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The Essential Role of Innovation for Educating in Faith and Life that Promotes Inclusion and Respectful Relationships: *Some findings from an Action Research Study of Adult Faith Education in Canada*

Abstract: *Among the findings of an Action Research Study of Adult Faith Education in Canada is the realization that innovative research and educational frameworks are – themselves – a source of hope for moving toward transforming practice that heals the division between faith and life. This paper explores how engaging an awareness-based action research approach and creative exaptation unleashes interdisciplinary wisdom from religious education, business and organizational development, and social sciences to innovate adult religious education that bridges the faith-life gap and promotes inclusion and respectful relationships - rather than divided societies.*

In the fall of 2018, I began my work as principal researcher for a qualitative research study - An Awareness-Based Action Research Project in Adult Faith Education in Canada: *Towards Transforming Practice* - in response to the ever-intensifying gap between faith and life.¹ It has been said that, “it is probably true that educating in “faith and life” was never more demanding than in our time.”² Sharing the passion and concern for this challenge that so many scholars and practitioners have demonstrated in their work over these decades, our team began to generate an empirical research design that we hoped could surface some helpful insights and responses. We also had two compelling messages from practitioners in adult faith education from across Canada driving our efforts: First, that practitioners recognize the need to move from a *program* to a *process-based approach* to adult faith education, but are struggling to know how to achieve this; second, that practitioners need resources to support this work.

Two important perspectives framed the initial stage of this initiative. First, as I designed the project, clear in my mind was an observation made in 2006 by Biola University Professor, Kevin Lawson, that shaped my doctoral research at that time: We are lacking in all forms of research in religious education and, perhaps most of all, in empirical research.³ This invited me to consider if

¹ While the reference to this divide is in the Vatican Council Document, *Gaudium et Spes* (#43) of the Catholic Church, and this paper presents perspectives drawn from qualitative research conducted in the context of religious education in the Catholic Church in Canada, it is my hope that many insights and findings are relevant for religious education in other faith traditions and locations as well.

² M. Myrtle Power, “Religious Education and Vatican II,” *Theoform*, Saint Paul University, Ottawa, 2012.

³ Kevin Lawson, “The Research We Need in Religious Education: Four Facets,” *Religious Education* (Spring, 2006), Vol. 101 No. 2, 157.

there may be a unique contribution empirical research – that recognizes observations and experiences as a source of knowledge– can make to effective practice in religious education.⁴ Second, is a view my co-researcher articulated very well, “(Not only has) the gap between faith and life identified during the Second Vatican Council increased during the last six decades; some would suggest it has grown exponentially even while work is going on in many ways to address it.”⁵ Our sense is that empirical research – that draws on our observations and experience - is greatly needed to help us better understand the faith-life gap in our current context and to point to innovative practices in adult religious education that help to bridge it. Phase I of our project has just concluded and we are excited and encouraged by the fresh understandings and practical wisdom that have emerged in our findings. They are currently being compiled into a resource that will allow us to share them with all who accompany adult faith and to open some collaborative discussions and learning spaces as well as further action research in a phase II of the project.

One of our key findings is the realization that innovative research and educational frameworks are – themselves – a source of hope for moving toward transforming practice that bridges the faith-life gap. This paper will explore how engaging in an awareness-based action research approach and creative exaptation, in our project, unleashed this generative interdisciplinary wisdom. This transforming practice promotes inclusion and respectful relationships - rather than divided societies.

The Faith-Life Gap and Divided Societies

It bears mentioning, at this point, that a connection seems evident between divided societies that lack inclusion and respectful relationships and the divide between faith and life. Thomas Groome points out in his recent review of John Shea’s new publication that, “Shea articulates what is, in fact, the existential intent of all educating-in-faith— that people may become adults who are morally responsible and fully human.”⁶ The field of transformative education offers the important insight that learning that is truly transformative in nature – marked by new ways of seeing things - is evidenced in the concrete action of the learner’s life.⁷ In other words, if someone has come to genuinely know something, then there is unity between what they know and how they live; learning is demonstrated by the integrity of who the person is becoming. Conversely, then, if our societies – and our communities of faith – are marked, not by inclusion and respectful coexistence, but by division, then we must face the painful reality that our most sacred teachings have not been genuinely learned. If respect for human dignity and human diversity, loving compassion, and our communal responsibility for each other, especially those most in need, are not evidenced in the concrete action of who we are becoming, then they are not genuinely known.

