Learning Compassion Through Practices of Encounter in L’Arche

Abstract

This essay highlights how the relational practices of compassionate care and the welcoming of vulnerability, learned by newcomers to l’Arche communities through encounter with long-term members of the communities, especially those with developmental disabilities, can deepen identities of compassion in the non-disabled caregiver assistants. The example of l’Arche, articulated by Vanier, Reimer, and others, is viewed in a more robust and extrapolative manner via overlay of the conceptual frameworks of Situated Learning and Communities of Practice as articulated by Lave and Wenger.
Introduction

Encounter across (initially) perceived difference is the very way of life in the communities of l’Arche. In the 149 l’Arche communities worldwide, people with and without disabilities come together to share their lives in family-like homes and relationships. Caregiver assistants may come to l’Arche, in the estimation of Jean Vanier, the founder of l’Arche, “because they want to serve the poor,” but they stay on and remain in relationships with the core members of the community, those with physical and intellectual disabilities, only “once they have discovered that they themselves are the poor.”\(^1\) It is this dynamic, prompted and animated by profound encounter within the dailiness of shared life across differing physical or intellectual capacities, that forms an important element of the mission of l’Arche, to “make known the gifts of people who have intellectual disabilities, revealed through mutually transforming relationships.”\(^2\) These mutually transforming relationships of l’Arche are marked by a sense of encounter that is more than “just a question of performing good deeds for those who are excluded,” and becomes about “being open and vulnerable to them in order to receive the life that they can offer; it is to become their friends.”\(^3\)

Encounter, when viewed this way, is the opening of a door to these transformational relationships whereby the caregiver assistants learn from the core members the key lesson of l’Arche: the recognition of disability not as something to be avoided, but rather as something fundamentally inherent to the self.”\(^4\) Disability, and the interdependency that develops within the relationships of l’Arche, become construed anew by the caregiver assistants as “ontological characteristics of our lives.”\(^5\)

Recent scholarship (much of it carried out by Warren S. Brown and Kevin Reimer) emphasizing the development of compassion and virtue in l’Arche caregiver assistants shines a light on the fact that the encounters between those with and without disabilities can have a profound impact on the lives of all involved in those encounters.\(^6\) As initial encounters in l’Arche develop into authentic relationships, wherein the gifts of the core members with disabilities impact their non-disabled caregiver assistants over extended time, a marked increase in compassionate traits can be traced from the novice to the expert caregiver assistants.\(^7\) And, while Brown and Reimer confined their study to the caregiver assistants, it is clear in their work, and will be highlighted below, that compassion is learned in l’Arche from relationships with the

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\(^6\) Both qualitative and quantitative research projects in recent years have addressed the impact of l’Arche on the lives of the caregiver assistants. They form a backdrop to this essay and include the following which have not been explicitly cited elsewhere in this essay:


\(^7\) Kevin Reimer, “Unexpected Communion: Purpose, Vocation, and Developmental Disability,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 65, no. 3 (September 2013): 200-201.
core members with disabilities, who are esteemed within l’Arche as exemplars of compassion and virtue.

This essay attempts to help articulate this transformative potential of encounter by discussing the deepening development of compassionate identity in the long-term caregiver assistants in l’Arche through the organizing framework of situated learning as articulated by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave. Within that framework, the particular characterization of identity as formed in and through practices and context provides a concept to view and amplify the process of transformation that Vanier, Reimer, Brown, and others have traced in the relational practices and context of l’Arche in recent years. As Wenger and Lave write, “learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice,” and so this essay hopes to describe the deepening compassionate identity learned through the social practices of l’Arche as an example with broader implication for religious educators concerned with identity development through encounter.\(^8\)

**Learning the Craft of Compassion in L’Arche**

The communities of l’Arche form a worldwide network where people with and without disabilities come together to share their lives in family-like relationships. At present, there are 149 l’Arche communities scattered across 37 different countries (International Federation of L’Arche Communities). L’Arche was founded in 1964 when Vanier invited Raphael Simi and Philippe Seux, who had been living in an institution for men with developmental disabilities, to leave that institution and move with him to a small home in the village of Trosly-Breuil, on the edge of the Compiegne Forest in France. Vanier’s invitation was a response to what he had seen as unjust and dehumanizing conditions in the institutions he had begun visiting in France. He describes the place where Simi and Seux had been living: “huge concrete walls surrounded the buildings made of cement block; eighty men lived in dormitories with no work. All day long they just walked around in circles. From 2 to 4pm there was a compulsory siesta, then time for a walk all together. There I was struck by the screams and the atmosphere of sadness.”\(^9\)

