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'Crossing frontiers without a map'—the role of threshold concepts and problematic knowledge in religious education and spirituality

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Abstract

Earlier research has examined the potential of pedagogies of disorientation or displacement for religious education and spirituality, within a pedagogical framework shifting from secure orientation through disturbing disorientation, and towards surprising reorientation (Brueggemann, 2007; Mudge, 2013a; M. Taylor, 1987). Such articles have noted that these three movements are cyclical and repetitive in nature, and challenge teacher and student transition in teaching and learning. Yet researchers have also asserted that it remains the prerogative of each individual as to whether or not they respond to the challenge of any disorientation or reorientation that confronts them.

This article focuses more specifically on the middle movement of "disturbing disorientation" within the disciplines of religious education and spirituality, what threshold concept theory refers to as "crossing the threshold or liminal zone". In particular, it focuses on that pedagogical moment of transition into deeper and conflicted understanding of the relevant topic. It is concerned with the central issue of what transpires when students move from their "comfort zones" towards the more difficult transitions involved with threshold concepts (Land, Meyer, & Smith, 2008), a movement also referred to in the paper as a "threshold transition". It also examines what particular thresholds were the most discomforting or disorienting for the author's Masters students in religious education and spirituality. It does this in relation to analysis of some 600 reflection learning logs completed by the Masters students between September 2011 and November 2013 (Mudge, 2013b).

Taken together, the findings from this paper have the potential to make a constructive contribution to ongoing threshold concept research, to pedagogical frameworks within religious education and spirituality, and to challenge similar frameworks within associated areas such as theology, philosophy, and other disciplines.

Keywords

Threshold concepts, threshold transitions, problematic knowledge, religious education, spirituality, kataphatic and apophatic knowing, reflective learning logs.

Introduction

This paper will focus on ways in which Masters students of religious education (hereafter RE) and spirituality engage with threshold concepts and problematic knowledge. It does this in relation to an analysis of some 600 reflection learning logs completed by the author's Masters students between September 2011 and November 2013 (Mudge, 2013b). Following some brief prefacing remarks, it explores six key areas followed by conclusions, some covered briefly and others in greater depth:

1. What is meant by "threshold concepts" (hereafter TCs)?

2. What do student narratives tell us about how students engage with TCs and what I call threshold transitions (TTs) and why do they find it difficult to understand and respond to both? (TTs are the total movement or transition sought, such as from knowledge to wisdom, whereas TCs are the single end point of that transition – in this case wisdom).

3. In what ways can Walter Brueggemann's threefold taxonomy assist in a deeper understanding of TCs and TTs?

4. What particular TTs do the students find the most challenging?

5. Kataphatic and apophatic knowing as one example of a difficult TT.

6. Data from student reflective learning logs demonstrating various "disorienting" TTs.

'Crossing frontiers without a map'

The title of this paper is drawn from some reflections by Arnold van Gennep in his classic work *The Rites of Passage,* originally published in French in 1908, and later in English in 1960. In his second section entitled "The Territorial Passage", van Gennep (1960) observes:

> Territorial passages can provide a framework for the discussion of rites of passage which follows … The frontier, an imaginary line connecting milestones or stakes, is visible—in an exaggerated fashion—only on maps. But not so long ago the passage from one country to another, from one province to another within each country, …was accompanied by various formalities … [one such formality is the rite of crossing a threshold] … In order to understand rites pertaining to the threshold, one should always remember that the threshold is only a part of the door and that most of these rites should be understood as direct and physical rites of entrance, of waiting, and of departure—that is, as rites of passage. (pp. 15, 25)

Cognisant of van Gennep's observations, this article focuses on two aspects of this "crossing frontiers" experience—one, that many students are indeed "without a map" both *before* and *during the transition time* when they need to decide whether or not to cross into the deeper concepts and challenges within RE and spirituality; and two, it is important to discuss and suggest which threshold concepts might be helpful to better enable students to cross into and find their directions within these new territories. The latter will be based on sample narratives drawn from some 600 plus learning reflection logs completed by the author's Masters students between September 2011 and November 2013 (Mudge, 2013b). It is also instructive to note at the outset that, in the above passage, van Gennep visualises the 'threshold' as part of the door, indeed a zone rather than a state, that requires entering, waiting upon, and departing.

But first, before moving on to the nature of threshold concepts, some brief comments on two key terms employed in this paper—RE and spirituality. "Religious education" is understood here as that form of education focused on religion, which in its general sense embraces a particular activity that humans do in relation to belief and culture, including elements such as sacred beliefs, creeds, rituals, texts, ethics, architecture, inspiring people, spirituality, gender and power (Nye, 2008, pp. 1–22). However, this predominantly is an instrumental definition and needs to be supplemented by other more organic descriptions, such as those based on metaphors of dwelling "at home" and crossing "boundaries" (cf. comfort and discomfort zones respectively). A useful metaphor for such transitions is the compact and common garden snail. A helpful definition embracing such concepts has been proposed by Thomas A. Tweed (2006), and will act as a flexible definition for this paper. He states "religions are confluences of

organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and super human forces to make homes and cross boundaries" (p. 54).

The other key term, "spirituality", is understood as a reality that overlaps with religion, and which characterises the way in which a person or community lives out its religious beliefs in a practical and meaningful way, in relation to a particular tradition such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and others. Spirituality, moreover, is envisaged as "a conscious way of life based on a transcendent referent" (Mason, Webber, Singleton, & Hughes, 2006, p. 2). That is, it acknowledges a reality beyond but complementary to the immanent, a reality that exists in God, the Mystery, or the Sacred, yet in and beyond the material or created world (cf. Sinclair, 2003, p. 1267). In a more practical sense, it refers to "the deepest values and meanings by which people seek to live … [and] implies some kind of vision of the human spirit and of what will assist it to achieve full potential" (Sheldrake, 2007, pp. 1–2). In this combined sense, spirituality cannot be separated from religion, ethics, wisdom and praxis. Spirituality too is associated with these metaphors and experiences of crossing over thresholds or boundaries, of invitations to leave home, pass through frontiers, return home, and ultimately arrive at transformation.

