A new culture of learning: What are the implications for theological educators?

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"A new culture of learning" -- that's a bold title for a paper of this sort. I have to begin by pointing out that I didn't come up with it. It's the title of a book that was published this past year by two luminaries who work in the field of learning more generally, Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown (2011). Yet I think this title aptly captures what we can see all around us, if we look closely, and thus I feel free to borrow it. That is, there are shifts underway in how learning happens in the 21st century. We, as theological educators working in multiple faith traditions, in a globalized world, need to be attentive to those shifts if we want to design learning experiences that are effective and constructive in that midst of that shift.

This paper will begin by laying out the elements of this new culture of learning, drawing heavily on the work of those researchers who have been part of the MacArthur Foundation's "new digital literacies" projects, and which is so well summarized by Seely Brown and Thomas.[1] I will then contextualize that work more fully in theological education, and make a few tentative proposals for our continued development.

Before I go any further, I need to be clear about my own situatedness. I am a Roman Catholic layperson who teaches in an ELCA seminary in the United States. Each of those labels already narrows and constrains the lenses I bring to bear on this situation. At the same time, I have been working in the fields of media education and religious education for more than twenty years, and during that time have traveled to multiple

[1] See in particular Mizuko, 2009 and Jenkins, 2006. The overall project is accessible via the web at: http://tinyurl.com/3vw6xn.

contexts around the world learning from people who are studying the intersections of media, religion and digital cultures. From that point of view I hope to offer useful "hooks" into the relevant literatures, and a frame for considering how these shifts that are being identified might emerge in your own contexts and teaching environments. Please understand that what I offer here is meant to stimulate discussion and experimentation, and is not intended to be definitive.

What is this "new culture of learning" that is being described? It is crucial to the argument that Thomas and Seely Brown (hereafter referred to as TSB) are making, to grasp that learning happens not simply on an explicit or intentional level, but also at the level of the implicit, or incidental, and even ultimately, the null, or taboo, levels. They begin their observations by using the metaphors of the information network, and the petri dish. That is, they point to the potentially limitless nature of the current information environment and argue that in order to support learning in such a space educators must design spaces that are appropriately bounded. Here the metaphor of the petri dish is particularly evocative because it speaks to the deliberately constructed nature of a biological culture, which necessitates creating an environment upon which the specific organism one hopes to grow, depends for development; and the challenge of keeping such an environment, such a "culture," appropriately rich and yet clearly bounded.

As TSB point out, this culture is not about:

> unchecked access to information and unbridled passion, however. Left to their own devices, there is no telling what students will do. If you give them a resource like the Internet and ask them to follow their passion, they will probably meander around finding bits and pieces of information that move them from topic to topic – and produce a very haphazard result (81).

As TSB – and frankly, most other scholars who are attending to the challenges of teaching and learning with digital tools – note, we can no longer work in this environment, we can not adequately create such "petri dishes" if our approaches are teaching-based; instead they must be learning-based. The distinction TSB make is increasingly common not only in the worlds of digital learning, online and distributed technologies, and so on, but also deep within a variety of accrediting organizations and other institutions dedicated to assessing and supporting learning. A "teaching-based" approach assumes a stable base of information to be shared "about" the world, whereas a "learning-based" approach is focused on learning "through" engagement with the world (37).

In my own context, for example, the recent shifts in the standards of the Association of Theological Schools are in precisely this direction. The focus of the ATS accreditation process requires schools seeking that accreditation to articulate clearly their learning outcomes, not simply at the level of individual student learning objectives in specific courses, but at the broader level of entire degree programs and the implicit as well as explicit learning of an institution.[2]

So the first shift in a new culture of learning is an intentional shift from "teaching-based" to "learning-based" approaches. The second shift has to do with moving away from the debates over the "private and the public" which have so captivated our attention in regards to social media in particular, and to think about and embed in learning design, the "personal and the collective." TSB are particularly alert to the kinds of learning that are taking place in various gaming structures, especially those with social and

[2] For a quick entry into this discussion, see the recent ATS *Colloquy*, Volume 20, Number 1 Fall 2011.

participatory elements to their design. The example they explore at length is that of *World of Warcraft*. In that environment (and the other games like it), unlike in our more typical definition of community, people do not learn in order to belong but rather participate in order to learn.

