Educational Definitions for Scriptural Reasoning: Learning, Understanding, and Dialogue

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This essay promotes a simple thesis: that learning and understanding happen through dialogue. This essay is, however, only intended to lay groundwork for such a thesis, in that it is structured as a series of definitions to three terms within that thesis: “learning,” “understanding,” and “dialogue.” These definitions are an exercise in a peculiar form of writing, in that I am only interested how defining these terms might inform an approach to interreligious dialogues like Scriptural Reasoning (SR). Other terms, like “interreligious” or “reasoning,” might be investigated in a similar way. I have chosen these terms because of their centrality in educational and philosophical discourse and the importance they have for my thesis. This essay presumes a certain familiarity with the literature surrounding SR—particularly seminal texts like the essays in The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning and Interreligious Reading after Vatican II.

The reflections here are, to a certain degree, theoretical—intended to spark educational inquiry among scholars of interreligious engagement. This essay is therefore also intended to introduce some of the educational resources from which those scholars might draw for future study of SR. Many scholars of interreligious engagement, even those working specifically in the field of interreligious learning, often do not step back and define what they mean when they use the term learning, or other particularly rich educational terms. Much less do they define their vocabulary in educationally informed ways. One example to prove the point: throughout the entirety of Michael Barnes’s Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination, nowhere does Barnes engage the field of scholars who are working on the cognitive, psychological, or sociological aspects of learning. This is not to imply that Barnes’s and others’ work is not valid. My point is that if scholars of interreligious engagement are going to use terms like “learning” to describe what happens in and through the process of that engagement (as I hope to do), then it stands to reason that our theses and maxims will be strengthened through attention to the theoretical and practical literatures on learning. Educational philosophy is an area with a considerable history and scope. What can it teach those of us who are seeking to understand interreligious engagement better? It is to this and similar questions that we now turn.

Defining “Learning” for SR

What do we mean by learning as it relates to what happens in SR? I use the category of experiential learning, particularly as David A. Kolb and his school famously articulate it, as the springboard for my reflections on learning itself. Defining what it means to learn has been a perennial pursuit of philosophers and educators, and countless other models might be helpful (indeed, fruitful, to play on Peirce’s terms). Experiential learning lends itself to our purposes in this

4 For a helpful review of learning theories, particularly in the context of education (over and against psychology), see Dale H. Schunk, Learning Theories: An Educational Perspective (Boston: Pearson, 2012). Of particular focus for locating the kind of learning I am proposing in this essay, see Schunk’s chapter on constructivism, (228-277). Schnuck
discussion for several reasons. First, experiential learning fosters a simple and, crucially, flexible definition of learning. The aims and scope of experiential learning can be applied to a host of categories, institutions, and methodologies. Its legacy, as we shall see, is one of myriad applications, not the least important of which is conversation. Second, experiential learning draws deeply from American pragmatism (a spring from which SR studies drink deeply), particularly the thought of John Dewey. While Dewey’s influence will not be directly felt throughout this essay, a worthwhile endeavor would be for scholars of SR to use Dewey’s pragmatism as a source for understanding the learning that happens in dialogue.

The concept of experiential learning came most prominently into the American educational scene in 1984, with the publication of Kolb’s Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development. While Kolb certainly did not invent experiential education (its roots go back to Dewey), Kolb’s thesis for learning was groundbreaking in its simplicity and reach：“Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.” Kolb expounded upon this thesis with three “models” for how learning happens. The simplest and most often cited model of learning, and the one most readily applicable to our purposes on learning in the context of dialogue, is the model he based on the work of Kurt Lewin.

In the Lewinian model, demonstrated by the graphic to the left, learning happens in four distinct steps: (1) “Concrete experience,” which is where all learning begins. These experiences provide “life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time provid[e] a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process.” (2) “Observations and reflections.” It is in this step that the

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arguments that there is no single definition of constructivism per se, but that constructivism is instead better thought of as an epistemology. Information is not sitting, waiting to be discovered; instead, people create and construct, their own learning. We do so in the form of hypotheses which must be tested (which is resonant with Peter Ochs’s theory of SR). Schunk claims, “Constructivists…argue that no statement can be assumed as true but rather should be viewed with reasonable doubt. The world can be mentally constructed in many different ways, so no theory has a lock on the truth” (230). For Schunk, there are three “perspectives” on constructivism: exogenous (“The acquisition of knowledge represents a reconstruction of the external world.”), endogenous (“Knowledge derives from previously acquired knowledge and…develops through cognitive abstraction.”), and dialectical (“Knowledge derives from interactions between persons and their environments.”) (232). Due to its intrinsically communal and dialogical nature, the theory of knowledge I am proposing for SR fits more with the third perspective: dialectical constructivism. Schunk notes several key thinkers in this dialectical tradition, each of whom David Kolb, my major theorist on learning, will react to: Jerome Bruner, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky.

6 Kolb, Experiential Learning, 38. Emphasis in original.
7 The other two models that Kolb utilized were based directly on Dewey and Piaget, though each of them retain the essential shape of the Lewinian model. Dewey and Piaget’s models each focused more on human intellectual development over the course of a lifetime (particularly Piaget). For a general introduction to those alternative models, see Kolb, Experiential Learning, 22-25, though they have informed Kolb’s subsequent work only peripherally.
8 Taken from Richard Mobbs, “David Kolb,” University of Leicester Graduate School website, accessed 16 November 2015, http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/teaching/theories/kolb
9 Kolb, Experiential Learning, 21.
learner, either in community or individually, takes the raw data of the experience and begins the process of evaluating it. I mention the potentially communal aspect of this step, given that Kolb expressly names the social aspect of feedback as central to the process of experiential learning. He claims, “[I]nformation feedback provides the basis for a continuous process of goal-directed action and evaluation of the consequences of that action.”10 It is therefore in this second stage of learning that alternative, supportive, or critical reflections begin to be considered. (3) “Formation of abstract concepts and generalizations,” which is the process in which the learner begins to reach conclusions. These conclusions might appropriately be labeled abductions, to use Charles Sanders Peirce’s terms, or more simply they may be hypotheses (following Peter Ochs’s reading of Peirce).11 It is here that the learner begins to take ownership of an idea, even if that idea will be changed. (4) “Testing implications of concepts in new situations,” which is the step in which the learner brings his or her hypotheses into conversation not only with other (perhaps rival) hypotheses, but also in which the previous concrete experience is re-engaged and re-imagined. But it is crucial here to note that the learning process does not end with the testing of hypotheses. There is, in my view, another step, a fifth: that the learning process be repeated in light of new experiences. This additional step of repetition is congruent with Dewey’s model of experiential learning in that it acknowledges the progressive nature of learning. The hypotheses that formed the nature of a particular “learned” item then must be tested again under the scenario of a new concrete experience. Thus, the process of learning is cyclical.