⁴ Examples certainly exist of empirical research in Religious Education. See, for example, initiatives across Europe reported in the *British Journal of Religious Education* in 1999, and empirical studies by Diane Tickton Schuster and Lisa D. Grant in *Journal of Jewish Education*, 71, 2005, 179-200. Perhaps a current trend may be emerging as evidenced by the recent Participatory Action Research by Steve Thomason published in *Religious Education* (2018), Vol. 113 No. 1, 107 and numerous publications in the *Journal of Jewish Education* since 2010, and my research project in Religious Education employing Awareness-Based Action Research.

⁵ From my research project notes; quoting my co-researcher, Dr. Miriam Martin.

⁶ Thomas Groome (2019): “Adulthood, Morality, and the Fully Human: A Mosaic Of Peace, Religious Education,” *RELIGIOUS EDUCATION* 2019, VOL. 114, NO. 1, 91–92.

⁷ Jack Mezirow, “Learning to Think as an Adult” in Jack Mezirow and Associates, *Learning as Transformation* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 3-35.

Framed in this way, it seems apparent that a fundamental contribution religious education can make to the healing of divided societies is to seek transformative practices in adult religious education that bridge the faith-life gap by generating learning spaces that promote this unity between knowing and acting. In this way, religious education can help to promote inclusion and respect, rather than divided societies, by supporting adults in becoming morally responsible and fully human.

The importance of Innovation

Organizational development specialists, Nathan Furr, Jeffrey Dyer and Kyle Nell claim that the real hinderance to ideas that lead to significant improvements for businesses and organizations are biases such as, "...the tendency to overvalue things we already know...and the tendency to think new information proves our existing beliefs. As a result, we see only the opportunities related to the status quo, rather than the more-valuable opportunities just out of reach."⁸ Perhaps it is important for us to consider if this may be affecting our practice of religious education, as well. Are biases such as these hindering our advancement in religious education that can effectively bridge the faith-life gap? According to these experts, innovative approaches that "...shake-up our thinking and get us past our natural inclination to stick with what we know – to side-step our cognitive biases"⁹ are a solution to this dilemma. As Phase I of our research project unfolded the importance of innovation for surfacing new understandings and effective practices in religious education became increasingly evident.

I particularly value a perspective offered by these same specialists about the creative, generative role *exaptation* – an idea that originated in biology – can play when adopted by organizational development. Exaptation describes a phenomenon in nature where characteristics that evolve for one purpose are adapted laterally for another use. One example is feathers which originally served as a source of warmth for flightless birds and were later co-opted as the means for flight.¹⁰ Our authors suggest that if this genius can occur naturally in nature, then engaging "...human agency (in a) world of choice and imagination (points to) possibilities (that) are infinite."¹¹

While we recognize that there is already healthy interdisciplinary activity in religious education, the experience of our research team – as I will explore to follow – suggests that intentionally adopting this innovating perspective and practice in our field helps to open the way for transforming theory and practice.

The Methodology, Method and Process for Phase I of our Research Project

Action Research – a qualitative research methodology – was chosen for our project because it is designed to unleash rich, practical wisdom to help address real, concrete challenges - and this is what we need. "Meyer (2000) maintains, action research's strength lies in its focus on generating solutions to practical problems and its ability to empower practitioners, by getting them to engage with research and the subsequent development or implementation activities."¹²

⁸ Furr, Nathan, Jeffrey Dyer and Kyle Nell, "When Your Moon Shots Don't Take Off," in *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2019, 2.

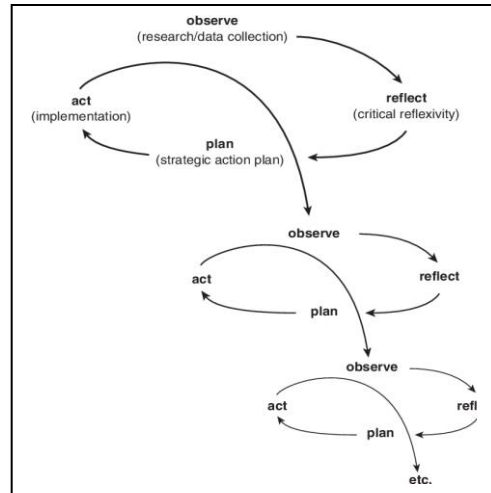
⁹ Ibid, 7.

