

CHAPTER ONE

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

This chapter seeks to describe the theoretical foundation upon which I based my search for answers to the questions raised in my introduction. How could and should religious educators interact with popular culture? How can one bring together the various disciplines of theology, psychology, media studies, and religious education into one conversation that sheds light on the dilemmas facing religious educators in a mass-mediated context?

In many ways the choice of which methodology to use to pursue these questions has its roots in the situatedness of my own educational journey. That acknowledgement will lead me into a discussion of the distinctions between “method,” “methodology,” and “epistemology,”; and from there into a very brief consideration of “standpoint” epistemology and its utility in the convergence of feminist practice and religious educational practice. From there I describe the methodology I have chosen to use in this dissertation, participatory action research, and how that methodology structured a collaboration with other religious educators around the use of media literacy within religious education.

Power issues and learning issues

It took several years from the completion of my undergraduate degree before I was ready to return to academe. I struggled during that time with

the contradiction of feeling like the work I was engaged in had to make a difference in the world of which I was a part, and yet also feeling that although certain books had changed me forever, for the most part adding yet another one to the shelves of a library did not make much of a difference in the world. In general I could perceive very little connection between what was already on those shelves and the problems and conflicts of the world in which I grew up.

A long and winding journey through the world of state government and nonprofit management forced the recognition upon me that “making a difference” was much more complicated than I had originally understood it to be, and that academe might provide some useful resources for my search after all. In particular I returned to school with a clear purpose in mind: seeking resources both to understand and to deal with the widespread powerlessness that so many of the educated, white, middle-class people that I lived among inhabited. As I hope will become clear throughout this dissertation, I neither believe that these people have no power, nor do I believe that our feelings of powerlessness are illusory. Rather, I think there are a complex and dynamic set of forces at work that situate such people —and I see myself among them— near the top of a number of structures that form the backbone of oppressive institutions. Yet at the same time these forces inhibit us from understanding the dangerous and debilitating aspects of such power, and from finding more wholistic and relational forms of power from which to deconstruct the various pyramids and construct, instead, healthy tensegritous¹⁵ structures.

¹⁵ Buckminster Fuller coined the term “tensegrity” to describe the incredible stability of structures that are built from the dynamic interaction of holding opposing forces together with respect to their integrity. “Tension” + “integrity” = “tensegrity.” I use the word in an adjectival form, although I realize that this form is not found in any

This personal note should begin to explain why I chose to look for a research methodology that is at once capable of exploring and perhaps even delineating such destructive power dynamics and at the same time describing and utilizing alternative forms of power. Yet I am also seeking an academic credential within an institution that has its own power dynamics, for better or worse; and within an interdisciplinary program that is situated somewhere in the interstices between the fields of education and theology. Any research methodology that I use has to be accessible, it has to utilize language and other tools that can be understood as descriptive and at least interesting, if not reliable, in both fields.

Education as a discipline has found itself, especially in the last few decades, increasingly reliant upon the methods and tools of the social sciences, particularly psychology and sociology. Theology, in contrast, particularly Roman Catholic theology, has been very skeptical about the social sciences, moving only very slowly to integrate such descriptions of human experience into its primary metaphorical inventories. The tools of philosophical reasoning, historical research and literary interpretation have still been the tools that theologians are most comfortable using.¹⁶ In many ways these two fields — education and theology — have traced quite disparate paths in recent history, and are only now beginning once again to converge in their methodologies. The research methodology I use

dictionary, to describe the kind of “border community” that in Chapter Five I will propose religious educators should foster.

¹⁶ As Kelsey and Wheeler (1984) write: “the overwhelming majority of basic research [in theological education] projects rely on studies of bodies of literature in the history of ideas, in one of the human sciences, or in philosophy.”

in this project needs to walk along this convergence, or at least allow for a journey that travels on both of these paths.

The search for a methodology that can do both of these things — remain highly self-conscious about its use of power, and yet also speak in a variety of disciplinary settings — has thrown me into some of the most contested questions of contemporary academic discourse. What is knowledge? How is it created (or constructed? or discovered?) Who is a “knower” and what counts as “knowledge”? These are questions central to what is usually termed “epistemology.” But they are also questions that can be traced in popular culture, if one only listens carefully enough. What does it mean to be “politically correct”? Who has the authority to speak, and in what contexts? What information is “factual” in contemporary events?¹⁷

As I listened and read in the literatures of theology and education, I discovered that I was coming closer to a conversation that could be helpful for my research project. I will have much more to say about epistemologies in later sections of this dissertation, but for the moment what is germane is that the research methodology I was searching for would have to be self-conscious about its epistemology and the power

¹⁷ A recent example, from the spring of 1997, that of the Heaven’s Gate community suicide, illustrates how these questions emerge in popular culture. In this case the people who committed suicide apparently believed that there was an alien ship waiting behind the Hale-Bopp comet to transport them to another dimension, one in which their bodies would no longer be necessary. This community’s livelihood depended on their development of web sites for the Internet, and evidence in support of their beliefs was widely published on the Internet, and thus entered into popular discourse. There was widespread debate in various popular news formats (particularly the tabloid print and television press) as to what “counted” as accurate information in this case, and whom one should believe as to the reliability of the scientific evidence.

dynamics of such, and would have to utilize an epistemology that “worked” in both education and theology.