Kolb has devoted his career to developing a number of the implications of experiential learning, even in response to its critics. For example, as we shall see below, Kolb has applied the learning thesis described here as a lens by which to understand both conversation and higher education. His remarks on conversation will inform a more general theory of dialogue, as well. Kolb has also noted that his theses have the potential to lay the foundation for a systematic model of learning styles.12 Important for our purposes in crafting a definition of learning for SR is the work that Kolb did later in his career, arguing that conversation can be an instance of experiential learning. Kolb claims rather simply, “Learners move through the cycle of experiencing, reflecting, abstracting, and acting as they construct meaning from their experiences in conversation…through

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10 Kolb, Experiential Learning, 21-22 (quote on 22).
12 See his essay, co-written with Alice Y. Kolb, entitled “Learning Styles and Learning Spaces: Enhancing Experiential Learning in Higher Education,” Academy of Management Learning & Education 4.2 (2005), 193-212. In that essay Kolb applies his theories to various learning styles, arguing that each of the four movements in the process of his learning theory informs a particular learning style, as well. While some scholars break these down into nine variant learning models, for purposes of space and simplicity I will summarize them in the fourfold structure of Kolb’s initial model. Each of these learning styles fits squarely between one of his four poles. First, there are those learners who fit between the concrete experience and observation/reflection poles. They are called “diverging.” These are learners who tend to enjoy multiple experiences and do well in contexts of dialogue. Second are those learners who fit between the observation/reflection and abstraction poles. They are called “assimilating.” These learners tend to do best in moments of synthesis. Third, there are those learners who fit between the abstraction and testing poles. They are called “converging.” These learners tend to enjoy applying various theories and testing them. Fourth, there are those learners who fit between the poles of testing and concrete experience. They are called “accommodating.” These learners tend to be very ‘hands on’ and learn best by doing. For more, see Kolb and Kolb, “Learning Styles and Learning Spaces,” 196-199. For a simpler articulation of those learning styles, see chapter 4 of Kolb’s Experiential Learning, where he labels them Reflectors, Theorists, Pragmatists, and Activists.
interplay of opposites and contradictions."¹³ In other words, conversation is a context in which learners can engage, review, hypothesize, and test the items that they are engaging with one another. Given that conversation is ubiquitous with human experience, it is also something that is often repeated. But conversation depends on the realization and acceptance of difference,¹⁴ something which SR is uniquely positioned to provide. It is in the context of dialogue that differences must be allowed to thrive, otherwise genuine learning through conversation is not possible.

Kolb and his wife Alice name conversation as a “learning space.”¹⁵ In defining learning spaces as loci of situated learning, they claim:

Learning spaces are not necessarily physical places but constructs of the person’s experience in the social environment. These situations are embedded in communities of practice that have a history, norms, tools, and traditions of practice. Knowledge resides not in the individual’s head but in communities of practice. Learning is thus a process of becoming a member of a community of practice through legitimate peripheral participation (i.e., apprenticeship). Situated learning theory enriches the learning space concept by reminding us that learning spaces extend beyond the teacher and the classroom.¹⁶

There is, clearly, a good deal of resonance here with SR. Learning spaces, like SR, are social. They are contexts for relationality as well as individual reflection. Learning spaces, like SR, often arise out of tradition, as we see in the case of text study. Participation within the procedure is a form of apprenticeship, which is exactly how David Ford describes learning in the context of SR.¹⁷ SR is a learning space that may well work within (but is not confined by) “traditional” educational contexts, such as classrooms.

I will now shift into a further explanation of why conversation is such a good learning space. I will do so by mapping out Kolb’s five “dialectics” that define the conversational process as he understands it. First, conversation is defined by the dialectic of concrete and abstract knowing, which he terms apprehension and comprehension respectively. Kolb traces this dialectic back to William James (another discussion in this discussion with classic pragmatism) who held that conversation was best conceived as a sensual experience, one in which the whole person is actually engaged, enabling the acceptable of non-verbal cues and other items to be taken into consideration in the process of learning.¹⁸ Second, Kolb sees the dialectic of reflection and action defining the conversational process. He terms these intension and extension, respectively. This dialectic is one in which the learner is active in the learning process “like breathing.”¹⁹ The gist of this dialectic is

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¹⁴ Kolb, Baker, and Jensen, “Conversation as Experiential Learning,” 54.
¹⁹ Kolb, Baker, and Jensen, “Conversation as Experiential Learning,” 56-58. Here Kolb is particularly dependent upon the work of Peter Elbow, with a marginal nod to Paulo Freire.
that learning cannot be a passive endeavor, even in conversation. Instead, the reflection takes its meaning from its subsequent actions, and actions form the quality of reflections. Third, Kolb sees present within conversation the dialectic of epistemology and ontology, what he calls doing and being. For Kolb, epistemological “discourse” begins to name ideas that live within the learner. I would liken these to SR’s internal libraries or even deep reasonings. Ontological “recourse” has to do with that state of being that defines the learning. In the case of SR, I might label this as one’s religious affiliation. It is the cyclical juxtaposition, in dialogue, of these two types of reflections (discourse and recourse) that gives shape to the learning process in SR.20 Fourth, there is a dialectic between individuality and relationality within conversation. In this dialectic, learners note that the dialogue will take away some of their individuality in that they become part of a group.21 Fifth, and finally, there is a dialectic in conversation between ranking and linking, one that informs the respective status of each learner in relation to each other. This dynamic is one that ebbs and flows with various notions of authority (teacher, student, etc.) at various points in the conversation.22

Kolb describes the various characteristics of experiential learning in terms of theses (not unlike the writing style of Ford). These theses have remained mostly consistent since his initial magnum opus in 1984.23 Each of these, in their own way, describes what happens in SR.

(1) “Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes” (26). This approach to learning is distinct from other forms in that it is open to the fact that real learning does not happen at once and that the “outcomes” of it are mostly beside the point. The process is what matters. Following the influential Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire, Kolb contrasts his approach to learning as intrinsically opposed to the “banking” model of education, in which a passive learner is indoctrinated by an “expert” teacher whose sole goal is to distribute information in its current form from one person to the next. Freire defined the “banking” model like this:

Education becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the student patiently receive, memorize, and repeat...But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system.24

In reality, though, Freire claimed (and Kolb would surely agree) that “apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”25

20 Kolb, Baker, and Jensen, “Conversation as Experiential Learning,” 58-60. In a passage of particularly dense writing, Kolb claims: “The discursive process is at work when learning is grounded through the naming of the world, whereas recursive process enters the scene as learners return to the subject that reappears anew, claiming an in-depth questioning and inquiry...Conversational learning occurs within such distinct yet intertwined linear and cyclical time dimensions that ultimately come together as a flux of spiral movement as new ideas are grounded through the discursive process and questioned from different perspectives through the recursive process of conversation” (60).