¹⁰ Ibid, 6.

¹¹ Ibid, 6.

¹² Elizabeth Koshy, Valsa Koshy and Heather Waterman, "What is Action Research?" in *Action Research in Healthcare* (Thousand Oaks, California, 2010), 2.

Furthermore, since “action research always retains its focus on transformative action which is discovered and inspired by the research process”¹³ it is an excellent methodology for a project in practical theology seeking transforming practice that also holds “the wider theological remit”¹⁴ of more faithful Christian practice. As Swinton and Mowat describe, “(b)oth (action research and practical theology) use a similar reflective process¹⁵ and both contain similar action-oriented and transformatively oriented dynamics and goals.”¹⁶ In its most basic expression, action research follows the spiral in the diagram to the right, that moves from observe, to reflect, to plan, to act, to observe, to reflect, to plan to act....



*Figure 1*¹⁷

A focus group was our chosen Method for the project because:

(f)ocus groups are highly regarded for the rich qualitative data they can generate: A small number of individuals, brought together as a discussion or resource group, is more valuable many times over than any representative sample. Such a group, discussing collectively their sphere of life and probing into it as they meet one another’s disagreements, will do more to lift the veils covering the spheres of life than any other device that I know of.¹⁸

Our choice of members for this focus group was key: Four experienced practitioners, one from each of four regions of Canada (West, East, Ontario, Quebec), highly regarded and identified by peers/colleagues as “effectively engaged in adult faith education.”¹⁹ Each belongs to a “community of practice”²⁰ (e.g. an association, network, committee) and practice in a place (parish, diocese and catholic school/school board) committed to providing adult faith education. They joined me and my co-researcher (we are both active practitioners as well as scholars in this

¹³ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, “Practical Theology as Action Research,” in *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, (Canterbury, England: SCM Publishing, 2006), 254-56.

¹⁴ Swinton and Mowat, 256.

¹⁵ It bears noting that a spiraling process (moving from observe- to reflect- to plan -to act – to observe - to reflect to plan to act...) is the basis for processes in many domains that are designed to gain insight, engage in meaning-making, and make decisions that lead to transformative action. We’ve noticed that “learning” and “meaning-making” are often described by us and others with reference to circles and spirals.

¹⁶ Swinton and Mowat, 256.

¹⁷ Linda Dickins and Karen Watkins, “Action Research: Rethinking Lewin,” *Management Journal* (Sage Journals), Vol 30, Issue 2, 1999, figure 1.3.

¹⁸ Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research, third edition* (London, England: Sage Publications, 2006), 191.

¹⁹ I asked several pastoral leaders and some catholic educators to identify people they know with experience and key leadership positions in adult faith education whom they regard as “effectively engaged in adult faith education.” A list of potential focus group members was generated from these recommendations.

²⁰ This ensures that focus group members have a wide view of adult faith education and a place to consult in their milieu.

field) to establish a research team of six passionate, committed and competent adult religious educators.

Over a ten-month period, we moved through a three-fold process in search of transforming practice in religious education that bridges the faith-life gap. A study of this kind doesn't propose to make final statements or draw definitive conclusions. Rather, it generates fresh insights and captures *promising practices*²¹ that can enrich and strengthen our work.