1. Contemplating the frontier—what are "threshold concepts" and "problematic knowledge"?

In order to learn, to be "educated" and thus "stretched" in their thinking, students need to engage successfully with both TCs and TTs. A helpful reminder of the original theorising behind TCs is provided by Baillie, Bowden and Meyer (2012) who observe with great insight:

> Threshold concept papers often use the term "concept" in relation to various aspects of the discipline being studied. The origins of the TCF [Threshold Concepts Framework] however, were *not content focused* and arose in the context of a *large multidisciplinary UK research project that focused on the constructive alignment between aims and the whole teaching-learning environment.* (p. 235, author's *italics*)

It was within the context of this research project that Meyer and Land identified many thresholds to learning which they then related to a broader set of ideas (as cited in Baillie et al., 2012, p. 234). Hence, they were concerned with what I would term the links between "separate" and "connected" knowing. Separate and connected knowing are sometimes also referred to as autonomous and relational knowing respectively (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997, pp. 101–103). Other authors, such as Davies and Mangan (2008), considered the hard task of applying such TCs within one's own profession, and with demonstrating "practical" or "procedural knowing" (Davies & Mangan, 2008, pp. 38–39). These are issues with which the author's Masters students also struggle in relation to TCs and problematic knowledge—how does a teacher engage students in struggling with TCs and TTs, as well as demonstrate their "procedural knowing" in practical or concrete ways?

Eight characteristics of threshold concepts as problematic/troublesome knowledge on the frontier

The relatively young suite of literature on TCs focuses variously on eight characteristics that can assist the threshold-crossing journey, and also more importantly, identifying TCs within the teaching and learning experiences of both teachers and their classroom students:

1. *Transformative*—occasioning a significant shift in the perception of a subject.
2. *Troublesome*—counter-intuitive, alien or seemingly incoherent.
3. *Irreversible*—difficult to "unlearn".
4. *Integrated*— exposes the previously hidden interrelatedness of something.
5. *Bounded*—delineates and captures.
6. *Discursive*—dialogical and "stretching".
7. *Reconstitutive*—shift in learner subjectivity over time.
8. *Liminal*—messy back and forth journeys over threshold in relation to a "difficult concept".

(Land, Meyer, & Smith, 2008, pp. x–xiii; Meyer, Land, & Baillie, 2010, pp. ix–xi)

This paper will focus in particular on the first two characteristics of TCs. The notion of "transformative" is fairly straight forward, except to note that such transformation "can be protracted, over considerable periods of time, and involve *oscillation* between states, often with temporary regression to earlier status" (Land et al., 2008, p. xi). In doing so, the paper understands "troublesome" and "problematic" as equivalent terms (Perkins, 1999), described not just in the manner above, but also as "ritualised, inert, tacit or even intellectually absurd at face value" (Land et al., 2008, p. x). One further variant of troublesome knowledge is "nettlesome knowledge" which comprises "elements of knowledge that are deemed taboo in that they are defended against, repressed or ignored because if they were grasped they might 'sting' and thus evoke a feared intense emotional and *embodied* response" (Sibbett & Thompson, 2008, p. 229). This characteristic has also been labelled elsewhere as "dissonant" and "disorienting" (cf. Mezirow, 1991), the latter concurring with Brueggemann's taxonomy, to be examined in part three.

The case is made in part five of this paper that the transition from kataphatic to apophatic knowing can be regarded as a sound example of such a TC, as well as a challenging engagement with problematic or troublesome knowledge. The kataphatic dimension refers to *what one can actually see*, visualise, trace, or read—creation, writings, maps, journals and so on. The apophatic dimension is reflected in *what one cannot see*, write or physically relate to—darkness, intuition, mysticism, and symbolism. The kataphatic and apophatic relationship is seminal not only to RE and spirituality, and to their ways of knowing. For example, as Holt (1971; cited in Atkin, 2007, p. 22) observes, there are realities that we can see and collect data on—but there are others that we don't yet know and still others that "we don't know that we don't know". The next section focuses on dimensions of TCs and TTs commonly explored within the disciplines of RE and spirituality.

2.   What do student narratives tell us about "crossing frontiers without a map" and links with TCs?

Student narratives of crossing, dwelling and "stuckness"

The research field of TCs (and by association with the TTs that they imply) is not just concerned with themes within its growing literature, or to its pure theoretical grounding, but with actual TCs and TTs that transpire within the lives of students, and their learning and teaching experiences. After all, the ultimate aim of any academic theory for practising RE and spirituality students must be those practical aspects and principles that transform them into more successful and critical teachers—in other words the procedural, possessive, performative or proactive aspects of their roles (Land et al., 2008, p. xiii).

For this author, such narratives of process and performance are an important element, linked to teacher wisdom and praxis that lie at the heart of TC literature. This I hope will become evident in the selection of 600 learning logs analysed later in this paper. While these learning logs were focused on questions related to Brueggemann's tripartite transition of life and spirituality (see part three), I hope it will also become obvious that Brueggemann's theory (2007, pp. 1–16) can be intimately and supportively connected with TC theory and practice.

Included here are three examples of student narratives which suggest difficult transitions—in relation to faith, religion, and the shift from kataphatic to apophatic knowing, respectively.