22 Kolb, Baker, and Jensen, “Conversation as Experiential Learning,” 62-64.

23 I have taken these characteristics from Kolb, Experiential Learning, 26-38. For purposes of this summary, further references to Kolb’s text will be listed parenthetically through the main text above.

24 Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th anniversary edition (New York: Continuum, 2000), 72. See also Kolb, Experiential Learning, 26-27.

25 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 72.
In the context of SR, the notion that a process is involved is rather non-controversial. SR is practiced with no particular end in mind; in SR, practitioners wait to see what happens. Thus, alongside conversational learning as articulated by Kolb, the process of SR itself is indeed the manifestation of its promise. Practitioners proceed in SR for the sake of the engagement itself, not necessarily to seek a particular outcome. This is, of course, not to suggest that certain outcomes do not happen; there are frequent results to SR, like practitioners coming to appreciate difference in the other. But those ends are not in mind throughout the SR session(s). It is the process that matters most. In line with Paulo Freire’s description of learning, SR therefore is a very human process.

(2) “Learning is a continuous process grounded in experience” (27). In a later work, Kolb reframed this as “all learning is relearning.” In other words, learning is a process in which practitioners—in my case practitioners in SR—are called to bring their experiences with the text and their respective faith communities to the table to dialogue. It is through a dialogue, like SR, that learners are called to reevaluate their existing experiences and frameworks. One of the main benefits of experiential learning, as Kolb defines it, is simply that it offers a framework within which a learner can rethink (and perhaps reject) old ideas. As Kolb says, “If the education process begins by bringing out the learner’s beliefs and theories, examining and testing them, and then integrating the new, more refined ideas into the person’s belief systems, the learning process will be facilitated.”

In an interreligious context, perhaps nothing is as important as allowing the experience of dialogue to alter preexisting presuppositions and conclusions. This is true not only of what a person knows about his or her own religious tradition (i.e., religious learning), but also about what he or she knows about the tradition of the other (i.e., interreligious learning). This aspect of experiential learning has the potential to inform the learning that will take place in interreligious engagement generally and SR specifically.

(3) “The process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaption to the world” (29). Kolb later clarified by saying that “Conflict, differences, and disagreement are what drive the learning process. In the process of learning one is called upon to move back and forth between opposing modes of reflection and action and feeling and thinking.” In Kolb’s initial telling, these dialectical movements have to do with mental vs. physical processes (i.e., reflecting and acting). But, as we saw above, later he would apply those same logics to various interpersonal contexts, such as conversation.

For the purposes of learning through SR, I would simplify this: the process of learning helps the learners to “disagree better,” following the maxim of Nicholas Adams. Freire claimed that dialogue is uniquely positioned to be able to inform such an approach to learning in that it allows for multiple voices at the table to give their “word,” and in that way elicit transformation.

(4) “Learning is an holistic process of adaptation to the world” (31). Kolb means that the process of learning has to do with all of someone—physically, mentally, and, I would add, spiritually. Crucially, Kolb uses this heading as the framework within which he locates his thesis that learning happens in myriad contexts. It is the world we are adapting to with a learning posture, not necessarily just a classroom. This is analogous to my purposes in that I am naming SR as a

27 Kolb, Experiential Learning, 28.
29 Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 88. See also Kolb, Experiential Learning, 30.
learning space within the larger world. SR is also a learning space that may or may not work within an existing classroom setting, providing a model for engagement and reciprocity among practitioners and learners. For Kolb, the discussion of the holistic nature of learning is a way to name that learning as a “bridge” that happens within life’s multiple experiential contexts. This is not to say that every moment or every experience is best considered a learning space. Rather, there is an endless number of avenues that learning can take. For our purposes, I am naming SR as one such avenue.

(5) “Learning involves transactions between the person and the environment” (34). Kolb later clarifies his thesis by saying that the transactions are “synergetic.” Kolb uses the definition of the word experience to prove this point: experience encompasses both internal and external realities. Kolb focuses on the word transaction over and against other words like “interaction,” in that transactions denote more the “fluid” nature of the way in which people experience their environment and act upon it. I am labeling dialogue as the specific kind of interaction in which the learning of SR takes place.

(6) “Learning is the process of creating knowledge” (36). Kolb defines knowledge as “the result of the transaction between social knowledge and personal knowledge.” While Kolb argues for a multiplicity of “knowledge systems,” for our purposes here it is not necessary to note the kind of knowledge that originates in SR. It is sufficient to note simply that knowledge is generated in SR, and that that generation of knowledge happens in the context of social interactions—i.e., with the other.

For the purposes of this conversation on (inter)religious learning, I add another characteristic to Kolb’s list above: namely that learning has to do with the transformation of the learner. Here I am attempting to bring the learning process articulated by Kolb into conversation with Ochs and Peirce’s goal of changing the habits of the learner. Kolb’s notion of experiential learning does indeed speak to the idea of transformation in several ways. For example, one way that transformation may happen through experiential learning is in Dewey’s concept of postponed action. For Dewey, one of the marks of learning is the postponement of action upon an item so as to incorporate each stage of learning. While Dewey would not have framed this thesis in Kolb’s terms exactly, Dewey’s thought was that “postponement of immediate action is essential for observation and judgment to intervene.” This postponed action is indicative of an altered habit, a transformation, one that serves as an example of reparative reasoning in action.

There are other resonances with pragmatism and existing SR theory in Kolb’s work. One helpful aspect of experiential learning is the use that Kolb makes of the concept of “laboratory” as a metaphor for a learning context and process. Through the work of Nicholas Adams and others, SR also makes direct use of this “laboratory” analogy in seeking to understand itself. I will address this concept of laboratories more concretely below.