Method/methodology/epistemology — a way to begin

At this point an initial definition of three terms is necessary: “method,” “methodology,” and “epistemology.” “Method” has generally been defined as “‘techniques’ or specific sets of research practices, such as surveys, interviews, ethnography” and so on. “Methodology” generally falls into a category that includes the “‘perspective’ or very broad theoretically informed framework” that shapes one’s approach to research. And “epistemology” has been defined as a “theory of knowledge which addresses central questions such as: who can be a ‘knower,’ what can be known...” (Stanley & Wise, 1990, p. 26).

These terms are not as clearly demarcated from each other as they might at first appear. Further, given that these terms continue to play a crucial role within academic research, it is important to use them with caution, remaining fully aware of the assumptions implicit in the frameworks in which they are embedded. Indeed, it may be most useful to understand the specific ways in which the frameworks underlying such terms function in a particular context, and then to “pivot” those contexts in such a way as to continually reflect upon, and expand, the frameworks we employ.¹⁸ In my own case, I need to understand in what ways this discussion functions within religious education, and what implications it holds for my own research and teaching.

¹⁸ I am indebted to Collins’ citation of Elsa Barkley Brown for this notion of “pivoting” our epistemological focal point (1990, p. 236).

Setting these terms up as separate and distinct labels of specific categories of research practice suggests that they fall within a hierarchy of meaning, with “method” being the term most closely linked to the practical, day-to-day concerns of research and “epistemology” being that category that is “meta” or philosophically structuring of the entire research enterprise. In this context, “methods” may be adapted to fit a variety of circumstances and used within a variety of epistemological frameworks, “methodologies” provide reasonable rationales for and supervision of, certain methods, again within varying epistemologies. “Epistemologies,” however, so control what is perceived as knowable that if one changes one’s epistemology, one’s research methods must be altered.

I have a certain degree of sympathy with this viewpoint, for I have used the research tools of one discipline (history), in the service of another (religious studies). But when one considers these terms through the lens of certain feminist perspectives, problems arise. For example, it is possible to argue that a research tool or method developed within a particular methodology which is in turn suffused by a specific epistemology cannot be considered apart from that methodology and epistemology. Wresting the tool out of its original context can and must change the “data” uncovered by, or perceived through the use of, that tool. From this perspective it is impossible to describe and utilize a research tool fully without also allowing the methodological and epistemological categories within which that tool was developed to infuse one’s research in some way. Indeed, from this perspective the connotations of these words begin

to conflate to such an extent that it is possible to use them interchangeably, a confusion noted by feminist scholars.¹⁹

What kinds of tools, then, are appropriate within religious education? What kinds of methodologies, and what kinds of epistemologies? The answers to these questions have to refuse the sharp dichotomy that Enlightenment thought has created between “scientific” research, and “practical” experience, between thinking and feeling, between “disinterested” pursuit of answers to basic questions, and “engaged” attempts to work on particular problems.²⁰ The task of religious education is not primarily philosophical argumentation or archaeological and linguistic research, although these disciplines often prove useful to religious educators. Neither is it some form of behavior modification or therapeutic endeavor, although elements of each of these processes may be found within the broad arena that is described as religious education.

Rather, the task of religious education is one of building translations that bridge any perceived divide between the “pure research” of academe, and the “pure practice” of church; it is one of doing synthesis for, or providing accessibility to, resources that provide substantive answers to the questions raised by the “doing” of religious formation, the “making” of a tradition. Boys’ definition is both simple and broad enough that I find it compelling: “religious education is the making accessible of the traditions of the religious community and the making manifest of the

¹⁹ See Stanley and Wise’s (1990) discussion of this confusion, pp. 26 ff.

²⁰ West (1996) has a very accessible description of the dilemmas of Enlightenment thought in his interchanges of essays with Henry Louis Gates, pp. 55-66.

intrinsic connection between traditions and transformation” (1989, p. 193).²¹

What does it mean to provide access? Among other things it requires a “literacy,” even a “fluency” in the beliefs, norms of practice, rituals, and so on of a particular community. It is fundamentally a task of engaging experience: critically, sympathetically, wholeheartedly. Being a religious educator means being passionately embedded in a particular community, situated amidst it so as to be wholly familiar with it, and yet also critically aware enough to be able to recognize its flaws and finitude.