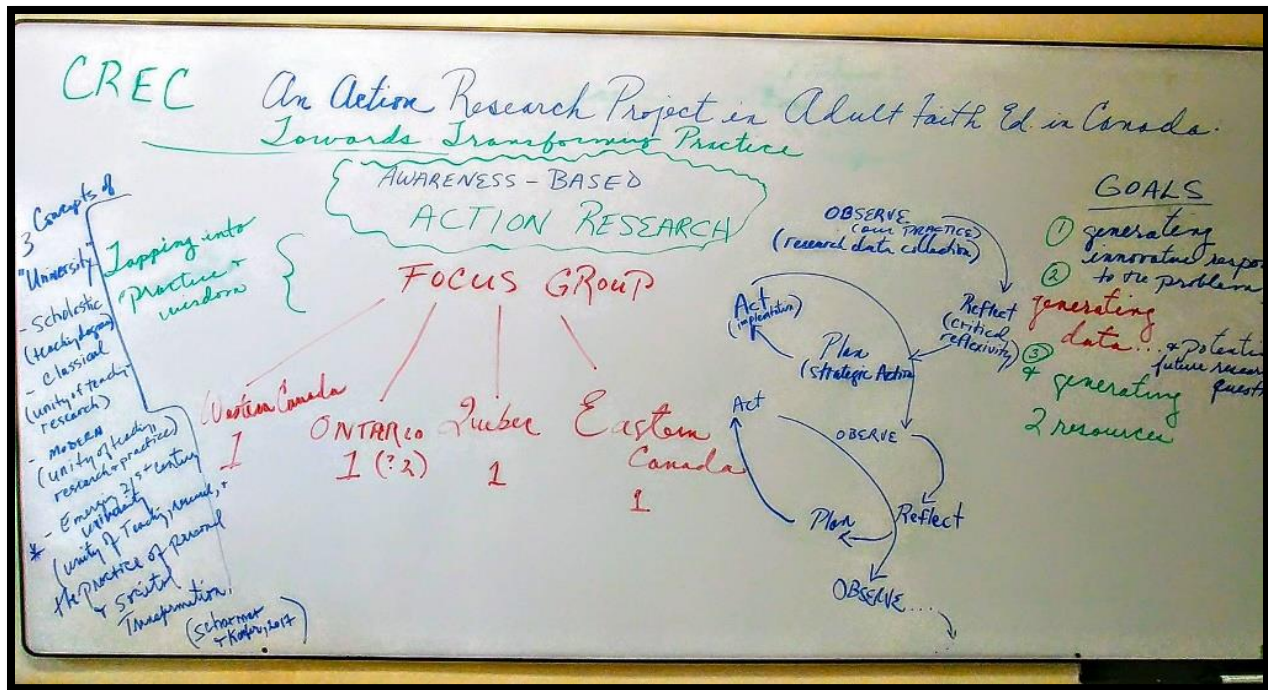


Figure 1.2 Visual Mapping of the Action research Project, Phase 1, Kuzmochka

Action research is frequently used in the field of education,²² and Phase I of our project allowed our team to experience how timely and promising it is as a research approach for religious education as well. It has the potential to generate much needed insight and contribute to innovative practice. But this is not all we discovered about this methodology. A key and surprising finding from Phase I of our project is that action research is, in and of itself, a transformative educational process.²³

Awareness-Based Action Research

It is important to mention, at this point, that we used a new and innovative approach introduced by Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer called, *Awareness-Based Action Research*²⁴ that

²¹ The term, “promising practices” can be found at this link: <https://www.cpha.ca/promising-practices-canada>. We think it is an excellent descriptor for our findings.

²² When U.S. psychologist Kurt Lewin introduced the research method in 1944 it was with the intention to engage people in the field in research leading to social change. The field of education adopted it with Lewin’s guidance.

²³ Steve Thomason presents a similar finding in his article on, “Participatory Action Research as Trinitarian Praxis and a Pedagogical Model for the Suburban Congregation,” *Religious Education* (2018), Vol. 113 No. 1, 107.

²⁴ Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, “Awareness-Based Action Research: Catching Social

integrates Scharmer's Theory U into the methodology²⁵ and is specifically designed to lead to innovative social change. It is in this choice that our innovative exaptation is most apparent: we co-opted a research method designed for organizational development and used it to research practice in religious education.²⁶ Furthermore, as we did this, we discovered that a research approach intended to facilitate movement toward transformative social change was not only an effective research approach in religious education, but also a highly effective method for transformative education for religious education practitioners as well.