> I thought that *faith* was a thing, a noun, a static product. Now I realise that it is a verb, a process, something alive. That's scary and I'll have to reflect deeply on that. (Campbelltown student, 2013)

> *Religion* used to be about doctrines and creeds, but Tweed's theory about religion as 'crossing and dwelling' changes everything". (Newcastle student, 2013)

> I don't accept *kataphatic and apophatic knowing*. There are only two types of knowing— what science has discovered and what it has yet to discover. There is no mystery, or Holt's [4th way of knowing]'what I don't know that I don't know'. (Hobart student, 2012)

These statements suggest that the students in question have crossed over into new perceptions or challenges of the three respective areas – faith, religion, and kataphatic/apophatic knowing – and that they have dwelled or become stuck in a liminal zone of "not knowing". In the last example, the student has surveyed the "territory" of kataphatic and apophatic knowing and clearly rejected it as a viable pedagogical framework.

The foregoing understandings of TCs and TTs are now further enriched by placing them in conversation with the theory of Walter Brueggemann (2007, pp. 1–16), which again is commonly employed within the disciplines of RE, biblical studies and spirituality.

3. Being "stuck" at the threshold—in dialogue with Brueggemann's three movements

Crossing a threshold has already been characterised in this article by words and phrases such as—liminality, stuckness, paralysis, and "hanging around in the fog" (to live with uncertainty and ambiguity, in Baillie, Kabo, & Reader, 2012, p. 58). Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann introduces other words that are helpful for understanding and negotiating threshold crossings, especially across the liminal zone, by employing terms such as "disturbance" and "disorientation". This section examines ways in which Brueggemann's taxonomy can promote a deeper understanding of this middle zone, and how it can provide some clues to students' questions about "where to next" (after departing liminality).

Based on his analysis of psalmic spirituality, Brueggemann (2007) suggests that the life of faith (and here I would extend his model to the life and pedagogical journey in general) consists in traversing three primary movements along with their in-between seasonal movements. The three predominant movements are:

a.   Being securely oriented.

b.   Being painfully disoriented.

c.   Being surprisingly reoriented. (p. 2)

Figure 1 sums up these three movements and in-between seasons. Movement one of secure orientation is described as a situation of equilibrium, where one is living a mundane and unsurprising existence, and is well settled, knowing that life makes sense and is comfortable ("business as usual") (Brueggemann, 2007, p. 3). The second movement of disturbing disorientation transpires when the person experiences disorientation, disturbance or deconstruction, and voices this to God or others as "complaint". The person crossing the threshold encounters chaos or disorder and senses that their life, their values or their experiences are dislocated. This could take place in a minor way in the form of "a cross word, a disappointing letter, a sharp criticism, a minor illness" or in a major way as "a marriage failure, the loss of a job, a financial reverse, the diagnosis of a doctor" (Brueggemann, 2007, p. 9), or even in the form of a natural disaster such as typhoon, flood, fire or hailstorm. Finally, the third movement of surprising reorientation is exactly that—a movement or transition that the person cannot plan, will or foresee. It is not an automatic or presumptive movement, a return to one's former (pre-liminal) state, but rather an "all things new" moment. And when it happens, it is always a surprise, always a gift of graciousness, and always an experience that evokes gratitude (Brueggemann, 2007, p. 11).

The middle movement of "disorientation" is particularly pertinent to any study of students negotiating TCs and TTs. Elsewhere in his writings, (Brueggemann & Sharp, 2012) characterises disorientation as a movement where one "travel[s] beyond safe places" (p. 147); an experience of exile and pain (pp. 34-35); and an invitation to the arts and poetry which offer us a lens to see the world differently, with wonder and creativity (Brueggemann & Scorer, 2011, p. 56). He also delineates this movement as a time when one is asked to confront the *dominant* powers and consciousness of existence and replace these with an *alternative* consciousness, e.g., to replace consumerism and war with simplicity and peace (Brueggemann, 1983, pp. 13–14); as well as with prophetic imagination (Brueggemann, 2009, p. 51. Refer also to section one for TC correlates of this "disorientation" phase).
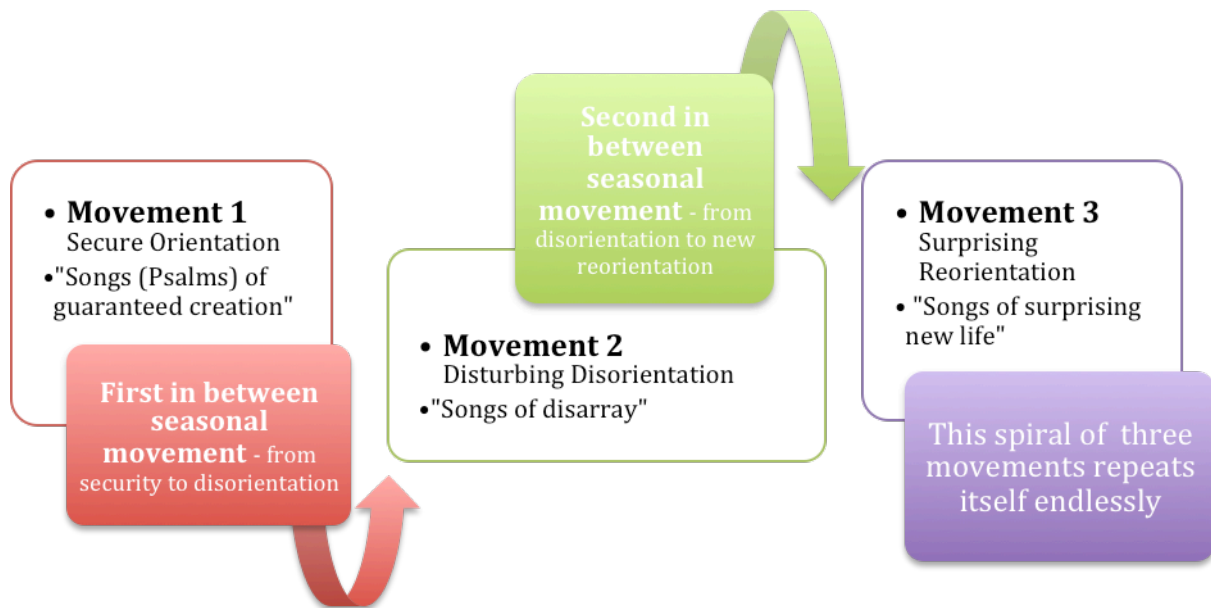
Figure 1.   **The three primary movements and the "in between" seasonal movements, as applied to education, religious, theology and spirituality, and derived from Brueggemann's tripartite spirituality theory (2007, pp. 2–11).**