At this point in history being a religious educator also requires recognizing the plurality of religious communities that populate our religious consciousnesses, and being able to speak with love and commitment to one specific community, being rooted and loyal to that one, while at the same time being open to the broad and deep diversity of religious experience that exists both within one community, and amongst the world community of religions.²² What is germane to a discussion of methodology is the requirement that religious educational practice is of necessity “embodied” practice, “situated” practice, “passionate” practice. Belief systems are surely an important part of that practice, but no matter the crystal clarity of a structure of belief, if it doesn’t at the same time create the ability to live authentically from within one’s home community and at the same time embrace the larger global community, it is not at the heart of religious education. The kind of epistemology underlying such an

²¹ Note that this definition does *not* specify the identity of the community (such as “Christian” or “Jewish”), but that I am very deliberately speaking only from my own standpoint as a Catholic Christian educator.

²² Two educators who have helped me sense the need to move in this direction are Rosenak (1987), who uses the language of “loyal, but open,” and Alexander (1997, p. 267), who speaks of “seeking the universal out of the particular.”

educational practice is, in my own experience, most clearly articulated within feminist practice.²³

Feminisms, feminist practices, and standpoint

There are probably as many definitions of feminism, as there are people who call themselves feminists. Most of us share some understanding that gender oppression is a powerful dynamic in the midst of human community; but how we describe that oppression, and how we see it interlocking with other structures such as racism, classism, and so on will be different. There are common threads of feminist *process*, however, particularly the passion for hearing each other into speech, and for doing so in ways that lead to active political²⁴ practices.

That there is an intimate connection between being, knowing and acting is one aspect of what I mean when I use the term “feminist.”²⁵ Popular feminist slogans in the 60’s included “the personal is political” and the “process is the goal.” Both of these slogans suggest that there are no easy distinctions to be made between method, methodology and epistemology. They may be read as suggesting that making such distinctions, and the dichotomizing that often results from using the

²³ Again, I am speaking here from my own experience. Obviously these issues arise in other contexts as well. As Freire (1985, p. 385) notes: “I do not think anyone can seriously engage in a search for new knowledge without using his or her point of view and historical location as a point of departure.”

²⁴ I appreciate Groome’s definition of “political” in relation to religious education: “any deliberate intervention in people’s lives that influences how they live their lives as social beings in history, that is, as agent-subjects-in-relationship” (1991, p. 12).

²⁵ This intimate connection has also been named in many other ways, including Groome’s notion of an “epistemic ontology” (1991, p. 8).

distinctions in research, may in fact be one readily accessible signpost of patriarchal ways of being, knowing and acting.

I do not mean to suggest that terms such as “method, methodology, epistemology” have not been useful in feminist philosophizing, or within academe; rather, I want to suggest that we should see them as temporalized, contingent, and dangerous terms. In short, I suggest that we approach their use — particularly the “results” that come from research built within these frameworks — with a “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

Upon what kind of foundation would such a hermeneutics be built? One possibility grows out of the conversation built around “standpoint theory.” Feminist standpoint theorizing is, in itself, a widely divergent set of theoretical practices. Harding defines it as knowledge “derived from a committed feminist exploration of women’s experience of oppression. It is thus a practical achievement, not an abstract ‘stance’...” (Stanley & Wise, 1990, p. 27).²⁶

The understanding of “feminist standpoint” I find most compelling is clearly articulated in the work of Black feminist or womanist theorists such as Collins (1990), Cannon (1988), and Lorde (1984). Collins (1990, p. 209) suggests that at the heart of knowledge-building in African-American thought systems is “experience as a criterion of meaning with practical images as its symbolic vehicles.” Further, she writes, “connectedness rather than separation is an essential component of the

²⁶ The literature that exists in feminist philosophy concerning epistemological frameworks is wide and deep. I can not deal adequately with it here, although I should point out that Harding is also very critical of the feminist standpoint position, not the least because she perceives it as arising only out of “theorizing out of a sexual division of labour in society.” As will become apparent in what follows, I am naming and claiming a particular stance as relevant to this research project, not exploring the feminist critique of epistemology in depth.

knowledge validation process” (1990, p. 212). “Ideas cannot be divorced from the individuals who create and share them,” (1990, p. 215) hence “while the ideas presented by a speaker must have validity... the group also appraises the way knowledge claims are presented” (1990, p. 216). Finally she notes that (pp. 217-218):

An ethic of personal accountability is the final dimension of an alternative epistemology. Not only must individuals develop their knowledge claims through dialogue and present them in a style proving their concern for their ideas, but people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims.

This articulation of a feminist standpoint position suggests that the development of knowledge in a feminist context — here, in a specifically Black feminist context — requires the active acknowledgement of, and participation in, a wider, politically committed community.