Pause for a moment to think about that shift.

Collectives are not, as TSB note, “simply new forms of public spaces.” Rather, “they are built and structured around participation and therefore carry a different sense of investment for those who engage in them. Collectives, unlike the larger notion of the public, are both contextual and situated, particularly with regard to engaging in specific actions” (56).

Why does this matter? If we pick up on the implicit curriculum at work in these places, if we pay attention to what TSB highlight as the “tacit” knowing that is occurring, we will recognize that an increasingly large number of people are “learning how to learn” in ways that stress their own passion, interest, and agency. Picking up on the work of Polanyi and others, TSB note that tacit knowing is the kind of knowing that builds from constantly changing experiences. Explicit knowing, on the other hand, tends to be that which has become stable and fixed over time. Here again you can pick up on the need for a shift from “teaching about” the world, to “learning through engagement with” the world. In a context in which there is a large body of fixed and stable knowledge, “teaching about” might be both functional and adequate. In a world, however, in which what constitutes “knowing” is constantly changing, rarely fixed, and deeply embedded in personal agency and experience, in that kind of world, one must “learn through engagement.” That is, we learn by doing, watching, experiencing.

In such a world the third element of the shift that TSB note is that of a move away from asking "what do we know?" to "what are the things we don't know, and what can we ask about them?" (83). This is a practice that is particularly evident in the midst of various gaming environments, where often the primary objective in a given "room" or "area" of a game is to explore the space and figure out what resources exist there, what surprises can be tapped, and so on.

TSB begin to talk, in this part of their argument, about practices of "indwelling." I imagine that many of us, living in faith traditions, might find our ears perking up at this word. For TSB, "indwelling" is the "set of practices we use and develop to find and make connections among the tacit dimensions of things. It is the set of experiences from which we are able to develop our hunches and sense of intuition" (85). The more people play certain kinds of video games, for instance, the more they hone their ability to pick up on clues that lead to unlocking new resources, and the more they experiment with what they can "do" in a given place. Incidentally, there is much to be made in this argument about the importance of "place," of situatedness and location, yet another resonance with contemporary theological education.

Thus far, three elements of the shift in the new culture of learning: (1) a move from "teaching-based" to "learning-based" approaches, (2) a shift from the public and private, to the personal and collective, and (3) a focus on tacit knowing which grows from inquiry-led approaches.

Perhaps the clearest statement TSB make, is to note that "the new culture of learning is about the kind of tension that develops when students with an interest or

passion they want to explore are faced with a set of constraints that allow them to act only within given boundaries" (81).

Let me turn, now, to explore some of the possible implications for theological education. First I think we need to ask: is any of this really all that new? Formation in collectives that draws deeply on personal experience and which is alert to tacit knowing could be one way of describing the work of religious communities, such as the "collectives" of the School Sisters of Notre Dame or the Jesuits, to mention only two of the hundreds of religious orders that exist.

This culture of learning may be breaking down in congregational settings, where the community's ability to socialize their young, let alone to initiate and form new members, was often dependent upon a larger cultural surround which is now often multi-faith in ways rarely appreciated in previous times. It may simply be, as Cathy Davidson notes in her recent book, *Now You See It*, that our practices of attention have been disrupted enough by these emerging digital technologies to enable us to "see" what has indeed been going on all around us (2011).

To return to TSB's definition, "the new culture of learning is about the kind of tension that develops when students with an interest or passion they want to explore are faced with a set of constraints that allow them to act only within given boundaries" (81).

I want to ask a specifically theological question about this definition, and to do so I'll draw on a famous quote of Frederick Buechner's, who wrote of "vocation" being where "your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of the world we are moving into, at least for those of us who live within Christian communities – and I would venture to guess, rather than to assert, that

there are similarities to be found in other faith communities – is that Christians believe human being to be something that is both a gift from God, and deeply broken. That is, to paraphrase a common assertion from the Lutheran seminary where I teach, we are "simultaneously saint and sinner."