While not necessarily attempting to begin the worldwide movement that l’Arche has become, Vanier simply wanted to offer an alternative to those institutional conditions. While such institutions are largely a thing of the past (thanks in no small part to the witness of Vanier, Simi, and Seux), the lives of people with developmental disabilities are marked to this day by a number of negative societal responses, including congregation and segregation from the general public amongst the most common, as described by pioneering disabilities rights advocate Wolf Wolfensberger.\(^10\)

Within l’Arche today, the caregiver assistants live and work alongside the core members of the community, who have a range of physical and intellectual disabilities. Perhaps what most distinguishes l’Arche from other organizations providing care is the emphasis on developing authentic relationships and friendships across perceived physical and intellectual difference, as well as a marked reversal of the typical care-provider/care-receiver paradigm. Within the communities of l’Arche, compassion and lessons of relationship and the heart are learned by the non-disabled assistants from the exemplars of the core members with disabilities. As Vanier stated in his acceptance of the 2015 Templeton Prize, people with disabilities are “able to help

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many so-called ‘normal’ people imprisoned by our cultures orientated towards power, winning, and individual success, to discover what it means to be human.”

As Brown and Reimer found in their study of l’Arche, “genuine compassion emerges in long-term caregivers through significant personal transformation which comes about in sustained contact with, and care for, core members.” This portion of the essay aims to articulate some of the features of this transformation, which will also be construed as an instance of situated learning below.

It is Vanier’s sense of discovering what it means to be human that invites an examination of the importance of encounter between people with and without disabilities in l’Arche. The practices of l’Arche are mundane and bodily, “rooted in simple, material things: cooking meals, spending time together at table, washing the dishes, doing the laundry and housework […] looking after the needs of the weaker people: giving them baths, cutting their nails, helping them buy clothes.” These gestures, however simple, are the very heart of encounter in l’Arche, for when they are carried out with love, they become gestures wherein “the communion of hearts can grow.” It is in these practices and gestures of love that the caregiver assistants can begin to truly learn from the core members of community about being human in ever increasingly interpersonal or even interdependent ways. As the communion of hearts grows in these practices of l’Arche, a “kind of Christian habitus” forms which works to provide a “counter cultural matrix of meaning as well as bodily forming its members in its philosophic anthropology through its shared life together.” One could say that the highly relational anthropology of l’Arche can only be accessed via the gateway of encounter.

As these gestures and practices of l’Arche provide a space for the core members to enact their gifts of relationship and compassion, those gifts begin to be learned and internalized by the caregiver assistants walking alongside them. In Brown and Reimer’s study, they named a sense of embodied cognition, involving deeply formed, habituated behaviors” of compassion and care. Further, Brown and Reimer conclude that this deeply embodied compassion and care is primarily “framed by social cues associated with bodies in situ,” whereby the core members can influence the caregiver assistants, and it only “emerges in long-term caregivers through significant personal transformation which comes about in sustained contact with, and care for, core members.” This echoes Jason Reimer Greig’s notion, named above, of a Christian habitus at work on the caregiver assistants of l’Arche and makes a strong case for situated learning as a helpful conceptual framework for understanding the transformation that can occur in the caregiver assistants in l’Arche.

Situatedness is a key element of Brown and Reimer’s sense of embodied cognition as it forms compassionate identities in l’Arche caregiver assistants. Brown and Reimer note that the long-term development of compassionate character “would suggest that virtue exists as a form of interaction tendency with respect to specific sorts of situations […] a form of action regularly

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14 Ibid, 57.
taken in certain social, interpersonal contexts, often without conscious deliberation.”18 Within the specific context of l’Arche, the core members “serve as models and exemplars in the community,” from whom the caregiver assistants learn “openness and the craft of compassion [and] an interpersonal posture lacking competition and exclusion.”19 This learning occurs in navigating together the shared practices of relationship and “communion of hearts” as outlined by Vanier above. The paradigm-shifting recognition of disability as a fundamental aspect of humanity, to be embraced and not avoided, only arises in the long-term caregiver assistants as they “remain in the position of daily exposure to human weakness and vulnerability.”20 The caregiver assistants need to remain in the practices long enough to begin to truly grasp and embody these crucial lessons from the core members, for “it is then, as we grow gradually into the acceptance of our wounds and fragility, that we grow into wholeness.”21