It is often argued that one of the primary benefits of positivist scientific epistemologies, and the methodologies they employ, is their ability to develop ways of describing our surroundings in a manner that can be independently verified, and thus is descriptive across numerous boundaries. Indeed, some within academe still argue for the applicability of such terms as “universal” within scientific research. The ability to create descriptions that can be widely shared is indeed useful, but there is no need to rely on what we now recognize as the narrow epistemologies of the Enlightenment to do so. Feminist standpoint theorists have their own rich proposals for such knowledge building. As Collins suggests (1990, p. 236):

Those ideas that are validated as true by African-American women, African-American men, Latina lesbians, Asian-American women, Puerto Rican men, and other groups with distinctive standpoints, with each group using the epistemological approaches growing from its unique standpoint, thus become the most “objective” truths. Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares

its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups' standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups' partial perspectives. ... Partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard; individuals and groups forwarding knowledge claims without owning their position are deemed less credible than those who do.

This description fuses epistemological concerns with methodological ones. *What* one knows is intimately linked to *how* one goes about knowing it. Yet that fusing is illuminating and *infusing*, rather than *confusing* (as an Enlightenment mind might suggest).²⁷ All of these terms are striving to find a way to talk about “truth” as arising from, or depending upon, “understanding, which emerges from functioning in the world” (Winnicott (cited in Jones, 1996, p. 111)).

In the future, we may reach a place where “all people can learn to center in another experience, validate it, and judge it by its own standards without need of comparison or need to adopt that framework as their own. In such dialogues, one has no need to ‘decenter’ anyone in order to center someone else; one has only to constantly, appropriately, ‘pivot the center’” (Brown (cited by Collins, 1990, p. 236)). In this context, developing research projects in collaboration with communities, indeed, with their active participation, would be a necessity, not a trivial or dangerous practice. Research methods that refused to “own their partiality” would be actively discouraged. The pursuit of “universal” truths would become the pursuit of highly specific truths that yet have the ability to speak to myriad

²⁷ Another way to describe this stance would be to go to the literature evolving in psychology and religion and talk about an alternative to either “an empiricist ideal of objectivity” or “radical subjectivity,” namely, what Lakoff and Bernstein call “experientialism” and Jones suggests could be labelled in Winnicott’s terminology an “interactionalist epistemology” (Jones, 1996, pp. 110-111).

difference. As Lorraine Hansberry suggests: “one of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific” (Hansberry (cited in Collins, 1990, p. 234)). It is in the midst this search for ways of “pivoting the center,” that these concerns become most pressing in my own discipline of religious education.

It is precisely this kind of research, that actively owns its commitments and is explicitly situated within a specific community, that I believe is most useful for religious educators. This standpoint, if you will, is also why I have begun this text with a more personal introduction, and why I continue to reiterate that I am speaking from a very specific community and to a very specific community,²⁸ although I acknowledge — and perhaps even hope for — the possibility of relevance beyond that community.

As noted, religious education in an age of pluralism often finds itself most concerned with how to go about communicating and nurturing the specific truths of specific religious communities.²⁹ And yet many, if not most, religious communities see their truths as the universal Truth. There is a clear contradiction here, given the diversity of religious community, at least in terms of an Enlightenment definition of “universal.” Religious educators also find themselves in the position of seeking to spread a

²⁸ As previously noted: the community of religious educators working in the Christian tradition, and even more specifically in the Catholic community.

²⁹ I acknowledge that this is such a generalization as to be almost useless, since there are obviously many very diverse definitions of “religious education,” and it is an endeavor that has manifested itself very differently at various points in history, and within diverse communities. Yet I think the point I’m trying to make is important: in a mass-mediated context people no longer are immersed in one particular community of faith enough to absorb it totally through socialization, nor are purely intellectual approaches generally effective in such a context.

community's "Truth" to the people not yet within it, or to people who are rapidly finding reasons to leave. The task for feminist religious educators becomes yet more complicated by the reality that any given religious community is permeated by patriarchal oppression that is similar, if not identical, to that which structures the society in which it lives. So the "truth" that feminist religious educators are seeking to communicate also includes critical engagement with the fundamental assumptions binding the community together in the first place.

Participatory action research

What tools, then, might be helpful as I approach a project from this kind of epistemological standpoint? As I continued to search through the conversations occurring in education, one in particular had enormous resonance for me — the discussion about research methodologies clustering around what is now most often called "participatory action research (PAR)." At its most basic, Whyte, et. al. (1991, p. 20) note that PAR is a process wherein "some of the people in the organization or community under study participate actively with the professional researcher throughout the study process from the initial design to the final presentation of results and discussion of their action implications."