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31 Kolb, Experiential Learning, 31-34.
32 Kolb and Kolb, “Learning Styles and Learning Spaces,” 194. Here, following Piaget, Kolb is taking the term “synergetic” to mean the interplay between new experiences and existing ideas, and new ideas with existing experiences.
33 Kolb, Experiential Learning, 36. This is not Kolb’s clearest articulation, using knowledge to define knowledge. Perhaps a more adequate method by which to explain it would be that general knowledge has to do with the transaction between social and interpersonal knowledge.
34 Kolb, Experiential Learning, 36-38.
35 Kolb, Experiential Learning, 22. Kolb is reacting here to an extended quote from Dewey’s Experience and Education.
36 For a few references to SR as laboratory, see Jacob Goodson, “Repressing Novelty?: William James and the Reasoning of Scriptural Reasoning,” Journal of Scriptural Reasoning 8.2 (2009), accessed 16 November 2015,
Lest this brief treatment insinuate that the relationship between Kolb’s experiential learning and (inter)religious learning in SR is one-to-one, I would note that there are differences in experiential learning and the kinds of learning happening in (inter)religious contexts. Many of Dewey and Kolb’s motivations for articulating this educational approach, or its variants, stemmed from a desire to bring lived experience to the fore in an understanding of what education meant. Not a few of Kolb’s remarks have to do with creating a more efficiently trained workforce for the American economy, which is obviously not a primary goal for SR or its theorists.

This brings me back to my own definition of what learning is. Generally speaking, I embrace Kolb’s definition of learning as “knowledge created by the transformation of experience.” I would argue against Kolb’s sixth thesis above that learning isn’t only the process of creating knowledge. Learning also has to do with increasing and facilitating understanding. The nuance here is not just one of semantics. All understanding presupposes knowledge, and all knowledge has elements of understanding within it. I therefore turn now to a reflection on the nature of the word “understanding” as it applies to SR, in an attempt to distinguish helpfully between knowledge and understanding. In so doing, it will be clear that SR has the potential to increase both knowledge and understanding.

**Defining “Understanding” for SR**

Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe offer a helpful perspective on the nature of understanding in their *Understanding by Design*, commonly used by professional educators. Wiggins and McTighe offer a rigorous definition of the concept of understanding, and they provide a structure for applying the concept of understanding to educational settings. Like Kolb (and Nicholas Burbules, whom we will examine below), Wiggins and McTighe fall squarely within the constructivist camp of educational philosophers. They draw deeply from both John Dewey and Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the work of both of these philosophers have informed the nature of SR in generative ways.

Wiggins and McTighe begin their treatment of understanding by investigating it alongside the concept of knowledge. In their estimation, understanding is a framework comprised of knowledge, one that utilizes and transforms it in new ways. Thus, for Wiggins and McTighe, the colloquial interchangeability of terms like ‘know’ and ‘understand’ is an unfortunate tendency in Western English that educators and philosophers must repair. Wiggins and McTighe structure their definition of understanding around two terms: meaningful inference and transferability.

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37 See the whole of Kolb, *Experiential Learning*, chapter 1, 1-19.

38 Expanded 2nd edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2005). I must concede, however, that I have used their work very selectively. Much of their valuable text has to do with curricular and course design. It is their thesis that teachers and facilitators should work “backwards,” beginning with the end in mind. Clearly this stands at odds with the open-ended, procedural thesis above that states that experiential learning should not have a pre-determined end. But while the theoretical work they propose in that volume is primarily intended to help professors and teachers more effectively design courses, their theories as to the nature of understanding also might undergird a number of educational conversations for the purposes of SR.

Meaningful inference, in their view, has to do with the facts (i.e., knowledge), which begin to take on meaning for the learner as learning increases. They cite an oft-quoted passage from Dewey in claiming that meaningful inference has to do with locating an idea in relation to another:

To grasp the meaning of a thing, an event, or situation is to see it in its relations to other things: to see how it operates or functions, what consequences follow from it, what causes it, what uses it can be put to. In contrast, what we have called the brute thing, the thing without meaning to us, is something whose relations are not grasped…The relation of means-consequence is the center and heart of all understanding.40

This definition of meaningful inference as relationality is indeed also at the very heart of what interreligious engagement (and SR specifically) is and does. For Wiggins and McTighe, meaningful inferences are also instances in which a learner must “go beyond” that which the facts present. This informs the nature of abduction in SR, which in Ochsian terms has to do with creativity and spontaneity. As Ochs has demonstrated, SR practitioners of SR frequently make abductions regarding the texts under discussion. This creativity, taken with the ability to transfer (which we will engage below), enables the creation of new knowledge.41

In SR, practitioners are putting their ideas into conversation with other, rival forms of thinking and knowing. It therefore raises fundamental questions about the nature of religious knowledge. Can Christians (or any religious group, for that matter) truly understand their own tradition(s) without also taking into consideration other, perhaps rival, traditions? Or, in the case of SR, can anyone understand their texts in isolation from other texts?

In contrast to Dewey, who focused on meaningful inference, the issue of transferability lies at the heart of understanding in the work of McTighe and Wiggins. Their definition of transfer is one that evokes the use of a set of skills or ideas learned in one context into an entirely separate one. Yet understanding is more involved than simply having useful knowledge: “Transfer involves figuring out which knowledge and skill matters here and often adapting what we know to address the challenge at hand.”42 Thus, there are elements of discernment in their concept of understanding. Understanding signifies internalization and flexibility.43

Not all dialogue leads to understanding, of course. There will be misunderstandings through the process of dialogue, particularly those between differing religious practitioners. It is therefore helpful to articulate a definition of misunderstanding. Misunderstanding, they claim, “is the mapping of a working idea in a plausible but incorrect way in a new situation.”44 SR, however, has a potential safeguard against misunderstandings in the form of community: each claim a participant makes is made in the presence of the other who may in turn critique, correct, or reject it. These

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40 John Dewey, How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process (Boston: Heath and Company, 1933), 137-138 and 146. Emphasis in original. This full quote is also given in Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 38. It is not present in the 1910 version of How We Think, being part of the extensive revision Dewey did of that text in the early 20th century. I cannot help but be struck by the resonance here between Dewey’s thinking and that of Peirce’s concept of Firsts and Seconds.

41 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 40.

42 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 41. Emphasis in original. See also p. 43: “An understanding is the successful result of trying to understand—the resultant grasp of an unobvious idea, an inference that makes meaning of many discrete (and perhaps seemingly insignificant) elements of knowledge.” Emphasis in original.

43 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 49.

44 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 51.
misunderstandings might indeed be pedagogically significant, opening up a “teaching moment” in which an SR practitioner can help someone learn about a religious tradition, text, or idea.\textsuperscript{45}

One aspect of the thesis of Wiggins and McTighe that is particularly helpful for defining SR as a communal dialogue is their insistence that genuine learning has an \textit{interpersonal} aspect to it. This interpersonal dimension is demonstrated by a willingness to acknowledge varying points of view, and, as we shall see below, to treat the people holding those views with respect.\textsuperscript{46}

For Wiggins and McTighe, understanding is characterized by six “facets,” each of which informs aspects of the notion of transferability. I will briefly elaborate on each one below, and offer specific reflections on what they might look like in the context of SR.

