on the idea that learning is a constructive, situated and social activity, a vision that is also reflected in the work of John Dewey and his colleague George Herbert Mead.<sup>4</sup> Besides a vision on learning, apprenticeship learning also includes a particular vision on role division between teacher and learner. Farnham-Diggory (1994) for example distinguishes an apprenticeship paradigm of this role division reflecting a social system in which the learner must participate in the expert’s world to learn, through acculturation.<sup>5</sup> This apprenticeship paradigm reflects the situated learning theory of Lave and Wenger (1991), who assume that “the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community”<sup>6</sup> and more in general social theories of learning like Wenger’s (1998) theory on communities of practice in which learning is conceived as a form of social participation.”<sup>7</sup>

The very idea of apprenticeship and apprenticeship learning has also been widely applied in education and formation contexts that are not directly preparing for professional practices, among which are also religious or faith practices. This is the reason why models like the apprenticeship model of catechetical learning environments have entered the discourse in religious education. In such a model the church community is conceived, in terms of Lave and Wenger (1991) as a community of practice. Mercer (2005) describes the church as a community of practice in the following way:

“By community I mean a group defined by a particular experience of social relations (expressed in the New Testament Greek term *koinonia*) gathered in relation to a peculiar set of practices, activities, and ways of making meaning that persons share and engage in over time and that produce identity both corporate and individual. (...) Congregations constitute communities of practice as groups whose membership is defined by participation in the activities, discourse, and ways of meaning-making shaped in relation to Jesus and his proclamation of the kin-dom of God.”<sup>8</sup>

### 3. The original apprenticeship model of catechetical learning environments

How can the apprenticeship model of catechetical learning environments be described? In his description of the apprenticeship model of catechetical learning environments in an international publication in 2014, De Kock concentrates in particular on the aspect of role

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<sup>4</sup> De Kock, A., Slegers, P., Voeten, M.J.M. (2004). New learning and the classification of learning environments in secondary education. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(2), 141-170.

<sup>5</sup> Farnham-Diggory, S. (1994). Paradigms of knowledge and instruction. *Review of Educational Research*, 64(3), 463–477. See also De Kock, A. (2012a). Promising approaches to catechesis in church communities: towards a research framework. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 16(2), 176-196.

<sup>6</sup> Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Wenger (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; see De Kock, A., Slegers, P., Voeten, M.J.M. (2004). New learning and the classification of learning environments in secondary education. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(2), 141-170.

<sup>8</sup> Mercer, J.A. (2005). *Welcoming children. A practical theology of childhood*. St. Louis (Missouri): Chalice Press, pp. 171-172.

division between catechist and catechumen.<sup>9</sup> De Kock differentiates between role divisions according to a behavioural, developmental and apprenticeship model. This division harks back to a division between three teacher-learner roles as introduced in a classification scheme of learning environments in secondary education originally presented by De Kock et al.<sup>10</sup> Whereas a behavioural model reflects a high status expert role for the teacher and a low status novice role for the learner and a developmental model reflects a supporting, coaching role for the teacher and a self-directing role for the learner, a role division according to an apprenticeship model entails: "... that the catechist and catechumen participate in a shared world, the faith community. The catechist has considerable expertise within this world and tries to model his expertise. The catechumen learns by participating in this world and imitating the activities of the catechist."<sup>11</sup>

In his earlier publication in 2012, however, De Kock presents the apprenticeship model of catechetical learning environments not primarily as a role division between catechist and catechumen but primarily broader, as an 'instructional paradigm'. Catechetical learning environments following an apprenticeship model show "... an apprenticeship paradigm reflecting a social system in which the learner must clearly participate in the expert's world to learn (through acculturation)".<sup>12</sup>