PAR has deep roots in a number of advocacy contexts. Deshler and Ewert³⁰ (1995) note five such realms, in particular: action research in organizations, participatory research in community development, action

³⁰ The Deshler & Ewert article is taken from the electronic archives of PARNet, an ever-evolving resource found on the Internet at: www.parnet.org. This WWW resource connects researchers around the world who are using the PAR methodology.

research in schools, farmer participatory research and technology generation, and participatory evaluation.³¹ The name of the methodology, “participatory action research” provides important clues to its methods. It is first and primarily about “participation.” From the standpoint of my basic questions, if I was to use a PAR methodology any research framework had to involve collaboration, it had to find a way to balance the demands my institution placed upon me with respect to the credential I was seeking in undertaking this project, with the questions and concerns of the people to whom I hoped my research would prove useful. The questions I sought answers to had to grow out of our shared questions, they could not simply be problems to which I was seeking solutions by studying, as an outsider, some set of research “subjects.”

In this respect, PAR as a methodology was precisely what I was looking for. In its emphasis on participation it provided a rationale for ensuring that the people to whom I hoped to be helpful were intimately involved in the construction of whatever knowledge was to be produced. On a practical level, that meant that I was seeking to collaborate with religious educators who were interested in pop culture issues. It also provided a set of ethical questions that structured my own participation. In building my research project around this methodology I created a structure — specific people with specific concerns — that could hold me accountable for the processes we would engage, and whatever insights we could suggest.

³¹ Torres (1992, p. 53) notes that when participatory methodologies have been applied to pedagogical strategies in Latin America they have often been implemented by people who “have worked, politically and professionally, within political parties, universities, and research centers, as well as with organizations *that have originated in or are linked to churches.*” [my emphasis]

The second term of the name, “action,” is perhaps a more difficult aspect of this methodology to describe. As Deshler (1995) points out, all five realms out of which PAR grew share a commitment to action, which he defines as a “research process aligned with potential for community action” and reflecting “a commitment by researchers and community participants to individual, social, technical or cultural actions consequent to the learning acquired through research.”

The connections between such research and the daily lives of people of faith are precisely the connections I, as a religious educator, would like to nurture. But they are not always connections that flourish in the realm of academic theological discourse,³² and thus they are difficult connections to delineate in the languages I must use to acquire the credential which is, after all, the material condition for my undertaking this research project. Part of what I attempt in this project, then, is to specify a definition of “action” that grows out of religiously engaged educational research, or educationally engaged religious research.

In some ways, it is the “action” part of “participatory action research” that begins to get at the epistemological issues. Consider Kincheloe’s description of the requirements of such research (1995 p. 74):

First, it rejects Cartesian-Newtonian notions of rationality, objectivity, and truth. Second, critical action researchers are aware of their own value commitments, the value commitments of others and the values promoted by the dominant culture.

³² That they do not flourish perhaps says more about the current institutional framework of academic endeavors in the US, than about the theologies or theologians to be found within that structure. Indeed, there is a lively conversation going on within what might be called “border” theologies about whether or not academe is even an appropriate place within which to work. I, as a feminist Catholic, have obviously chosen to find ways to work within this framework — one way being the need to be continually conscious of the contradictions inherent in such an endeavor.

In other words, one of the main concerns of critical action research involves the exposure of the relationship between personal values and practice. Third, critical action researchers are aware of the social construction of professional consciousness. Fourth, critical action researchers attempt to uncover those aspects of the dominant social order which undermine our effort to pursue emancipatory goals. And, fifth, critical action research is always conceived in relation to practice — it exists to improve practice.

While Kincheloe chooses to label such a methodology “critical action research,” the description is similar to that of participatory action research,³³ and is clearly linked to the kinds of concerns being raised by the feminist standpoint theorists. It also has resonance within the framework of “conscientization” raised by Freire (1985) and of “epistemic ontology” raised by Groome (1991).

The final term of the name specifying this methodology is “research.” At its root is the necessity of searching again, that is, to “re” “search.” And it is precisely in the sense of searching again, of finding multiple lenses through which to consider information, that I struggled with the academic definitions of research. How would I interpret the “data” generated by this project? If it was a participatory project was there any sense in which I alone could do that? Given that the methods a researcher uses to interpret data inevitably shape the conclusions reached, what kinds of conclusions was I trying to reach? Indeed, if participation was to be a fundamental part of the process, what kinds of questions was I even asking? Ultimately, I chose to ask a basic question — how might religious educators encounter popular culture texts in a media literacy framework, and in what ways could such a framework prove useful to them? — and then to seek out religious educators who were interested in asking that question with me.

³³ For a more systematic exploration of the differences in nuance between “participatory action research,” “action science,” and “action research,” see Argyris & Schon (1991).

As the project progressed, we began to uncover relevant answers, and I began to deepen my own understanding of the initial question and ask what I believe to be an integrally related question: how might critical engagement with popular culture enhance religious experience?

The “data” to be considered in this project is both the active process of the research workshop, the six sessions in which the group of us engaged in dialogue and learning around issues of religious education and media literacy; as well as the learning or “data” generated outside of the workshop, in the ways in which workshop participants integrated the substance of the workshop into their own lives and their own teaching contexts. This latter kind of information was primarily accessed via the post-workshop interviews, although occasionally participants shared it during our “check-in” time at each workshop session. In addition I have learned, and thus “generated data,” through my own struggle to situate this process amidst a complex set of academic discussions.