In what ways might these movements, especially the middle movement of "disorientation", manifest themselves in the academic endeavours of students, and during their crossing of thresholds? Disorientation in particular might become evident in student experiences when they study new, unsettling and challenging topics and feel as though—they are departing from security and "settled ways", leaving home, moving into "exile", their world is fractured, or during related experience of incoherence, confusion, disarray, waiting upon, stuckness, or loss of balance (Brueggemann, 2002, passim). The next section discusses typical TCs and TTs encountered by RE and spirituality students, and then focuses in greater detail on one particular TT, from kataphatic to apophatic knowing and spirituality. Student transitions are then analysed in greater detail in section six.

4. Threshold transitions that students find among the most challenging

Recounting the difficult thresholds of the mythic hero's journey, Joseph Campbell (1949/1988) describes the rigorous testing of the hero in these terms: "Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where [he/she] must survive a succession of trials" (p. 97). The same is true of students encountering various threshold concepts, which usually materialise as a series of transitional understandings throughout the given RE course. Each week of the author's Masters courses is very dense with readings and new concepts. The courses referred to in the remaining pages of this paper are EDUC6043—Religious Education: Theory and Practice; THEO6007—Theology of Religious Education; and THEO6016—Spirituality and Pastoral Care. The following list represents the major TCs, stated as transitions, that students typically encounter during their twelve weeks of formal study. Examples of representative student readings accompany each topic. Some of these are reiterated in the analysis of reflection logs in section six of this paper:

- From instrumentalist to critically reflective and through to praxis and wisdom ways of knowing (Habermas, 1984; Lovat, 2013; Mudge, 2012).
- From poor, lower level Bloom's taxonomy questioning to a detailed model of fertile questions, including the training of "communities of inquiry" and participation in "concluding performances" (Harpaz, 2005; Rohr, 2006; Serrat, 2009; Wanak, 2009).
- From problem-solving learning to problem-based learning (Perkins, 2008, p. 15).
- From arboreal to rhizomatic ways of thinking & knowing (Sajjadi, 2008).

- From instruction to education; accompanied by a transition from noun to verb-based pedagogy (Cooper, 1998; Miedema & Biesta, 2003).
- From separate knowing to connected knowing; from discrete concepts to webs of concepts (cf. Baillie, Bowden & Meyer, 2012; Belenky et al., 1997)
- From kataphatic to apophatic ways of knowing (from visible to symbolic and metaphorical) (Claxton, 2000; John of the Cross in Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, 1979; D. Turner, 1995).

Some of these TTs will be examined in greater depth in future articles. However, it is the last listed transition to which we now turn in order to elucidate its key aspects.

5. From kataphatic to apophatic knowing as a difficult threshold transition

From kataphatic knowing to an inclusion of apophatic knowing

One of the seminal statements from the Indiana Jones movie *The Last Crusade* is: "We do not follow maps to buried treasure, and X never, ever marks the spot" (Lucas & Spielberg, 1989). Although Indiana Jones is a mythical adventurer, his saying is anything but whimsical. One aspect that the saying elucidates, from the perspective of my own courses, is the difficult transition between kataphatic and apophatic spirituality (defined earlier) which in fact is also a way of knowing.

As Philip Sheldrake (1998) notes: "The words 'apophatic' and 'cataphatic' [sic] have often been used to describe different spiritual paths: *apophatic*, emphasizing silence, darkness, passivity and the absence of imagery; and *cataphatic*, emphasizing by contrast the way of images and the positive evaluation of creation or human relationships as contexts for God's self-revelation" (p. 199; see also Howells, 2005, pp. 117–118). However, the apophatic dimension is not simply hidden – it is, like the very TC the students experience, "betwixt and between" reality. As Tugwell (1984) observes, citing sections from the fourteenth-century classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*: "Therefore we should choose God who is 'hid betwixt them' [e.g., eating and fasting] and in that way we shall be 'silently speaking and speakingly silent, fasting eating and eatingly fasting' and so on" (p. 182).

Tracking the transition from kataphatic to apophatic knowing as a TC

Whether one focuses on the transition between kataphatic knowing and apophatic knowing (KK and AK) or on the actual TC of apophatic knowing itself, the following list in my view appears to be valid in relation to both TCs and the TTs that they imply. I have attempted to represent each of these TC characteristics in terms of how students would typically understand them, as evidenced by their online discussions, their minor and major essay submissions, email and phone conversations, as well as their learning reflection log statements and spontaneous comments during seminars:

1. *Transformative*—occasioning a significant shift in the perception of a subject. The transition from KK to AK elicits a shift from one view of spirituality, pedagogy and knowing, to another; and at the same time prompts a movement from informative or instrumental knowing to formative and wisdom knowing. It is a transformation from knowing accompanied by words and images to knowing without them, based only on wordless symbols, metaphors and artistic expression;

2. *Troublesome*—counter-intuitive, alien or seemingly incoherent. Initially, AK makes no empirical or logical sense because it does not rely on what can be physically seen or empirically proven;