The difference between the accent in the 2014 publication and the accent in the 2012 publication is on first sight not very large but close reading reveals that there is an important difference. Whereas the 2014 publication explains the apprenticeship model of catechetical learning environments foremost in terms of (1) role division between catechist and catechumen and (2) processes of modeling and imitating, the original explanation of the apprenticeship model in the 2012 publication is explained in terms of (1) a paradigm that guides all aspects of the learning environment and (2) processes of participation and acculturation. This original explanation is in sound with what Mercer sees as learning in the church as a community of practice:

"Learning, especially learning in relation to religious faith, fundamentally involves the construction of an identity, a process that is social in nature and takes place through participation in a community of practice in which the identities of persons take shape through sustained participation in that community of practice."<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. How the apprenticeship model of catechetical learning environments is actually used and why the original meaning of the model should be brought to the foreground again**

The very idea of an apprenticeship model of catechetical learning environments has been used during the past years in several publications, both academic and more professional and in consultancy practices. The model is used as a way to *describe* learning environments in which (religious) learning processes occur. This actually happens in discussions, meetings with professionals in the field of religious education, youth ministry or in particular catechesis practices: the model then is often used to try to direct our observations. The description

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<sup>9</sup> De Kock, A. (2014a). A typology of catechetical learning environments. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 18(2), 264-286.

<sup>10</sup> De Kock, A., Slegers, P., Voeten, M.J.M. (2004). New learning and the classification of learning environments in secondary education. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(2), 141-170.

<sup>11</sup> De Kock, A. (2014a). A typology of catechetical learning environments. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 18(2), p. 277.

<sup>12</sup> De Kock, A. (2012a). Promising approaches to catechesis in church communities: towards a research framework. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 16(2), p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> Mercer, J.A. (2005). *Welcoming children. A practical theology of childhood*. St. Louis (Missouri): Chalice Press, p. 193.

function of the model can also be at stake in empirical research, for example in the PhD research project of Meerveld.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the model is also used as a way of *interpretation* of the environments in which (religious) learning is at stake. The apprenticeship model as a try to *heuristically search for explanations and meanings* in how things are going on in learning environments is primarily at stake in the different journal articles I already hit but also in other research projects we conduct in our Research Center for Youth, Church and Culture (OJKC).<sup>15</sup> How learning and learning environments are conceptualized in a variety of OJKC research projects is reviewed in De Kock (2015c).<sup>16</sup>

Next, the apprenticeship model is also used in a *prescribing* way: it then prescribes from a particular normative position how learning environments should ideally be arranged with the aim to actualize religious learning processes. This is done for example in De Kock (2012b).<sup>17</sup> And lastly, the model is also used as an instruction, a practical recommendations for how to arrange learning environments for the enhancement of religious learning. This is done for example in the Dutch handbook on catechesis practices “Altijd Leerling”.<sup>18</sup>

What I observe in all these different reflections on apprenticeship learning is foremost a particular concentration on the role division between catechist and catechumen and the corresponding processes of modeling and imitating. The original explanation of the apprenticeship model in terms of a paradigm that guides *all* aspects of the learning environment and corresponding processes of participation and acculturation has, however, a minor position in these reflections. Most of the times the very idea of apprenticeship learning is applied in a narrow sense, focusing on the worth of personal interactions between older and younger generations, rather in a broad sense, focusing on living and acting in shared faith practices.

Three recent “reactions” to the apprenticeship model as originally presented<sup>19</sup> underline the need to bring the original meaning of the model to the foreground again.

First, Holmqvist (2014) argued that in the reflection on enhancing religious learning more emphasis should be laid on the role of material objects or tools and materiality.<sup>20</sup> Holmqvist analyses: “In his concept of the ‘learning environment’, De Kock understands environment in terms of the surroundings in which action is taking place, and learning as an individual activity occurring between the catechist and the catechumen”.<sup>21</sup> In 2012, Dutch scholar Meijer plead for taking the material aspect of religion serious, preventing ourselves as researchers to only focus on (abstract) belief systems.<sup>22</sup> The original meaning of the

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<sup>14</sup> Meerveld (20XX). The learning results of catechesis practices. *Dissertation in progress*.