Thus when I consider TSB's work on a "new culture of learning," I inevitably want to ask where that definition allows us to engage the brokenness, the sinfulness of human being. Where might we speak of God's agency, not simply human agency? What draws us to faith in the midst of pain? I think that one of the potentially most difficult challenges posed by this "new culture of learning" to communities of faith has to do with the deep affirmation we carry that we are not alone. That it is not up to human beings, of our own individual accord, to control the world. We are not, in ourselves, singularly creative. We participate in creation, we participate in making the world whole, but we do not do this alone.

One of the elements of the tacit knowing shaped by gaming environments could, for instance, be brought to more explicit critique. We could ask "what does the designer of this game intend?" We could ask, along with Lawrence Lessig, in what ways the "code" or electronic architecture of a space constrains what can be known there, what kinds of learning can be nurtured in the petri dish of a specific space (2006).

I think part of the very real and authentic skepticism that theological educators have brought to moving theological education into digitally mediated, online spaces is that we recognize – although rarely publicly acknowledge – how difficult, limited, and sinful the learning can be even in those environments we believe we have shaped most carefully. Given our concerns about the brokenness of our current institutions, about the

wounding of the world through global capitalist exploitation, about the breakdown in relationship we see all around us, it is not surprising that we would ask serious questions about moving the already difficult process of theological education into spaces that would appear to attenuate our relationality.

I believe, however, and have argued extensively in other contexts, that digital spaces are no less relational than so-called "in-person" spaces (Hess, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2011a, 2011b). The challenge is to attend to the tacit knowing that is being drawn on in a given space. So, for example, when I find myself as a woman feeling deeply discounted and "dis-embodied" by the gender dynamics in a face-to-face academic setting, I need to critique and engage them. Similarly, when colleagues argue that digital environments allow us to be pulled beyond our racialization and the systemic racism which confers white privilege upon me, I want to see the proof.[3]

Thus there are elements of critique and awareness that theological educators are – and must – bring to this new culture of learning. But are there other ways in which we might engage this analysis?

I would point to five strengths that appear within theological education when viewed through the TSB lens. Keeping in mind that I am drawing these strengths from my particular location, and thus suggest them as evocative rather than definitive, I would note, first, that theological education is largely tending a fairly esoteric body of knowledge. TSB note how compelling the pursuit of esoteric knowledge is within gaming environments. There are scholars such as Craig Detwiler, who are using that analysis to suggest ways in which we might make our esoteric knowledge more inviting and

[3] Here the work of Lisa Nakamura and danah boyd is especially instructive.

intriguing to people who have grown up learning through gaming (2010). His description of structuring learning the Bible so that students might "level up" in particular ways is both compelling and fun.

The second element I would note is that where TSB talk about the limitless nature of information in a networked society, I would ask us to think about our own wisdom within communities of faith for engaging and managing approaches to the infinite. That is, as Rahner points out, it is our recognition of our own limits that points to the limitless. It is in recognizing our own finitude that we become conscious of the infinity of a transcendent God. We have, within Christian community alone – there are myriad approaches in other faith traditions – a deep sense of the humility necessary for conversation about infinity. As Mark Edwards has written, we have a "characteristically sensitive approach to boundary conditions where we know reason is prone to err badly" (2002, 4). "Limitless" access to information is not in, and of itself, access to wisdom. Yet wisdom is what has been cultivated within religious traditions over eons.

The third and fourth elements I would point to as strengths that I see within communities of faith for engaging this new culture of learning, grow out of our deep commitment to what Parker Palmer has termed the "whole sight" of knowing with both one's heart and one's mind (1993, xxiii). We acknowledge that there is a necessity to know in this "whole sight" way, and we have much to share from our own work with that commitment. We have drawn from our tacit knowing, our own experiences of seeing, doing, and being to shape practices that lead to wisdom. These practices compel us to witness to the limitations of reason as well as to the limitations of emotion. We have

centuries of practices that have been shaped to allow human beings to hone their *integrative* abilities.

Intimately connected to these third and fourth elements would be what I would label the fifth, although perhaps these are so entangled that it's hard to separate them? But the fifth element I would lift up is that communities of faith have long practice with bounded environments. Indeed in some ways I think that the growth of certain more clearly bounded religious communities grows out of the larger need people are experiencing for finding bounded environments in the midst of what can often feel like dramatically unbounded, unfounded, anti-institutional ways of being.