There are three sites for constructing the knowledge I believe we are generating in this project: the workshop itself, which reflects most directly a “practice” dimension; the post-workshop interviews, which reflect upon that practice dimension; and my own attempts to situate the project amidst the larger conversations taking place within academe. All of these sites are intimately and integrally linked to each other, and the synthesis I achieve in this project, if it is achieved at all, will be because I can make that interdependence clear. The “re” “search” process, then, includes all of the ways in which we (the workshop participants, myself, and my dissertation committee) separately and together, tried to enrich and extend our understanding, our knowledge, through returning to our experiences again and again.

I will have more to say in later sections of this dissertation about the specific ways in which we sought to come to these understandings, but the primary mechanism that made it possible to return again and again to our experiences, adding layer upon layer of meaning to them, was audiotape transcript (for the workshop participants) and repeated writing/editing (for the academic conversation). All of the workshop sessions were recorded on audiotape, as were the individual interviews I did with each of the workshop participants following the conclusion of the six sessions.³⁴ I transcribed these tapes and generated printed transcripts that made it possible to return to the sessions looking for shared themes and emerging insights. I also maintained a written research journal chronicling my own reactions to and immersion in the process, as well as records of discussions with various faculty members.

In general I used Deshler and Ewert's (1995) delineation of the "major assumptions of participatory action research" as a resource for implementing a PAR methodology in this project. If the project fulfills these assumptions, then I believe it can be claimed to be PAR. If not, simply trying to understand in what ways the methodology did *not* work will be helpful as well. These assumptions include a set of "common values":

1. the democratization of knowledge production and use
2. ethical fairness in the benefits of of the knowledge generation process
3. an ecological stance toward society and nature
4. appreciation of the capacity of humans to reflect, learn, and change, and
5. a commitment to nonviolent social change

³⁴ As the group is still meeting intermittently, this research is only "finished" in the sense that the specific sessions they agreed to as part of my doctoral credentialing process are over.

Deshler and Ewert also believe that PAR specifies very concrete kinds of broad ownership of the research, clear commitment to action, a stance on the part of the “formally trained researcher” that is one of engaged participation rather than “objective observation,” a research process that is flexible and oriented towards change, and a process for resolving any differences that arise that is fair and open. These values permeate many descriptions of the adult education process as well and thus I chose to use that literature as a framework for the workshop that formed the heart of this research project.

Workshop planning

I am particularly indebted to Vella (1994) and Brookfield (1991) for the structural suggestions upon which I based the workshop. Coming into this process I knew that I wanted to build a space within which a conversation would emerge that could explore the tensions and resources of popular culture for the religious education endeavor. But having such a desire, and finding ways to make it happen are often two very different things. More than anything the work of these two authors suggested to me that it is important to have faith in the learning process of adults as a self-interested, self-driven one.

I was also very interested in building upon work that had already been done within the media literacy movement. One resource that was suggested to me was a curriculum “kit” — basically a set of session agendas with accompanying handouts and background guide — published by the Center for Media Literacy in California. This kit, entitled *Catholic Connections to Media Literacy (CCML)*, is available for use

throughout the United States, with many dioceses owning copies through their media centers. I decided to use that resource as a starting point for this research project, not so much to evaluate it rigorously, although some evaluation would be inevitable, but more to provide a common point of reference for our work and a connection to a movement beyond this one small project. I took that resource, and then embedded it in the twelve adult education principles found with Vella's work. In the section that follows I will talk briefly about each principle and how I sought to implement it in this context. The general theory that both Vella and Brookfield adhere to is that adult learning takes place in dialogue: dialogue between learner and materials, between different learners, between a learner and a teacher (facilitator), and so on.

Vella's twelve principles

1. "Needs assessment": "Learners need to participate in naming what it is to be learned," (Vella, 1994, p. 3 and following). I facilitated this naming in three main ways. First, while I tried to be clear about my own interests in coming to this project, I specifically asked for the kinds of questions and concerns participants brought to the research from the very beginning, in the application process. Next, in our first meeting, I spent the bulk of the meeting facilitating a discussion of how we would go about pursuing these questions. As will become clear in what follows, one consequence of that discussion is that we focussed our inquiries around specific "genres" of media (film, television, the Internet, and so on), and used the CCML kit as a loose organizing tool rather than an explicit curriculum to follow. Throughout the workshop I continued to ask the

group how we wanted to proceed, and I supported people in bringing their own materials, and indeed, as one did, in facilitating an entire session. Finally, at the close of the six sessions I engaged each participant in a lengthy interview that helped to name what it is that they, and we as a group, had learned.