(1) When a person understands something, she or he can \textit{explain} it. Wiggins and McTighe define explanation as the ability to \textit{illustrate} an idea by concretely articulating it and demonstrating its logic.\textsuperscript{47} Explanation must also locate the particular idea under consideration within a larger framework.\textsuperscript{48} This is resonant with the definition of understanding as meaningful inference from Dewey, in which we see an item in relationship to other items.

Wiggins and McTighe claim that the power of explanation has to do with recognizing the key questions, or \textit{problems}, that surround (and, I add, incite) a particular reality or idea.\textsuperscript{49} In the case of SR, then, we might say that explanation begins with suffering—just as in Peirce and Ochs’s philosophic reasoning. Or, in the language of Ford, explanation begins in \textit{cries}. This implies not only hearing the cry, but also recognizing it as a cry and looking to the wisdom traditions (i.e., the religions) for a framework for it. Explanation then involves taking a concept and extending it beyond its original locus for beginning the reflection.

(2) When a person understands something, she or he can \textit{interpret} it. Wiggins and McTighe define interpretation as “narratives, and translations that provide meaning,”\textsuperscript{50} but it is important to note two key aspects of interpretations: they are both \textit{contestable} and \textit{intransigently multiple} (a phrase Wiggins and McTighe borrow from Jerome Bruner). An interpretation is contestable in that it is possible for one to disagree with it. An interpretation is intransigently multiple insofar as there is the possibility of alternatives (bearing similarity to the discussion above on recognizing the interpersonal nature of understanding). “Narratives,” and parables particularly, invite multiple interpretations.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{45} Wiggins and McTighe, \textit{Understanding by Design}, 51.

\textsuperscript{46} Wiggins and McTighe, \textit{Understanding by Design}, 83: “There is an interpersonal as well as intellectual meaning [to the term ‘understanding’]—implied in English, but made explicit in other languages (the French verbs \textit{savoir} and \textit{connaître}, for example). We try to understand ideas but we also work to understand other people and situations...A failure to understand interpersonally typically involves a failure to consider or imagine there being different points of view.” Emphasis in original.

\textsuperscript{47} Explanations are, for Wiggins and McTighe, “sophisticated and apt theories and illustrations, which provide knowledgeable and justified accounts of events, actions, and ideas...Understanding is thus not mere knowledge of facts but inference about why and how, with specific evidence and logic—insightful connections and illustrations.” See Wiggins and McTighe, \textit{Understanding by Design}, 85-86.

\textsuperscript{48} Wiggins and McTighe, \textit{Understanding by Design}, 87.

\textsuperscript{49} Wiggins and McTighe, \textit{Understanding by Design}, 88.

\textsuperscript{50} Wiggins and McTighe, \textit{Understanding by Design}, 88.

\textsuperscript{51} Wiggins and McTighe, \textit{Understanding by Design}, 89. Here they are quoting and reflecting on a particularly pregnant passage from Donald L. Finkel, \textit{Teaching with Your Mouth Shut} (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000). As we shall see below, it is no coincidence that certain forms of dialogical learning (in a case analogous to SR, havruta) prefer the use of narrative texts.
Interpretation is fundamentally an exercise in making meaning, which is an intrinsically subjective process, and it is because of this meaning making that Wiggins and McTighe locate interpretation under the heading of constructivism. The history of hermeneutical theory offers many examples of the myriad factors involved in the interpretative, meaning-making process. Wiggins and McTighe hold that the point of interpretation is to apply a theory (from the explanation in facet #1 above) to a specific context, providing a framework for meaning to be extrapolated from it. One need not look far for resources from within the SR world on the issue of hermeneutics, but this is not to say that there have been any systematic treatments of how interpretation takes place in the context of SR. Indeed, such a theory seems impossible. Given the countless extenuating circumstances that surround SR in all of the various contexts it might take place, a theory of interpretation would need to arise out of each instance of SR, which would be not only futile but also counterproductive: a comprehensive theory of interpretation would deny the spontaneity that occurs in SR in the first place.

(3) When a person understands something, she or he can apply it. This is a corollary to the facet #2 above on meaning-making and interpretation. An application, for Wiggins and McTighe, is the “ability to use knowledge effectively in new situations and diverse, realistic contexts.” Following William James, they label one aspect of the ability to apply as tact: “knowledge of a concrete situation.” The ability to apply is a skill one develops that leads to understanding.

For Wiggins and McTighe, the ability to apply understanding is the method by which learners address “real-world problems.” In SR terms, application is more poetically understood as repair in response to suffering or cries. Application has to do, therefore, with performance. Consider, for example, Ochs’s concept of reparative reasoning. Ochs seeks to repair vagueness in one text with another, following Peirce and his reading of the rabbis. Thus, one method by which SR might elicit application (and, in that sense, understanding) would be for practitioners to reason together about an unclear text in light of another one, elucidating a specific context.

(4) When a person understands something, she or he has perspective on it. Wiggins and McTighe define perspective as “critical and insightful points of view,” and it is through these perspectives that the new knowledge (i.e., constructivism) comes to fruition. Perspective implies a complex combination of both theory and application, and perspectives can, of course, be varied: one can hold multiple perspectives at the same time. Indeed, the best perspective is often the one that takes into consideration the myriad alternatives available. Perspective, like application, is a skill, and it therefore requires both practice and accountability. Perspective also requires wisdom. For example, in order to hold a perspective, one must be willing to pose questions of it. “What is

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52 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 90: “Meaning, of course, is in the eye of the beholder.”
53 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 91: “Theory is general; interpretations are contextual and specific. The act of interpretation is more fraught with inherent ambiguity than the act of theory building and testing: we may not agree on the right theoretical explanation but we expect there to be only one theory surviving by the end.”
54 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 92.
55 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 93.
56 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 94.
57 Peter Ochs, Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture (New York, 1998); see also Ochs, “Philosophic Warrants for Scriptural Reasoning,” mentioned above.
58 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 95. Further on they claim, “This type of understanding is not about any student’s particular point of view but about the mature recognition than any answer to a complex question typically involves a point of view” (95).
assumed?” “What follows?” These questions and others like them, according to Wiggins and McTighe, are “essential.”

Perspective is a key goal for SR, as I understand it. I note here for the purposes of SR that having perspective is implied in the notion of holding and investigating a deep reasoning, which has to do with the internal logic of a person’s approach to faith, a text, or a situation. In SR, practitioners not only note alternative views, but also ask questions about what gives rise to these alternative views. Given that interpretations grow out of specific contexts, practitioners of SR must probe those contexts. In other words, perspective comes into play not only when a person has a stake in the claims that are being made, but also when a practitioner realizes the stakes of the other.