3. *Irreversible*—difficult to "unlearn". Once students discern the relationship between KK and AK and later link it to both Holt's and Habermas' four ways of knowing, the insight is lodged in their consciousness; they can deny the existence of AK but they would have difficulty erasing the possibility of a different way of knowing from their awareness. In addition, AK is a "connected knowing" concept—it links to many other concepts that students need to deal with in their RE and spirituality studies and practice, such as mysticism, teacher spirituality, values education, and teaching as subversive practice, which leads to;

4. *Integrated*—exposes the previously hidden interrelatedness of something. This characteristic would appear to fit hand in glove with other pedagogical skills such as synthesising concepts and cultivating "connected knowing". Students examining the relationship and transition between KK and AK are then potentially able to integrate this previously hidden understanding with other insights that they are gaining in pedagogy, spirituality, values education, postmodernism, and fertile questioning;

5. *Bounded*—in the manner of "boundary markers", delineates and captures conceptual spaces that constitute disciplinary terrain (Land et al., 2008, p. x). Students, by studying the KK to AK transition, are better placed to understand the relationship between the two types of knowing and two types of spirituality. Knowledge of this transition does not put limits on various types of knowing but simply maps the possibilities of other types of knowing. It also allows links to be established with other related areas such as pedagogy and ways of knowing;

6. *Discursive*—dialogical & "stretching". This is particularly the case for those students whose previous understandings of pedagogy, education and spirituality have been dominated and limited by a post-enlightenment perspective, and where the enlightenment or "Age of Reason" paradigm "holds the promise of freedom from myth, superstition, and a belief in mysterious powers by using critical reasoning" (Olson, 2011, p. 198). When encountering KK and AK theory, some students accept diverse ways of spirituality and knowing (thus their discursive space is broadened), and yet others are free to reject or avoid the KK to AK transition;

7. *Reconstitutive*—shift in learner subjectivity over time. As a result of all the foregoing characteristics, students are challenged to reconstitute their understandings of spirituality and pedagogy. They reconfigure previous operational schemas in these areas and let go of previous (now unworkable) conceptual stances (Meyer et al, 2010, p. xi) (e.g., spirituality is only kataphatic; pedagogy is only concerned with instrumental knowing);

8. *Liminal*—messy back and forth journeys over a threshold or "difficult concept". The learner can find him/herself in "a suspended state of partial understanding, or a 'stuck place', in which understanding approximates to a kind of 'mimicry' or lack of authenticity … [or states of] unsettlings … [or] a sense of loss" (Meyer et al., 2010, p x). The "liminal" is perhaps the clearest aspect of TCs in this context, due to AK being the path of "dazzling darkness", "the way of unknowing", or "the dark night of the senses and of the soul", as enshrined in many mystical writings (e.g., St John of the Cross, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Meister Eckhart). Encountering the liminal also implies that this is a "slippery" journey, one that often "involves a degree of recursiveness, and of oscillation" (Meyer et al., 2010, p. xi). The student is uncertain of whether to go forward or backward, of where the next step will lead, and of whether the next insight will be dangerous or confronting. They are gripped in a type of paralysis until they grasp deeper dimensions of AK.

6. Student narratives revealing TCs in practice

This penultimate section explores some individual comments by the author's Masters students (most of whom were teachers along with some principals and diocesan office staff) on "disturbing disorientation". These provide a palpable and powerful sense of how challenging and, in some cases, how life-changing this opportunity was to reflect contemplatively on one's learning and how, in some instances, this could be applied to life in general or the classroom. More details on the sampling of these learning logs are included later.

Methodology and process

The methodology for this analysis of student reflection learning logs and other materials (refer to source details) has been adapted from narrative inquiry. This is a method that is used across many disciplines such as education, medicine and social work (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Riessmann, 2007). It is used predominantly by social science researchers to "inquire" or ask questions of practitioners in order to seek deeper understanding of life experience, education, spirituality, and other areas. This paper follows some forms of narrative inquiry which study the process whereby students move from former to new and challenging understandings, exemplified in this research as TCs and TTs (for the generic process, see

Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative inquiry, in the context of this paper, also places an emphasis on the stories of those completing reflection learning logs, as well as on certain images or constellations of images that they use in their feedback and descriptions (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 5).

The reflective learning log statements were completed by students between September 2011 and November 2013. During that time period, some 600 plus learning reflection logs were collected from the author's Masters students (Mudge, 2013b) who were completing the two courses Religious Education: Theory and Practice (EDUC6043—five cohorts across five dioceses during 2011, 2012 and 2013) and Theology of Religious Education (THEO6007—two cohorts across two dioceses during 2013). A smaller number of learning logs were also collected from staff who completed spirituality and professional development days aligned with Spirituality and Pastoral Care (THEO6016—five groups during 2012 and 2013). Students who participated in these seminar and online courses were drawn predominantly from the east coast of Australia, from dioceses in New South Wales, including those of Broken Bay, Bathurst, Wollongong, Wagga Wagga, Maitland/Newcastle, and Tasmania (Mudge, 2013b).

Readings referred to or implied by students, from the lectures and course readings, are included in brackets. Here are just five examples among many:

> After looking at Richard Rohr's [2011] theory about the "two halves of life", I now realise that my ex-husband was stuck in the first half of life while I had moved into the second half of life—hence the reason why we found it hard to communicate. (Student in THEO6016 paper.)