<sup>15</sup> See [www.ojkc.nl/en](http://www.ojkc.nl/en)

<sup>16</sup> De Kock, A. (2015c). What about *learning* in practical theological studies? Toward more conceptual clarity. *SAGE Open*, 5(2), DOI: 10.1177/2158244015592682

<sup>17</sup> De Kock, A. (2012b). Een veelbelovende benadering. Catechese volgens het meester-gezel-leerlingmodel. *Handelingen*, 39(2), 21-31.

<sup>18</sup> De Kock, A., & Verboom, W. (e.a.) (2011). *Altijd leerling. Basisboek catechese*. Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum.

<sup>19</sup> In De Kock, A. (2012a). Promising approaches to catechesis in church communities: towards a research framework. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 16(2), 176-196; and De Kock, A. (2014a). A typology of catechetical learning environments. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 18(2), 264-286.

<sup>20</sup> Holmqvist, M. (2014). Learning Religion in Confirmation: Mediating the Material Logics of Religion. An ethnographic case study of religious learning in confirmation within the Church of Norway. *Dissertation MF Norwegian School of Theology*; see also Kaufman, T.S. & Sandsmark, A. (2015). Spaces of Possibilities. The Role of Artifacts in Religious Learning Processes for Vulnerable Youth. *Journal of Youth and Theology* 14(2), 138-154.

<sup>21</sup> Holmqvist, M. (2014). Learning Religion in Confirmation: Mediating the Material Logics of Religion. An ethnographic case study of religious learning in confirmation within the Church of Norway. *Dissertation MF Norwegian School of Theology*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Meijer, B. (2012). *Mediation and the genesis of presence towards a material approach to religion*. Inaugural lecture, 19 oktober 2012, Utrecht University, The Netherlands.

apprenticeship model has indeed the potential to focus not only on belief systems and personal interactions of participants in which belief is at stake, but also on faith practices in faith communities and the particular role of the material dimension in these communities of practice.

Second, Meerveld (20XX)<sup>23</sup> problematizes that De Kock (2014) couple the apprenticeship learning model directly with one of three definitions of catechesis as distinguished by Westerhoff (1987):<sup>24</sup> Westerhoff distinguishes three ways of defining catechesis: (1) as Christian instruction, (2) as Christian formation, and (3) as Christian education. According to De Kock (2014) an apprenticeship model of role division reflects catechesis as formation, meaning in the words of Westerhoff “experience Christian faith and life”. But Meerveld (20XX) argues that you should not take apart formation from the other two functions of catechesis: instruction (to acquire knowledge and skills considered necessary and usefull to Christian life), and education (to reflect on experience in the light of Christian faith and life). According to Meerveld (20XX) the unique character of religious learning in faith communities is the innerconnectedness of instruction, education and formation. From this observation of Meerveld we can learn that indeed the original meaning of the apprenticeship model indeed is hinting on this interrelatedness.

Third, De Kock (2014b) empirically underlines the argument of Meerveld (20XX).<sup>25</sup> In his interview study among catechists in Dutch protestant churches, he concludes that “... the respondents’ conceptions of role divisions of catechist and catechumens only partly reflect the different categories found in the typology, i.e. role division following (a) a behavioural model, (b) a developmental model, and (c) an apprenticeship model. At the same time, configurations of catechist and catechumen roles were found that cannot be easily captured by this differentiation in the typology.”<sup>26</sup> The same type of conclusion is formulated when it comes to learning goals catechists strive for.

## **5. Developments in youth ministry challenging the original meaning of the apprenticeship model**

Not only a ‘narrow’ use of the apprenticeship model in academic and professional reflections, also current developments in youth ministry practices, initiated either by congregations or parar-church organisations, are challenging the original explanation of the apprenticeship model in terms of a paradigm that guides *all* aspects of the learning environment and corresponding processes of participation and acculturation.