**Situated Learning Within L’Arche**

Lave and Wenger’s *situated learning* concept provides a helpful means to build upon and amplify the research into the development of compassion in l’Arche done by Brown, Reimer, and others. Central to Brown and Reimer’s sense of embodied cognition is an assertion that “our cognitive processes are, at their core, sensorimotor, situated, and action-relevant.”22 Lave and Wenger offer a framework within which to lift up and view this situated element as they posit that learning is “an aspect of social practice [and] implies not only a relation to specific activities, but a relation to social communities.”23 For Lave and Wenger, these social communities are articulated as *Communities of Practice (CoP)*, and one could find ample evidence that l’Arche is indeed a constellation of these communities of practice. This essay, while borrowing from the construct of CoP, and highlighting points of resonance between CoP and l’Arche, primarily focuses below on the unique situational aspects of learning and practicing compassion within l’Arche, and does not provide a full treatment of CoP.

In their review of ethnographic studies of apprenticeship across several cultural and historical settings, Lave and Wenger find “the indivisible character of learning and work practices.”24 As learning and practice cannot be separated from one another, neither can learning and practice be separated from context. Rather than setting learning and practice into a typical teacher-learner paradigm, situated learning emphasizes the “historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do.”25 With Lave and Wenger’s sense of situated learning as an inseparable bond of learning/practice/context in mind, the potential inherent in the practices of relationship fully embedded with the specific lived-in context of l’Arche becomes more evident. Situated learning is the primary way that caregiver assistants learn from the core members with disabilities both the contours of the craft of compassion and how to be a person whose identity is marked by that compassion and the welcome of vulnerability, as noted in the research cited above.

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18 Ibid, 836.
20 Ibid, 390.
24 Ibid, 61.
As new caregiver assistants enter l’Arche, they begin to practice from a peripheral position within the community. According to Lave and Wenger, “rather than learning by replicating the performances of others or by acquiring knowledge transmitted in instruction […] learning occurs through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community.” Thus, new members of the community must be granted access to legitimate peripheral participation to begin on their learning trajectory towards the central practices of a community, which are already more fully embodied by the old-timers of the community. Reflecting on the practices of apprenticeship they studied, Lave and Wenger found that identity development is a crucial aspect of this process of moving from peripherality to full participation in the practices of a given context. They write, “moving toward full participation in practice involves not just a greater commitment of time, intensified effort, more and broader responsibilities with the community, and more difficult and risky tasks, but, more significantly, an increasing sense of identity as a master practitioner.” In l’Arche, transformed identities result from moving along the trajectory from being a newcomer to the practices of compassion to becoming an old-timer in the craft; learning how be become a person of greater compassion from both practice and other old-timers.

Identity Development Through the Practices of L’Arche

Part of practice, and thus learning, for Lave and Wenger is how people “negotiate the ways of being a person” within their particular context and set of practices. Within l’Arche, being a person means profoundly practicing compassion and welcome of vulnerability. The anthropology of l’Arche is one that recognizes that “weakness and vulnerability in a person, far from being an obstacle to union with god, can foster it.” Such an anthropological conviction becomes even more robust alongside the Identity Statement of l’Arche that “we celebrate the unique value of every person and recognize our need of one another.” Taken together, these statements point to the fact that being a person in the eyes of l’Arche is about interdependence and welcoming weakness and vulnerability in one another and within ourselves. This anthropology is extended in an equalizing manner across any potential barrier between the caregiver assistant and the core members with disabilities. This welcome of vulnerability is more than a thought exercise or language deployed to describe the situation, and it is not just a new self-image that is developed within l’Arche, but it is rather a much deeper sense that “who we are lies in the way we live day to day.”

Thinking again of Brown and Reimer’s sense of embodied cognition at play in the development of compassionate identities in l’Arche caregiver assistants, we can begin to see how this embodied cognition occurs within the relational context of l’Arche. Brown and Reimer turn away from abstract ideas as being primarily formative of identity and conclude that “formation

26 Lave and Wenger, Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation, 100.
27 Ibid, 29. Again, this essay does not provide a full explanation of the concept of CoP. Terminology such as legitimate peripheral participation and old-timers receive full treatment in Lave and Wenger, 1991 and Wenger, 1998.
28 Ibid, 111.
29 Wenger, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity, 149.
32 Wenger, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity, 151.
occurs in relations to action and feedback [...] in the domain of action schemas and habits.”