Our three-fold process was in keeping with awareness-based action research: 1. First, we used intentional levels of listening - with a focus on generative discussion and outcomes²⁷ - to help us identify our experiences of effective adult faith education when we could clearly see that the gap between faith and life was closed. We held extensive generative discussions of these experiences to capture some of the principles and practices that were at work. One principle related to the ethical responsibility to provide effective adult faith education became clear very quickly. Four other principles began to take shape as we continued our levels of listening and generative conversation with an aim toward accessing a deep common understanding of practices that bridge the faith-life gap as well as reasons why the gap exists. 2. Next, we listened to others over many months - leaders and colleagues in the field, people fully engaged and those who (for many reasons) have become distant from the life of the Christian community. They spoke of experiences - often transformative - when no gap between faith and life exists, they shared their experiences - often painful - and observations about the faith-life gap in their own lives and in the lives of others around them. Our focus group met frequently to share what we were hearing, observing and grappling with to continue our intentional listening and analysis and generative discussion. This allowed two things: for our understanding of the faith-life gap to expand; for the emerging principles to gradually take on a clearer shape. 3. Finally, we took the emerging principles that were taking shape and observed/studied them further in our various places of practice by integrating them into projects in which we were involved over the season of Lent;²⁸ what more could we learn about these emerging principles when we intentionally integrated them into our practice and observed the results? Then we brought these experiences back to the focus group for further generative discussion, exploration and analysis.

Our engagement in this awareness-based action research gave us access to some current experiences of the faith-life gap that opens new perspectives and deepens understanding. And, it

Reality Creation in Flight," in Hilary Bradbury, ed., *Action Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015), 201.

²⁵ Discovering Scharmer and Kaufer's variation on Action Research was very meaningful since the Centre for Religious Education at Saint Paul University is housed within the School of Transformative Leadership and Spirituality where Theory U is well known and practiced. My co-researcher, Dr. Miriam Martin, is the director of this School.

²⁶ ²⁶ A paper that was written about integrating Theory U into Christian Education in 2014 considers the relationship between Theory U and Religious Education but from a very different perspective than that of our Awareness-based Action Research Project on Adult Faith Education in Canada (accessed at: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Theory-U-as-a-conceptual-framework-for-Christian-Zeitler/013c35f42a83b748fade540a223976b3ff524d36>, June 2019).

²⁷ These are specific to the theory and practice underlying Awareness-Based Action Research.

²⁸ This is a forty-day period of spiritual preparation for Easter.

allowed five innovative, encouraging “promising practices” that can help to bridge the faith-life gap to take shape.²⁹

Innovative Exaptation: A transformative educational process

Awareness-based action research integrates Theory U which proposes that the emergence of transformative change depends upon the ability to connect with our contexts in deeper ways that allow us to *really* access our experience³⁰ by being fully present to it. This – in turn – allows us to access deeper sources of knowing. This is a key consideration for religious education whose effectiveness depends upon being able to hold together experience and faith, to bridge faith and life.

Scharmer describes the three Levels of listening that move away from downloading (simply hearing what I already know) to: *an open mind* (intentionally listening for what is really going on; engaging new ideas, insights and perspectives); *an open heart* (intentionally listening with empathy and compassion to what is going on in the context/the field); *an open will* (intentionally listening for the future that is emerging and finding the courage to act on it).³¹ Intentionally engaging these levels of listening allows us to suspend habitual behaviours that prevent us from allowing new things to emerge. Integrating this theory into action research yields a “...journey (though not necessarily sequential) through the following stages: Seeding, co-initiating, co-sensing, co-inspiring, co-creating and co-shaping.”³²

It is beyond the scope of this paper to unpack this process and how we used it in Phase 1 of our study in detail. However, it is important to emphasize that as a focus group – a community of practitioners - we found ourselves able to “capture” and name things we couldn’t capture and name before, because we used the awareness-based action research process of “reflecting on what we were doing as we were doing it.” This generated wisdom among us. No *one* of us could have learned what we did on their own.

This was, perhaps, best displayed during our final on-site working session when we engaged in an exercise to create a template for a process-based approach to adult religious education that bridges the faith-life gap. Rather than approach such a task in our habitual way, by discussing what we might say and how we would present it, we opted for an approach that allowed us to listen intentionally and to access the deeper sources under our patterns. We imagined the people with whom we wanted to share what we had learned about a process-based approach in the room with us. Rather than explaining the process-based approach in an instructive fashion, we kept returning to the question: *What are we doing with these people gathered to explore and learn together what we have learned about a process-based approach?* and listening deeply for our responses. As I facilitated this exercise, it was a struggle to help us stay in this experience and

²⁹ As mentioned previously, these findings are being released in a resource we’ve designed for those engaged in adult faith education.