> Lectures and readings on prayer [Mudge, 2007; Mudge & Kupkee, 2010] were extremely interesting and highlighted the lack of variety in prayer we are offering students at the school I teach at. The same applied to students' experience of prayers with breathing. I feel we are failing our students through this lack of a variety of prayer experiences and I aim to employ a different range of strategies based on what I have learned in this course. (Student in EDUC6043 paper)

> Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable, and we should do the same as educators and challenge our teaching colleagues and students in the same way. (Student in THEO6007 paper)

> I was challenged and confronted by the idea that Jesus is not an idea, a philosophy, a wise guru, or a good story [Lennan, 2006; Volf, 2002]—but I believe that we need to encounter Jesus as a real person who is "in your face" and "rattling your cage" all the time. This is potentially provocative for all teachers, parents and students. (Student in THEO6007 paper)

> I was extremely challenged by different ways of knowing we looked at [e.g., Habermas' approach to knowing discussed in Mudge, 2012] and most importantly and purely by the process of questioning. I don't question, is that a reflection of my own lack of education? By being like this, what do my students miss out on? How do I get past this? This is one of my biggest challenges. (Student in EDUC6043 paper)

Students were also asked to respond to these four questions

1. What in these lectures and discussions *confirmed* your understanding and corresponded to your "comfort zone"?

2. What in these lectures and discussions *challenged* your understanding and corresponded to your "discomfort or disorientation zone"?

3. What in these lectures and discussions led to *new insights and wisdom?*

4. What in these lectures and discussions would you like to *apply to your teaching* in the RE classroom or to your day-to-day work/ministry?

In each course, at the end of each single or double day of lectures, students followed a process whereby they were asked to respond to the aforementioned four questions. Students made statements, told stories, and included images in their responses to these questions. This paper analyses responses to *the first two questions only*, as these appear more relevant both to Brueggemann's theory and to the notion of "crossing thresholds" in general. For each of these two questions, only a selected number of groups and issues are included, namely those that the Masters students named with the highest response frequency, plus a sampling from the

middle 20% and bottom 20% of the cohort. This accounts for the number of group responses recorded (this applies equally across Tables 1 through 5 inclusive). Note that, apart from the questions listed, teachers were not given specific statements to respond to, nor were they given Likert and other scales to rank their viewpoints against. Every idea discussed came from original ideas expressed by a range of teachers, but based on course input and online academic readings in areas such as postmodernism, constructing fertile questions, spirituality, neuroscience and many more. All students were also conversant with Brueggemann's (2002) original work on his three movements, as well as with commentaries on how these movements might be applied to various practical contexts (e.g., Mudge, 2013a).

Even though the original questionnaires and learning logs completed by students made reference to disorientation, this paper examines their comments in relation to the experience of "crossing the threshold", since Brueggemann's argument is that one experiences discomfort or "disorientation" precisely at times when one crosses into a new way of understanding, indeed for many, a new way of seeing the world. Inclusion of such comments also assumes a necessary and complementary dialogue between quantitative/empirical and qualitative/narrative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2007)—that is, that the narratives of students need to balance and exist in a complementary relationship with quantitative data on their learning log comments.

Learning log statements reflecting comfort or "secure orientation"

Statements on RE and spirituality which reflected "secure orientation" were classified into a number of categories based on the words and phrases recurrently used by teachers (e.g. fertile questions). In making these statements, teachers affirmed their belief in the following ideas or stated that the course reminded them of what they already knew or accepted, or otherwise referred to the theory and practice that they affirmed and felt "comfortable" or "secure" in (refer to Question 1 above). Teachers responded in the largest numbers (between 22 and 30 respondents) to six particular ideas. These ideas are listed in Table 1 along with the number of teachers (x/600) that responded to each. References to sample academic sources read by students during the course, and prior to completion of their learning logs are also included in parentheses where relevant.

Table 1.   Six main ideas from the largest group that teachers related to comfort or "secure orientation"

Six main ideas that teachers related to comfort or "secure orientation"	No. of responses
The need to stretch oneself and one's students in using a wide range of teaching and learning strategies (Brueggemann, 2007; Mudge, 2013a).	30
The need to learn the theory and practice of fertile questions (Harpaz, 2005) and to adjust one's understanding of both God and education as verbs rather than nouns (Cooper, 1998; Tweed, 2006).	28
The importance of being aware and needing to respond to postmodern challenges in the RE classroom (Ward, 2005).	25
The importance of rigour in teaching, programming and assessing religious education (McWilliam, 2008).	24
The significance of neuroscience (Medina, 2012) and theories on ways of knowing (Lovat, 2013; Mudge, 2012) for the R.E. classroom.	22
Teaching students how to deal with silence and solitude (Christie, 2008—the related importance of meditation, mindfulness and prayer).	22
TOTAL COHORT = 151 teachers	151 teachers

Smaller groups of teachers (between 15 and 19 participants) described their security or 'comfort zone' in relation to statements such as the following.

Table 2. **Five main ideas from smaller groups related to comfort or "secure orientation, Part Two (N=96)**

Five main ideas expressed by teachers and related to comfort or "secure orientation" (samples only for 15 groups)	No. of responses
Developing brain "hooks" in order to engage students (Berns, 2010; Medina, 2012).	19
The crucial nature of values education including the implementation of the Troika paradigm (Lovat, Toomey, Clement, Crotty, & Nielsen, 2009).	18
The powerful insight that no Church, group, or individual "owns theology" (Ford, 2000).	18
It is important to question and promote the cultivation of wisdom and praxis among students (Mudge, 2012).	17
The importance of dialogue and conversation as a key concept, especially interfaith and interbelief dialogue (Castelli, 2012).	17
TOTAL COHORT = 250 teachers	Sample = 96

A final cluster of teachers in smaller groups (between 1 and 14 participants) made the following statements in relation to "secure orientation".