An action schema central to situated learning is found in Wenger’s framework of CoP, wherein members must navigate the dimensions of mutual engagement, the joint enterprise, and the shared repertoire of any given CoP. It is competence within these three dimensions that mark the identities of old-timers versus newcomers. The practices of a specific community of practice occurs not in an abstract sense, but rather exist “because people are engaged in actions whose meaning they negotiate with one another.”

Thinking here of the daily practices of compassion in l’Arche, identity development of individuals within l’Arche is rooted in building competence in the practices of Wenger’s three dimensions—embodying them.

Identity development occurs as mutuality of engagement draws one into “certain ways of engaging in action with other people” and can define individuality against the backdrop of the community of practice. In l’Arche, then, the deepening development of relationships between core members and caregiver assistants that marks the very heart of the community’s shared practices, can set newcomers onto the trajectory towards acting with ever greater compassion. As new caregiver assistants begin to set themselves into this backdrop of mutual engagement in the community, they learn to embody the ways of compassionate care with the core members and one another in a milieu marked by such practices of mutual care.

The joint enterprise that provides coherence and purpose to a community is another powerful agent in identity formation. Again, practice and context cohere around a particular joint enterprise that is “defined by the participants in the very process of pursuing it,” and is more than simply stating goals, but “creates among participants relations of mutual accountability.” Accountability to the joint enterprise of a CoP also brings with it a shifting of perspective and an identity that “manifests as a tendency to come up with certain choices, to value certain experiences—all by virtue of participating in certain enterprises.”

Embodying the practices of the joint enterprise can lead to developing identity along the same lines as a Brown and Reimer’s interaction tendency or Grieg’s Christian habitus, both noted above. Compassionate choices and values are learned by the caregiver assistants from the core members and embodied over time.

The relationships of mutual engagement and the essential practices of a community’s joint enterprise occur alongside the shared repertoire of a community of practice. This repertoire “includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions, or concepts” that have been developed in common within the community. Identity development occurs as “a personal set of events, references, memories, and experiences that create individual relations of negotiability with respect to the repertoire of a practice” arise. Within l’Arche, the repertoire of compassionate practices has room for improvisation and personalization, and yet is always forming caregiver assistants within the matrix of their deepening relationships with core members. The shared repertoire of l’Arche is relationship itself.

Learning through mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire is developing competency beyond “just acquiring skills and information; it is becoming a certain

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34 Wenger, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity, 73.
36 Ibid, 77-78.
37 Ibid, 153.
38 Ibid, 83.
New caregiver assistants have the real possibility of becoming a person modeled after and mentored by the core members, the compassionate old-timers of l’Arche. In a real way, they can become the poor, welcoming their own weakness and vulnerability in the manner Vanier suggests when he states that caregiver assistants will only stay in l’Arche “once they have discovered that they themselves are the poor.”

**Implications Beyond L’Arche**

With encounter holding such transformative potential as outlined above, as religious educators, it would serve our goals well to consider how best to structure platforms for encounter across perceived difference. The situated learning and CoP frameworks of Lave and Wenger seem to provide helpful concepts for this endeavor. Particularly promising seem to be the embedding of identity development within practice and context. With Brown and Reimer’s contention that “situatedness would suggest that virtue exists as a form of interaction tendency with respect to specific sorts of situations,” religious educators might ask what sorts of situations foster more virtuous interaction tendencies. Further, how might these best be incorporated into pedagogical planning that aims towards identity development? Religious educators might also wonder about what other interaction tendencies within the Christian witness, besides compassionate welcome of weakness and vulnerability, might be most needed for our times. Relatedly, what practices already exist within the given situations of religious educators that could be brought to the fore in new and transformational ways?

L’Arche provides an example of one powerful situation and set of practices wherein encounter across perceived difference leads to profound and transformational relationships. Other examples most certainly exist and would be well suited for religious educators to turn their eye towards. Indeed, as Greig writes, “l’Arche points to a broader vision of the human telos and is not limited to relationships between people both with and without intellectual disabilities. Thus, these discoveries […] have the potential to renew the church and the whole social order.”

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41 Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, 20.
Bibliography