(5) When a person understands something (or someone), she or he can empathize with it (or them). Wiggins and McTighe define empathy as “the ability to get inside another person’s feelings and worldview.” This facet of understanding is similar to the interpersonal nature of understanding we saw above. Empathy bears two main, interconnected characteristics according to Wiggins and McTighe: open-mindedness and respect. Open-mindedness has to do with recognizing the other, and respect has to do with being willing to hear them.

In light of the world’s critical need for more contexts for empathy, SR becomes an important phenomenon. The willingness to come to the table with someone different is one of the hallmarks of SR, but a willingness to engage the other is not enough to generate empathy. As I see it, SR therefore attempts to create a space in which empathy can flourish through attention to certain “rules.” Clearly, this is something that cannot be forced. Not all SR results in empathy, but these rules may be one way to frame a desire to allow empathy to prevail.

(6) When a person understands something, she or he has self-knowledge. Wiggins and McTighe define self-knowledge as “the wisdom to know one’s ignorance and how one’s patterns of thought and action inform as well as prejudice understanding.” Here they name their dependence upon Gadamer, and they claim that “to understand the world we must first understand ourselves. Through self-knowledge we also understand what we do not understand.”

There are two main benefits of self-knowledge as it relates to SR: realizing dichotomies, which Ochs labels “binaries,” and encouraging humility. In a vein similar to Ochs, they claim that students, or, more simply, “learners,” tend to lean toward binaries. Self-reflection enables students to question the nature of those dichotomies. Ochs labels that act of questioning an aspect of triadic

60 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 97.
62 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 98.
63 See Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 99. Here I am actually breaking slightly with them in that they locate respect first, making it the foundation for open-mindedness. They claim, “Our respect for [different people] causes us to be open-minded, to carefully consider their views when those views are different from ours” (99). I actually would frame it in the reverse: open-mindedness does not depend on respect, but respect depends on open-mindedness. Regardless, the exact nature of that relationship is rather beside the point. The point is that both open-mindedness and respect are present in the concept of empathy as it is understood by Wiggins and McTighe.
65 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 100.
66 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 100.
logic. The second benefit of self-knowledge is its ability to provide a snapshot of the limitations of knowledge, encouraging empathy, posing more questions to application, and encouraging humility in interpretations. They claim that self-knowledge, “demands that we self-consciously question our ways of seeing the world if we are to become more understanding—better able to see beyond our selves.”

I would add a few other suggestions for what understanding might look like in the context of SR, each of which is resonant with the work of Ochs and Ford. When a person understands something in the context of SR, she or he can compare it to analogous ideas from another. This has two dimensions: one having to do with recognizing an analogous idea, and the other having to do with the ability to compare. Also, when a person understands something in the context of SR, she or he can discern deep reasonings. This necessitates a series of wisdom skills, and it gets to the very heart of SR: naming that which is most important as one reads sacred texts. Last, when a person understands something in the context of SR, she or he can disagree peacefully. Following Adams, one of the central tenets of my approach to SR is that in SR practitioners are enabled to learn to disagree better.

Defining “Dialogue” for SR

The simplest description possible for SR is that it is a form of dialogue. As dialogue, SR is uniquely positioned to be able to appropriate resources from the bodies of literature that are dedicated to understanding dialogue both practically and theoretically in educational terms. What is dialogue, if not a context for learning? My primary resource for defining dialogue will be the educational philosopher Nicholas C. Burbules. In particular, his 1993 volume Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice holds considerable relevance for SR. Two overarching aspects of Burbules’s work in Dialogue in Teaching are appropriate in this discussion of SR: (1) Burbules’s insistence that dialogue is a “pedagogical communicative relation,” and (2) his notion that dialogue should be understood through the metaphor of a “game.” By naming SR as a “pedagogical communicative relation,” I hope to locate SR firmly within the umbrella of educational dialogue. Attentiveness to Burbules’s thought would enhance SR theory and provide resources for an educational supplement to the work of established thinkers like Ochs and Ford.

Dialogue is a complicated and fluid entity, one that takes many different shapes and manifests itself in many different ways depending on context. As such, dialogue is difficult if not impossible to define comprehensively. But this is not to say that we know nothing of dialogue. Dialogue has been a forum for education and learning through much of written history. Especially since Plato, intellectual communities have been learning through the process of give-and-take in dialogue with one another. Dialogue allows for the paradoxical balance between simultaneously

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67 Both of these come from Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 100.
68 Wiggins and McTighe, Understanding by Design, 102.
69 (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993). Burbules is, of course, not the only philosopher who has reflected on the issue of dialogue in education. Nor is he the only educator that the SR community might learn from. I chose Burbules (over and against others, like Stephen Brookfield) due both to the quality of his work and the ease with which it is applied to the practice of SR. For example, Burbules is heavily dependent upon Gadamer (which resonates with many SR theorists), and Burbules’s theses are easily translated into other disciplines. Another particularly important work of Burbules for purposes of this discussion is his Pragmatism and Educational Research, co-written with Gert J.J. Biesta (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).
holding and expressing understandings, reasonings, and sensibilities, as well as the experience of having one’s reasonings affirmed, critiqued, and reinterpreted by another or a group of others. Dialogue is also a method by which relationships are formed and decisions are made. Fundamentally, though, dialogue is a conduit for learning. If dialogue is primarily a conduit for learning, then it is particularly important for the field of interreligious engagement to frame it as such. Leonard Swidler argues about interreligious dialogue that “[t]he primary purpose of dialogue is to learn—that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly.” This understanding of dialogue is one I would embrace as both a bolstering my definition of learning above and as a specific maxim for interreligious engagement, one that SR has the ability to fill.

Burbules describes four types of dialogue, only the first two of which will be applicable to a discussion of SR: dialogue as “conversation,” “inquiry,” “debate,” and “instruction.” Neither dialogue as debate nor instruction is relevant for SR. Dialogue as debate is marked, not surprisingly, by its spirit of skepticism and perhaps antagonism regarding the other. As such, it is not an ideal model for the type of dialogue I want to suggest defines SR. Dialogue as instruction, which is marked by the goal of moving the dialogue toward a specific end of some kind, is also not congruent with SR’s call for open-ended dialogue. Thus, we are left with the other two forms of dialogue: conversation and inquiry. Each of these contributes significantly to an understanding of SR. Dialogue as conversation is marked by both a spirit of cooperation among the participants and by the aim of increasing mutual understanding. Dialogue as inquiry is marked by a group of participants cooperatively attempting to address a specific item that is unknown to them; the aim in the inquiry model is often (but not necessarily, as in the case of SR) consensus. In both the cases of conversation and inquiry, the process is aimed at achieving a common purpose or addressing a common issue, which is actually more important than consensus.