These five elements – esoteric knowledge, experience of finitude, commitment to integration, experience with tacit knowing, and practices of boundedness – are, however, all facing new challenges in our larger environments. These five elements which can contribute greatly to a new culture of learning, and which would appear to flourish in such a culture, are also newly at risk.

Consider, for instance, the ways in which the esoteric knowledges we tend are becoming rapidly inaccessible. Far too many theological educators have refused to be present in digital spaces, have resisted making their work accessible in open sourced ways, have fought the development of online learning, and have generally argued that we ought not to be engaging digital technologies. I suppose that one element of what defines "esoteric" knowing is that it is "likely to be understood only by a small number of people with a specialized interest,"[4] but if there are no ways to excite interest such that people are drawn into engagement and inquiry with that knowledge it will no longer be esoteric,

[4] This is the definition that "pops up" when I query the dictionary on my MacBookPro.

but instead extinct. The MDiv students at the seminary where I teach, for instance, are required to take both Greek and Hebrew. My colleagues, who are excellent scholars as well as creative teachers, have found ways to invite these students to use newly emerging digital tools such as *Accordance* to draw them into deeper study of the languages. These students are discovering a passion for inquiry that will serve them well with these language even once they are beyond the bounded classroom environments of a seminary.

The second element, a recognition of our finitude which leads to awareness of the divine and of our need for humility in the face of the divine, is also fading rapidly. A larger sense of God's agency and power is diminishing all around us. Scientific explanations have been picked up in the wider popular culture as explanations that leach out the wonder of creation, that settle agency on human beings alone. I'm not sure all of our scientists are comfortable with this. There are many who have written of the ways in which scientific method can lead into deeper wonder at the complexity and beauty of creation, ways in which scientific method forces open-ended humility.[5] But that is not the stance most often presented in wider popular culture. Communities of faith, and theological educators in particular, need to focus more directly on inviting engagement with the transcendence of God, and helping people to participate in – and thus learn – the practices which shape our belonging as humble humans in religious knowing.

The third and fourth elements, which have to do with a commitment to "whole sight," and the practices of integration that shape it, are also facing keen challenges all around us. I have written elsewhere about the ways our practices of attention are being shaped in digital environments (2011). I would point, here, to the movement emerging

[5] See, for example, Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc, 2010.

within Christian religious education, which focuses on practices that are deeply constitutive of Christian identity but not specifically liturgical or creedal. A good introduction would be Dorothy Bass' edited collection, *Practicing Our Faith* (2010). These practices are not confined only to non-digital spaces, they can be woven throughout daily life – that is, indeed, part of what defines them.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge to our strengths, however, is that which is being posed to our bounded environments. In the United States, at least in the Christian community, we have tended to understand our boundedness through the structures of congregation and denomination. But these structures are crumbling all around us, and it is not yet clear what will replace them. In theological education, at least in my institution, we have begun to focus more directly on helping our students to practice what Scott Cormode has called "homiletical" or "gardening" forms of leadership, which tend directly to meaning-making, and in doing so help to shape the communicative practices of a community (2006). Such communicative practices can be embedded in social media just as much as they can be embedded in the structure of an institution, although they will take different shape in different environments.

Strengths – and challenges to those strengths – live in theological education. Yet I have not even touched on the specific suggestions that TSB and others are making for how to help educators move into and draw on what they are calling the new culture of learning. They argue, for instance, for three distinct yet overlapping frames for redesigning learning: *homo sapiens*, *homo faber* and *homo ludens*, or "humans who know, humans who make (things), and humans who play" (90).

In the space of “humans who know,” TSB want very much to emphasize the place-based nature of that knowing. *Where* are we knowing, and how is that sense of place shaping our knowing? I think this is a question that has permeated theological education for at least the last several decades, and Willie James Jennings’ recent book, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race,* provides further compelling substance to that inquiry. The advent of digital technologies, and the ability to use those technologies to make theological education accessible to people far beyond specific, seminary-based, locations has been a huge challenge to theological education – and a wonderful opportunity at the same time. Where are we doing theological education? There is no longer a simple, clear answer. We are working in graduate schools, in congregations, in neighborhoods, around the globe, in and with the Spirit.