A first development is an increasing emphasis on liquid communities instead of static/fixed faith communities.<sup>27</sup> A young generation that is religiously interested feels oftenly not helped with a traditional form of religious community like the local church congregations or the Christian school but is helped with light, temporal and flexible (online of streetlevel) communities. Church leaders and youth ministry leaders alike are embracing this development and seek to be relevantly present in these liquid communities. This results in a pedagogical focus on the ‘inspirational modelling figure’ of the youth minister which is modelling the good Christian life in the hope it will be observed and imitated in a way by young people. Participation in church practices and acculturation in an existing (traditional of not) faith community is not at the foreground of the pedagogical task.

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<sup>23</sup> Meerveld (20XX). The learning results of catechesis practices. *Dissertation in progress*.

<sup>24</sup> Westerhoff, J. (1987). Formation, education, instruction. *Religious education*, 82(4), 578–591.

<sup>25</sup> De Kock, A. (2014b). Catechists’ conceptions of their catechetical learning environments. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 2014, 14(1), 3–21.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> See De Kock, A. (2015b). Schools and religious communities’ contributions to the religious formation of Christian youth. *International Journal of Christianity and Education*, 19, 121–134.

A second development I observe is an increasing emphasis on the role of parents in youth ministry practices.<sup>28</sup> After a period of professionalization of youth ministry practices, including the appointment of paid professional youth ministers in church congregations, nowadays the role of the own parents of young people in the faith formation endeavour is accentuated again. An important reason for this is the too fragmented situation that can be observed in many faith communities in which church education is completely isolated from the faith formation at home, and in the case there is any faith formation at home. Current generation of young parents are, partly as a result of the first development towards liquid communities, however loosely coupled with local church congregational life and much more focussed on guiding their children towards an individual religious stance in life: a focus which is to a certain extent in contrast with a focus on acculturation in a community of practice of the faith community.

A third development is an increasing emphasis on missionary practices in church's youth ministry.<sup>29</sup> The point here is that the ideal in these practices is often much more about the *sharing of the story* of the Gospel than about the (full) *participation in the faith community* that conserves and lives the story. Then, youth ministers become a type of modellers who show how you can uphold certain religious beliefs and how you can understand the Gospel, much more than modellers of how can be participated in faith communities.

These current developments in youth ministry challenges the original meaning of the apprenticeship model and, thus, underline in its own way the need to bring the original meaning of the model to the foreground again.

## 6. Conclusion

The problem statement for this article was as follows. How can the original meaning of the apprenticeship model be presented in a clearer way and how can we understand how the very heart of its meaning is challenged by current developments in youth ministry practices? The apprenticeship model of (catechetical) learning environments in faith communities is about a social system in which the learner must clearly participate in the expert's world to learn, to construct an identity, through acculturation.<sup>30</sup> To present and to reflect on this original meaning of the model in a clearer way the model should be used as a paradigm that guides *all* aspects of the learning environment (and not solely the interaction between catechist and catechumen) and corresponding processes of participation and acculturation (and not solely the processes of modeling and imitating). This means a pedagogical and theological focus on the formational power of faith practices in faith communities and the particular role of the material dimension in these communities of practice. Furthermore, this means a pedagogical and theological focus on the interconnectedness of both instruction, education and formation in faith learning processes. This very heart of the meaning of the apprenticeship model is challenged by current developments in youth ministry with an accent on the individual relationship between youth minister and youngster and the accent on finding individual forms of religious sense in life in favour of the ideal to acculturate a new generation in faith communities.

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<sup>28</sup> See De Kock, A., Elhorst, W., & Barnard, M. (2015). The comeback of parents in catechesis practices. *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 14(2), 155-171.

<sup>29</sup> See De Kock, A. (2015a). Being a church through religious learning at the street level. *Ecclesial Practices*, 2, 217-234.

<sup>30</sup> De Kock, A. (2012a). Promising approaches to catechesis in church communities: towards a research framework. *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 16(2), 176-196; Mercer, J.A. (2005). *Welcoming children. A practical theology of childhood*. St. Louis (Missouri): Chalice Press.

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