The specific form of dialogue that SR represents is not of central concern for me here (i.e., adjudicating the nuanced differences between dialogue as conversation and dialogue as inquiry). More pertinent for SR are the notions of inclusivity and collaboration within these two types of dialogue, as Burbules understands them. In dialogue, participants work together in such a way that allows a communal identity, but that also allows learners to maintain their individuality (indeed, at times, their incommensurability).

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70 Swidler continues, naming dialogue as a reflective process: “We come to dialogue that we might learn, change, and grow, not that we might induce change in the other, as one hopes to do in a debate—a hope realized in inverse proportion to the frequency and ferocity with which debate is entered into. On the other hand, because in dialogue all partners come with the intention of learning and changing themselves, one’s partner in fact will also change.” See his “Interreligious and Interideological Dialogue: The Matrix for All Systematic Reflection Today,” in Toward a Universal Theology of Religion, ed. Leonard Swidler (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 14. Emphasis in original.

71 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 112-124. See also Margret Buchmann, “Improving Education by Talking: Argument or Conversation?,” Teachers College Record 86.3 (1985), 441-453. Buchmann divides dialogue more simply into two basic kinds: argument and conversation. Her preference, like Burbules’s, is for conversation, though argument does have some benefits in her view. (Argument can be more systematic and structured than conversation.) In defense of conversation over and against argument, Buchmann claims, “Conversations can be long, lifelong, inconclusive as in marriage, and are continued in the absence of the partner. Arguments have an inherent drive toward conclusions, but conversations are not driven at all. As intellectual adventures, they begin with differences or notions often vaguely apprehended and, after a while, do not so much end as are abandoned. Arguments favor the here and now, but conversations assign importance to history… Neither education nor conversation can be identified with argument” (450).

72 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 112.
Dialogue, as conversation or inquiry, may have a number of potential outcomes, some of which may not be appropriate for SR. Burbules names five potential outcomes, which I paraphrase here.73 (1) complete agreement; (2) the construction of language to continue discussion about difference; (3) analogous understandings; (4) slight understanding, with respect; (5) complete incommensurability. Clearly, the issue dividing these outcomes (particularly in numbers 2-4) is the role that difference is to play in the dialogue. With these options, Burbules provides a language by which the respective religious practitioners at the table in SR may see the value in understanding one another’s differences, while also maintaining a language and context for continuing a relationship with one another. Which outcome the dialogue of SR will incite is impossible to predict.

Dialogue as Pedagogical Communicative Relation

The central tenet of Burbules’s approach to dialogue is his notion that dialogue is a pedagogical communicative relation. In what follows, I will develop each main element to that thesis, focusing by turns on the pedagogical, communicative, and relational aspects of dialogue. I will focus not only on dialogue generally, but SR specifically.

First, Burbules thinks that dialogue is pedagogical. Probing more deeply into the notion of SR as dialogue involves asking what separates dialogue from conversation generally. Burbules argues that “dialogue is different from conversation in that it is specifically geared toward teaching and learning.”74 The distinction is thus one of education: namely, conversations do not always aim to educate their participants, but dialogues do. By way of setting the stage for his work, Burbules says this about dialogue:

[D]ialogue involves two or more interlocutors. It is marked by a climate of open participation by any of its partners, who put forth a series of alternating statements of variable duration (including questions, responses, redirections, and building statements…), constituting a sequence that is continuous and developmental. … [I]t is guided by a spirit of discovery, so that the typical tone of the dialogue is exploratory and interrogative. It involves a commitment to the process of communicative interchange itself, a willingness to ‘see things through’ to some meaningful understandings or agreements among the participants. Furthermore, it manifests an attitude of reciprocity among the participants: an interest, respect, and concern that they share for one another, even in the face of disagreements.75

This quote not only describes dialogue in a very general sense, but also serves as a fine entry-point into what SR is and does. Four characteristics of dialogue from the above quote are particularly resonant with SR: (1) “open participation,” (2) “a spirit of discovery,” (3) “commitment to the process,” and (4) “an attitude of reciprocity.”

In naming dialogue as a form of pedagogy, Burbules draws from many philosophers, particularly Gadamer, Richard Rorty, and Jürgen Habermas. But it is not surprising to note that one

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73 See Burbules, Teaching in Dialogue, 128, for a fuller description of these five potential outcomes. See also David Bridges, “A Philosophical Analysis of Discussion,” in Questioning and Discussion: An Interdisciplinary Study, ed. J.T. Dillon (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1988), 16.
74 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, x. See also David Bridges, “A Philosophical Analysis of Discussion,” 16-17; here Bridges similarly argues that the central tenant of dialogue, over and against conversation, debate, etc., is a desire for understanding that undergirds the dialogical process.
75 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 7-8.
of his most concrete theoretical influences in arguing for dialogue as a form of education is Paulo Freire, particularly his classic text, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Burbules draws three fundamental concepts from Freire: (1) “the relational character of dialogue,” (2) “a constructivist view of knowledge,” (3) and “a nonauthoritarian conception of teaching.” Burbules argues that dialogue, as opposed to some other forms of teaching and learning, does not impose a specific viewpoint upon the learner; rather, dialogue allows the learner to construct his or her own concepts of the subjects being discussed as part of the learning process. The end result of the process of dialogue is therefore open-ended, unwilling (indeed, unable) to be conformed to a set of specific, pre-determined ends. This constructivist approach to knowledge and understanding is in line, of course, with Kolb, as well as Wiggins and McTighe above. As a form of dialogue, SR is thus an instance of a constructivist approach to learning, understanding, and conversation, but it is a distinctly communal instance, one in which people learn with and of the other.

As the second major element of Burbules’s thesis states, dialogue is also communicative. Communication is for him a process that informs four key elements of human existence, each of which impacts an understanding of SR as dialogue, and each of which may be considered an aspect of deep reasoning: (1) the nature and use of language; (2) the expression of ways of reasoning; (3) human self-understanding in light of morality (i.e., ethics); and (4) human relationality through politics, which he terms, more generally, social organization. It is dialogue, a process of communal reflection, that provides the ability and a context to engage these issues directly. It would be outside the scope of this essay to describe fully each of the four areas from Burbules as they relate to communication in religious terms. One example will suffice: that of the expression of reasonings. While “reasonings” might lead in any number of directions, I focus on the act of questioning as an expression of reasoning. Here I am directly dependent upon Gadamer, whose work has influenced Burbules as well as much of this piece.