2. “Safety”: People need safe environments in which to trust themselves to dialogue, particularly if that dialogue has transformation as any part of its intentionality.³⁵ Working as we are in the United States, at an elite university, this issue of safety has less to do with physical comfort (although I tried to ensure that as well, providing snacks, coffee and soda, and having the workshop meet in a comfortable room), and more to do with emotional, intellectual space. I approached this issue in a variety of ways. Part of what became clear in the interviews and meetings we held to discuss our learnings was that the research frame, that is, the fact that this project took place as part of a dissertation research project and entailed an application process with a consent form and a confidentiality agreement, had an important effect on the project because it created a degree of responsibility that made participants take the process very seriously.

Participants also mentioned the safety implicit in using “duets” and “quartets,” a process wherein I asked people to discuss a specific text first with one partner, and then that “duet” discussed it with another “duet” of two people, before returning to the larger group discussion. Finally, while few people mentioned it, I suspect that my explicit discussion in our first session of possible power issues might also have created a certain kind of

³⁵ See Walker (1996) for a very useful exploration and definition of “dialogue as a strategy for transformative education.”

openness and safe space in which to broach conflicting feelings and interpretations.

3. “Sound relationship”: “Friendship, but no dependency, fun without trivialization of learning, dialogue between men and women who consider themselves peers” (1994, p. 65) is Vella’s definition of “sound relationship.” There were several ways in which I tried to build upon this principle, but two seemed particularly effective: spending our first meeting on lengthy introductions, and always beginning subsequent meetings with a round of “check-ins” that gave people a brief opportunity to describe their energy level and anything else they felt like sharing. I also tried — with the group’s full cooperation and help — to ensure that our conversations gave everyone a chance to participate, whether through smaller “breakout” groups such as the duets and quartets, or through “round robins” where we simply went around the circle and asked everybody who wanted to, to share a reaction or comment. It almost goes without saying, but perhaps can’t be emphasized enough, that the material itself contributed greatly to the fun. Popular culture is by definition, “popular,” especially in its mass-mediated, commercial forms, and again and again we found ourselves sharing laughter together, and sharing tears, as we engaged these texts.

4. “Sequence and reinforcement”: Vella writes that it’s important to begin at the beginning, to “move from small to big, slow to fast, easy to hard” (1994, p. 80). This was a rather more difficult principle to use, partly because the project itself started to define what was the “beginning” in terms of integrating media literacy into religious education. As will become clear in the description of the workshop, some participants came into the process with substantial production experience, as well as

significant experience in thinking through these issues. Others were new to the ideas, and only beginning to consider how pop culture texts might function in their own personal lives, let alone in their professional contexts. Perhaps the biggest consequence of trying to remain close to this principle is that we ended up spending far more time than I had originally anticipated simply in learning how to do media literacy work together. The integration of that work into religious education ended up happening more often outside the workshop, in individual participant's contexts.

5. "Action with reflection, or *praxis*": This principle underlies the CCML curriculum itself, not to mention the participatory action research methodology we were using. Within religious reflection this process has been well described by Henriot and Holland (1983, p. 8) as a "pastoral circle" of "insertion, social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral planning."³⁶ Vella uses the terms "description, analysis, application, implementation" (1994, p. 12). The element of *praxis* that was most problematic in the workshop context was that of action, and I will address the question of whether or not we accomplished any "action" in chapter five of this work.

6. "Learners as subjects of their own learning": This principle is bound up with the previous five, and certainly is a central component of a participatory action research strategy, which seeks as much as possible to create an environment and structure within which participants ask and

³⁶ "*Praxis*" as a term is also frequently used within PAR contexts, although the elements of the process are named somewhat differently. Fals-Borda (1991, p. 157) suggests that "cultural-historical *praxis*" has three elements: "(1) the investigative practice, which requires the usual care and discipline; (2) the ideological practice, which requires clarity and ability to understand and communicate, and (3) the *political* practice, which requires commitment, boldness and a utopian vision...."

seek answers for their own questions. In the case of the specific content we were considering this principle came alive in the ways in which workshop members found themselves integrating these questions and materials into their own personal practices, in addition to their professional contexts. How each of them approached their own media use shed substantial light on how their students might engage the media, and helped us as a group to think through the ways in which we wanted to support this kind of engagement in various religious contexts.

7. “Learning with ideas, feelings, and actions”: This principle is particularly well facilitated by engagement with visual and aural media, since part of what we were learning is that one dimension of media literacy involves paying attention to one’s emotional engagement with a specific text. Religious educators are, as well, very aware of the ways in which religious formation involves far more than cognitive, intellectual functions. As noted previously, what could be considered “action” in this context will be considered at greater length later.

8. “Immediacy”: This principle has to do with learning and teaching what is “really useful” in a particular context. Again, because we structured what we were doing around the questions and concerns of the people in the workshop, this question of what is “really useful” was constantly in front of us. To some extent, the fact that the workshop group kept meeting, long past the group’s initial time commitment, suggests that the process retained immediacy.