Table 3. **Three main ideas from the smallest groups expressed by teachers and related to comfort or "secure orientation", Part Three (N=42)**

Three main ideas expressed by teachers and related to comfort or "secure orientation" (samples only for 20 groups)	No. of responses
The importance of encouraging students to ask "why" and to think in a critically reflective manner (Mediema & Biesta, 2003; Strenski, 2003).	14
The crucial nature of the pedagogical cycle of inform, form and transform (Groome, 1991, pp. 2–3).	14
The belief that teachers and adults are "educated" most profoundly by the difficult or dark episodes in their lives (Brueggemann, 2007).	14
TOTAL COHORT = 202 teachers	Sample = 42

Learning log statements reflecting discomfort, challenge or "disturbing disorientation"

Statements on RE and spirituality which reflected discomfort "disturbing disorientation" or the crossing of a threshold were also classified into a number of categories, based on the spontaneous and individual statements of teachers. Once again, as for the previous question, the highest teacher responses to issues are included along with a sampling of middle 20% and lower 20% responses (refer to Tables 1 through 5). In making these statements, the Masters students focused their attention on what challenged, discomforted or disoriented (even in some cases "exiled") them during the course. Apart from the students' reflection logs, other responses were also factored in to make sense of their comments on disorientation – particularly in their additional comments from online discussions, essays, learning reflection logs, emails and phone conversations (refer to Question 2 above). Teachers responded in the largest numbers (between 24 and 59 respondents) to five particular ideas. Table 4 shows these ideas listed along with the number of teachers (x/600) that responded to each:

Table 4.   Five main ideas expressed by teachers in the largest groups and related to discomfort or "disturbing disorientation", Part One (N = 194)"

Five main ideas expressed by teachers related to discomfort or "disturbing disorientation" (5 group responses)	No. of responses
The challenge to encourage and teach students to ask good questions (Serrat, 2009) to improve questioning techniques, and to construct Fertile Questions (Harpaz, 2005).	59
How to continually challenge and extend students by taking them into their "discomfort zone"; at the same time to develop ways to shift students from information to formation and reformation and towards transformation (Moore, 1997) and emancipation (Habermas, 1984).	54
How can we as teachers continually challenge and stretch students' ways of knowing and perception, in line with Habermas (1984) and other theorists, beyond ways in which they are currently engaged?	29
How to learn more about and to factor into teaching the pervasive influence of postmodernism (Clark, Lints, & Smith, 2004)?	28
The practical challenge of how to prepare students to go into the community and dialogue or converse with other faiths – in both interfaith and interbelief contexts (Castelli, 2012).	24
TOTAL COHORT = 194 teachers	194 teachers

A number of other challenges were identified by small groups of between 1 and 14 participants. Four of the most common challenges cited by this group of teachers are included in Table 5.

Table 5.   Four main ideas expressed by teachers in smallest groups and related to discomfort or "disturbing disorientation", Part Two (N=53)

Four main ideas expressed by teachers and related to discomfort or "disturbing disorientation" (samples only for 25 groups)	No. of responses
Overcoming the prevailing Western calculative and logocentric mindset which operates to the detriment of orality and contemplative knowing (Claxton, 2000; Ong, 2005).	14
The risk of believing that life is more about asking generative, open questions than arriving at tight answers or definitions (Bruna, 2010; Rohr, 2006).	13
Confusion, fuzziness or lack of clear answers is sometimes beneficial to both the thinking and teaching processes (Marshall & Clark, 2010; McArthur, 2012).	13
Struggling with Jesus' Jewish background and how this impacted upon his teaching and message, and upon our teaching, wisdom and the Church's mission? (Burbules, 2004; Tverberg, 2013).	13
TOTAL COHORT = 160 teachers	Sample = 53

The remaining clusters of teachers who submitted learning log responses on 'disturbing disorientation' comprised some twenty smaller groups of between one and ten respondents, and totalled 40% of those surveyed (total cohort of 240 teachers).

This sample of figures on study areas that effected challenge, discomfort or "disturbing disorientation" in teachers is summarised in the pie chart in Figure 2:
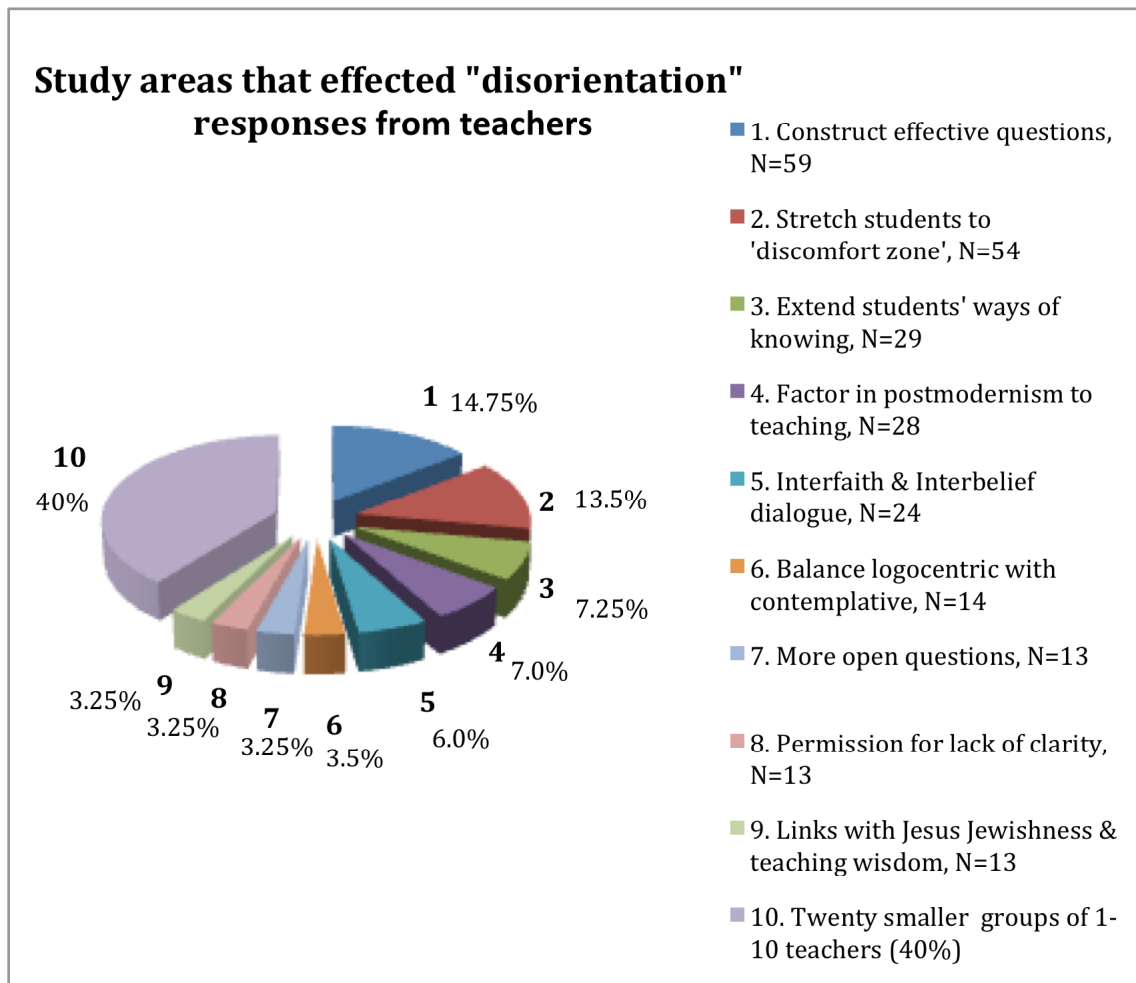
Figure 2.   Pie Chart showing percentages of surveyed Australian teachers identifying with a range of ideas about challenge or "disorientation" and based on a sample of over 600 learning reflection logs for religious education and spirituality Masters' courses, September 2011 to November 2013