³⁰ See Scharmer and Kaufer, 2-3 where Scharmer describes how he was deeply influenced by cognition scientist Varela who claimed that while everyone thinks we know how to access experience, we don’t really. From Varela’s work, Scharmer identifies three movements that open the self awareness needed by individuals and organizations to truly access experience and be able to move forward: suspending habitual ways of thinking and acting, redirecting focus from things and patterns to the sources underneath them, and letting go to make space for new things to emerge.

³¹ Scharmer and Kaufer, 2-3.

³² Scharmer and Kaufer, 9.

not revert to a more informative approach. Yet, when we did stay in this experience, the best of our wisdom was able to come to the surface. For my part, I found myself able to articulate dimensions of process that had before been simply intuitive and unidentified. Scharmer and Kaufer refer to this process as “catching social reality creation in flight.”³³ This experience also confirmed an important theme that was running through our findings; namely, that religious educators do not stand apart from the communities they lead as remote experts.³⁴ Rather, they are an integral part of the circle of learning.³⁵ This experience is a testament to the value of awareness-based action research and an example of the importance of unleashing the shared wisdom of communities of practice to help us find our way forward.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, for us as a focus group - a community of practice - the awareness-based action research process revealed itself as an example of the transforming educational process for which we were searching in our research into adult faith education in Canada. One of our focus group members described how her practice was transformed when she made the shift from a primary focus on presenting content to a process-based approach in adult religious education:

I have tended to approach formation sessions as my opportunity to tell others what I know. Since I've become more aware of the importance of listening and relationship, I'm stopping to listen and give space to others. I was (recently) very surprised when a woman I had assumed would have nothing significant to say had some very wise and insightful things to share with the group. I would not have made that space for her before. And, our formation session was greatly enriched.³⁶

This experience has inspired us and encouraged us such that we want to encourage others in religious education to consider employing this methodology as well.³⁷ Along with other topics that surfaced in phase 1 of this project, we are planning further research into the importance of communities of practice, and using awareness-based action research as a process for transformative faith education for practitioners.

Conclusion

This experience of Awareness-based Action Research methodology for the study of adult religious education in Canada has been an encouraging foray into an innovative realm in which

³³ Scharmer and Kaufer, 1.

³⁴ In his article, Steve Thomason reports a similar result from his action research study in the realization that educators are not “...remote experts” but rather part of the learning community. See, Steve Thomason, “Participatory Action Research as Trinitarian Praxis and a Pedagogical Model for the Suburban Congregation,” *Religious Education* (2018), Vol. 113 No. 1, 107.

³⁵ Parker Palmer wrote extensively about the educator as part of the circle of learning (see, for example, his book, *The Courage to Teach*, 1997). The idea of educators as “lead learners” is accredited to American educator Roland S. Barth who began writing about educators as learners in the 1990's. The term has developed common-place usage to indicate that educators are, themselves, learners and are not outside or separate from the circle of learning. Miriam Martin, co-researcher in this project, has been instrumental in introducing it into the field of faith education in Canada.

³⁶ Carol Kuzmochka, transcripts from, “A Study of Adult Faith Education in Canada: Towards Transforming Practice,” Centre for Religious Education and Catechesis, Saint Paul University, 2019.

we hope many others will join us. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the faith-life gap is a serious problem which, I believe, contributes to divided societies where the values of human dignity, diversity, compassion and kindness have not been genuinely learned. Religious Education can contribute to the healing of divided societies by offering faith education experiences that maintain and deepen the unity between what we believe and how we live.

There is much more to be discovered about adult faith education process-based frameworks that bridge the faith-life gap. The discovery that action research is – itself – an effective transformative educational framework, and that participation in it supports and strengthens communities of practice of religious educators, should open us to an intentional search for the exaptation of other perspectives and frameworks from the fields of business, organizational and leadership development that can innovate practices in religious education.

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