9. “Clear roles”: Vella tries to make clear the importance of moving the role of teacher from one of didactic emphasis to one of facilitation of dialogue. As she writes: “a teacher can be intent upon dialogue with an adult learner, but if the learner sees the teacher as ‘the professor’ with

whom there is no disagreement, no questioning, no challenge, the dialogue is dead in the water” (1994, p. 17). In a situation such as this workshop, where I brought the group together, and where the process was ultimately going to be part of my own dissertation, it would have been relatively easy for me to control the process in such a way. Typing up the transcripts was in some ways very difficult for me, personally, because I often felt while listening to the tapes that even with a commitment to dialogue I had spoken too often and at too great a length. But workshop members disagreed when I asked them about this concern in interviews, and stressed the extent to which we engaged a process that created opportunities for everyone to speak. There is a delicate balance to be had, somewhere between sharing information that you have based upon experience and research in a way that opens up conversation, and sharing that information in a way that constructs the teacher as an expert whose opinions cannot be contradicted. Vella’s principles work toward ensuring the former, and our group believed that we managed this process in that way.

10. “Teamwork”: This principle is in some ways simply a summary statement of Vella’s previous nine, because each of the earlier principles, if followed well, results in the development of teams of learners. In the case of our research project, the group itself, with only thirteen members, was one team. Different members held different roles, in the sense that some were more outspoken, often leading a discussion, whereas others paid more careful attention to ensuring that everyone participated, still other members of the group regularly brought snacks, posters of upcoming events, and so on, that led to further team building.

11. “Engagement”: This principle has to do with helping learners express their interest and investment in a learning event, and thus reinforces the earlier principles, as well as becoming more a sign of success, evidence of a goal reached, than a specific objective.

12. “Accountability”: Vella’s final principle in particular seeks to specify the goals of a process. As she writes: “what was proposed to be taught must be taught, what was meant to be learned must be learned, the skills intended to be gained must be manifest in all the learners” and so on (1994, p. 21). Aside from all that was previously discussed in relation to the ways in which I structured the workshop process, there were three other steps that I took to try to ensure accountability in this research process. First, I gave all of the participants access to workshop transcripts, as well as to the transcripts of their own post-workshop interviews. Second, I held a post-workshop session that discussed what I thought I was learning from doing the transcripts, and facilitated conversations about what the group thought we had learned.³⁷ Third, and finally, I invited workshop participants to participate in my dissertation defense by coming and asking questions.

Workshop recruiting

In December of 1995 I began recruiting participants for the project. I advertised throughout the Boston Theological Institute (a group of nine graduate programs in theology and ministry), as well as any other local

³⁷ See Appendix D. for the 23 October memo that I brought to our first “post workshop” meeting to discuss learning outcomes.

publication I thought might reach people who would be interested.³⁸ Having attended, the previous October, a workshop sponsored by the Archdiocese of Boston on media literacy for secondary school teachers, I also had the benefit of the list of participants from that workshop, and eventually a list of all the principals of Catholic secondary schools in the greater Boston area.

Part of the process of recruitment included an application that asked potential participants to think about what they would like to accomplish in the process, and a letter of introduction that gave me an opportunity to outline for them what I expected.³⁹ I asked each person to commit to coming to all six sessions of the workshop; to agree to have the workshop audiotaped for later transcription; and to do an exit interview (also to be taped) in which they would discuss their experience of the workshop. Of the 28 inquiries and applications I received, twelve people finally agreed to be a part of the project. I had planned to accept up to fifteen people into the research group. Since only twelve people decided they could commit to the requirements of the process, I did not have to employ any selection criteria to limit the group in size (beyond the self-selection involved in filling out an application and agreeing to join the project).

While the group was in many ways very similar, there also was a fair amount of diversity. To honor my agreement with them that I would keep their participation confidential, I have given them all pseudonyms when I quote them in this text, and I will describe them only briefly as follows. There were eight women and four men, ranging in age from 28 to 56. Six of the group were single, three were married, and three were vowed religious

³⁸ See Appendix A. for that ad.

³⁹ Please see Appendix A. for these forms.

(one of whom was later ordained a priest). Ten members of the group were Catholic, one was Protestant, and one was a Unitarian. Nine members of the group were white, one was Mexican/Chinese/white, one was Chinese/German, and one was African-American. Seven members of the group were graduate students (either at Boston College or at Harvard), three were directors of religious education, and two were Catholic secondary school teachers. Four members of the group had significant professional communications production experience (one had previously worked as a graphic designer, and three had done radio and/or television production work), while three members claimed no familiarity with pop culture or its production.

The descriptions of goals that people wrote on their applications were remarkably similar. The general desire was one of connecting with often younger students who were clearly very enmeshed in a media culture, and finding ways to do so that would provide an entry point into religious discussions. In the chapter that follows, I will describe the workshop itself, and begin to point towards some of the conclusions at which we arrived.