Some initial conclusions

Collection and analysis of data and statements is ongoing as new course cohorts commence their studies. Nevertheless it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions. The overall tenor of the "disturbing disorientation" or "crossing the threshold" statements listed above concurs with the general principle—"Life begins at the end of your comfort zone" (Kendall, 2005; Walsch, 2009, p. 55). The section commenced with statements concerning thresholds ranging from mundane to rather traumatic. The analysis of 600 learning reflection logs demonstrated that while respondents were more comfortable with aspects of "stretching", questioning, postmodernity, neuroscience and solitude, they were certainly less comfortable, bordering on disturbed and flummoxed, with other challenges within their classroom teaching of RE and spirituality. These included the asking of genuinely good questions, constructing more systematic fertile (rich, generative) questions, moving students from information to transformation, and exploring interfaith and interbelief dimensions of their unit topics. It remains for further, more targeted, research to be conducted on the two remaining but currently unexplored survey questions and accompanying data—What new insights and wisdom emerged from your studies? and How could lectures and discussions be applied to your classroom teaching and/or daily work or ministry? Some additional unexplored questions are also noted in the Conclusions.

7. Conclusions and some future directions for those "crossing frontiers without a map"…

The introduction to this paper noted that van Gennep (1960) visualised the "threshold" as part of the door, indeed a zone rather than a state, that requires entering, waiting upon, and departing (p. 25). It could be argued that the same motif could apply to the research and TCs examined in this paper, in particular the thresholds crossed by students in their study of various topics such as questioning, spirituality, neuroscience and pedagogy. In attempting these crossings, students are required to make the effort to enter, wait upon insights, and then depart (hopefully) for their next TC challenge.

This paper has argued not only that TCs are relevant to students of RE and spirituality seeking to "cross new frontiers", but also that Brueggemann's threefold taxonomy (2007, pp. 1–16) can profitably inform and complement the existing theory and practice of TCs and TTs in RE and spirituality. It has explored a number of transitions across various topics in those disciplines, and made the case that the kataphatic and apophatic continuum provides a clear example of a TC which challenges the students considered in this paper.

Finally, by incorporating a number of student statements and narratives linked to TCs and TTs, the paper identifies some significant "comfort zones" in students' study (e.g., basic questioning, postmodernity, silence and solitude) as well as other key areas that produce responses of "discomfort" or "disorientation" within the same student sample (e.g., deeper questioning leading to fertile questions, challenging students to cross their own thresholds, deeper ways of knowing, and interfaith dialogue). However, this research and analysis are not complete. Apart from issues noted in the previous section, it requires more sustained research into the areas raised by student reflection logs in this paper, as well as investigations into why students find such transitions difficult in the first place; and what might be the effects on teacher and student learning of either crossing or not crossing thresholds related to key terms, insights and understandings?

Much of this paper, to one degree or another has focused on the dynamics of not knowing, problematic knowledge, taking risks, and crossing dangerous boundaries. This in my view is what engagement with TCs is all about. This is what the transition from kataphatic to apophatic knowing is focused on. Another phrase that describes the same dynamic, used by writer and research professor Brené Brown, is "vulnerability, scarcity and fear of the dark". She describes this dynamic as follows:

> We are anxious people and many of us have very little tolerance for vulnerability. Our anxiety and fear can manifest as scarcity … Most of us have experienced being on the edge of joy only to be overcome by vulnerability and thrown into fear. Until we can tolerate vulnerability and transform it into gratitude, intense feelings of love will often bring up the fear of loss. If I had to sum up what I've learned about fear and joy, this is what I would say:
>
> The dark does not destroy the light; it defines it. It's our fear of the dark that casts our joy into the shadows. (Brown, 2010, pp. 81, 82)

Perhaps the greatest challenge for students in RE, spirituality and other disciplines is not just engagement with the TCs and TTs, but also with the vulnerability and fear of the "darkness" that lies within them, whenever they are faced with new and confronting pedagogical concepts and learning materials – whether these take the form of new concepts, other students, unfamiliar readings, scholars, traditions, and so on. The extent to which students are able to deal with such challenges will in turn indicate how effectively they can "cross frontiers without a map" and wrestle successfully with both TCs and problematic knowledge.

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