TSB talk at length about the issue of *homo faber,* and I have done so as well in other contexts (2008, 2010, 2011), because media educators learned long ago that one of the best ways to help students learn something effective about media was to help them to create in a specific medium. Yet I think it is worth noting, in this paper, that theological education ought to be asking “what” are we making? Are we making disciples? Are we making communities? Are we making collectives? Are we making scholars? Are we making teachers? Are we making learners? Perhaps we are “making” all of these, or many of these, at once. But I’m not sure how often or how clearly we articulate this element of our educational environment.

I certainly believe that there are elements to our “making” that have been profoundly problematic. In the ELCA context, for instance, in the national *Book of Faith* project, we are learning that some of what has been taught in seminaries – the implicit

curriculum of teaching the Bible, for instance – has "made" scholars, but not made teachers who could go out and help other people to learn the Bible in ways that are effective and constructive. Indeed, we are discovering that some of how we have taught biblical studies has led to pastors "teaching" their parishioners that they must have an expert in attendance any time they open up their Bible.[6]

The third form of knowing that TSB point to – that of *homo ludens* – is at the heart of their book, particularly given all of the MacArthur Foundation research upon which they have drawn. But what kinds of play are theological educators engaged in? I think we could potentially draw on multiple forms of play, everything from the sacred play of liturgy to the formal play of theater of the oppressed. But I'm not sure how often we give ourselves permission to engage in play, even in carefully constructed "educational" play. The work of Johan Huizinga and others points to the very serious nature of play, and the crucial ways in which learning takes shape in environments of play (2008). One element of play, of course, is the making of mistakes, and learning from failure. I doubt that making mistakes and learning from them is much in evidence in the seminary in which I teach, and anecdotal conversations with my colleagues in theological education suggest a similar pattern elsewhere. Henry Jenkins and colleagues have identified a set of learning outcomes they believe that citizens of the 21st century need to achieve (2006). Play, understood as the "capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem-solving" is at the top of their list.[7]

As I move through the work of TSB, and indeed the work of all those upon whom this book rests, I am struck repeatedly by its resonance with the discussion of theological

[6] Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Dale Martin have observed this more systematically in their own books.
[7] Jenkins, p. 22

educator David Tiede, who has been writing for years about the notion of a seminary as three-fold – academy, abbey and apostolate.[8] A seminary as an academy, in all the rich complexity of the "academy" as understand here at the "American Academy of Religion," is no doubt the form with which we are most familiar. Some of us may also have some experience with the "abbey," particularly those of us who live within vowed religious communities. I suspect the notion of an "apostolate" is much less familiar to many. Yet in the Christian community at least, the earliest followers of Jesus did not form an academy or an abbey – they were an apostolate, a community of apostles sharing their learning and experiences by engaging other learners and other experiences.

The "new culture of learning" opens up new arenas of action for us, whole new contexts in which we might engage learning, and in doing so share and learn with others both close at home and far away. I want to close by quoting TSB at length, for their emphasis on play is one that opens up new room for God – however we understand transcendence – to be at work in our midst:

> The almost unlimited resources provided by the information network serve as a set of nutrients, constantly selected and incorporated into the bounded environment of the petri dish, which provides the impetus for experimentation, play, and learning. Accordingly, the culture that emerges, the new culture of learning, is a culture of collective inquiry that harnesses the resources of the network and transforms them into nutrients within the petri dish environment, turning it into a space of play and experimentation.
>
> That moment of fusion between unlimited resources and a bounded environment creates a space that does not simply allow for imagination, it requires it. Only when we care about experimentation, play, and questions more than efficiency, outcomes, and answers do we have a space that is truly open to the imagination.
>
> And where imaginations play, learning happens. (118)

I truly believe that theological education is entering a new era, one of enormous potential for growth and engagement – but only if we truly allow our imaginations to be at work, and to play with the Spirit as she breathes amongst us.

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[8] Described by Daniel Aleshire (2008) p. 126.

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