Gadamer claimed that dialogue is the “original communication” that actually takes primacy over reading, implying that dialogue is to speech, which precedes writing, what hermeneutics is to texts. Part of the process of communication is the asking of questions, and Gadamer has claimed that “we cannot have experiences without asking questions.” Gadamer also identifies questioning as central to his understanding of knowledge, and, consequently, of dialogue. He distinguishes between “inauthentic” and “authentic” dialogue, with the differentiating factor being that, in authentic dialogue, the various interlocutors are asking questions to gain new insights and knowledge. Inauthentic dialogue, by contrast, involves the asking of questions with the goal of

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67 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 5-6. Here he is drawing from a reflection on Freire by another Brazilian educator, Tullio Maranhão.

68 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 10.

69 See Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 10-13. Burbules does not develop the communicative aspect of his thesis nearly as well as he does the pedagogical or relational aspects of it. What follows above is in many ways my own appropriation of the “dialogue as communicative” thesis.


81 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 370.
simply making a point.\textsuperscript{82} One way in which we gain new knowledge in SR is that we communicate to one another the questions that we bring to our respective texts. The communication of new questions, then, is one of the main contributions of a dialogical experience like SR. For Gadamer the process of exchanging questions is teaching interlocutors that they do now know everything,\textsuperscript{83} which bears similarity to the humility implied above through Wiggins and McTighe’s definition of self-knowledge. In SR, however, practitioners actually do learn new ways to question God, the self, the text, and the other. Scriptural Reasoners do this learning through mutual support, challenge, and mirroring. But this kind of learning only takes place if participants are receptive to it as Gadamer claims is necessary. That is, dialogue requires an openness and willingness to listen, bringing a communicative element to the dialogical experience.

Burbules claims that dialogue is intrinsically relational, involving people and communities, which is consistent with his communal understanding of learning. This position marks the third element of his thesis regarding dialogue. The relationship that forms the foundation for dialogue is one of commitment, not just to the subject matter, but to the other with whom one is in dialogue and also to the process of the dialogue itself.\textsuperscript{84} Indeed, Burbules argues that one of the central purposes of the “rules” of dialogue is the maintenance of a particular relation between practitioners. Characterizing dialogue as relational is one way of highlighting its communal nature. Dialogue, like SR, cannot happen in isolation from another person.

Burbules devotes an entire chapter to defining the relationships that take place in dialogue.\textsuperscript{85} Four key characteristics of what he calls “the dialogical relation” may be extrapolated to SR:

1) \textit{Embracing difference}. According to Burbules, difference provides both challenges and opportunities for dialogue. Challenges come, obviously, when different people come together under a common purpose, but given that the goal of dialogue is more to engage in the process rather than to achieve a particular outcome, the differences pose learning opportunities. Differences should not be glossed over, or even overcome. As he poignantly argues, “without differences to play against, learning itself is impossible.”\textsuperscript{86} This aspect of Burbules’s description of dialogue is analogous to one of the central agreements from Ochs and Ford, that SR is a forum for “interactive particularity.” In other words, SR is a context that, very simply, allows practitioners to be different from one another.

2) \textit{Intentionality regarding equality and community}. By this Burbules is referring to the reciprocity demonstrated by a willingness to take on various “roles” in the dialogue. For example, sometimes the learner may be more active, and other times the learner may be more passive.\textsuperscript{87} Just like any meaningful relationship, the dialogical relation does not happen instantly, and it requires a good deal of work. The willingness to see oneself as part of a community of inquiry defines the dialogical relation. As Ford claims, SR is at its best when practiced by groups that intentionally meet multiple times over the course of many years as a group.\textsuperscript{88}

3) \textit{Honesty about authority}. Burbules claims:

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Gadamer} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 371.
\bibitem{Gadamer} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 374.
\bibitem{Burbules} Burbules, \textit{Dialogue in Teaching}, 14-16.
\bibitem{Burbules} Burbules, \textit{Dialogue in Teaching}, 20-49.
\bibitem{Burbules} Burbules, \textit{Dialogue in Teaching}, 27.
\end{thebibliography}
[A] dialogical relation should be aimed toward making authority superfluous; but authority, properly conceived and sensitively exercised, can be a helpful element in attaining that end. Specifically, a dialogical communicative relation constitutes in form and process a practical repudiation of hierarchical concepts of authority...

Clearly this does not mean that authority does not exist. Rather, it simply means that the dialogical group (in this case, the SR group) must indeed understand and appropriate these elements of the dialogical relationship. This means not glossing over power dynamics or ignoring related issues of procedural methodology.

(4) Encouraging certain emotions and virtues. The dialogical relation is defined by certain key emotions and virtues. Burbules sees six emotions in play in dialogue. First is concern, which he likens to embodying Martin Buber’s “Thou.” Then comes trust, which is especially important when risk of some kind is involved in the relationship. Next is respect, which Burbules sees as “more important than equality.” Following that is appreciation, which implies a valuation of the interlocutor. Then is affection, which may simply be defined as “liking” people. And, finally, there is hope, which ininsates that the process of dialogue will be worth the effort for the participants.

Regarding virtues, Burbules is less systematic than he is regarding emotions. He does, however, name several that are important in order to maintain the dialogical relation, including tolerance, openness, self-restraint, and humility. Virtues, for Burbules, are intrinsically social entities. Given this interpersonal aspect, therefore, virtues are harder to define and develop than emotions, and the virtues needed in dialogue are not universals; different dialogues call for different virtues. Burbules implies that the virtues may be context-specific applications of the emotions and thus harder to place into a theory such as this one. A distinction might therefore be that emotions are felt among the participants, whereas virtues are practiced. But it is in this discussion of the virtues that we see another main contribution of dialogue (and SR): dialogue is a political and social reality, just as much as it is pedagogical. In fact, one cannot separate the social from the educative; these two spheres work in tandem. The emotions and virtues of a dialogical relation are potentially an entry point into questions probing the contribution that dialogue can have, a contribution that has real educational implications.

Dialogue as a Game

Burbules also focuses, following Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gadamer, and others, on the metaphor of a “game” to describe dialogue. One of the main reasons that Burbules believes the metaphor of a game is so valuable for understanding dialogue is that it prioritizes the process of dialogue more than it does the outcome of dialogue. Here there is a clear resonance with the theory

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89 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 35.
90 This is of particular concern for feminist writers. Burbules reacts to Elizabeth Ellsworth in her “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” Harvard Education Review 59.3 (1989), 291-324. See Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 31-35.
92 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 38.
93 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 41-43.
94 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 44. Here he is reacting to Rorty’s idea of “becoming ‘we’.”
95 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, xiii.
of experiential learning proposed by Kolb. The process is what dialogue generally, and SR specifically, is all about. As a way of giving more substance to his concept of a pedagogical communicative relation, Burbules draws “the metaphor of playing a game in order to illuminate the creative, spontaneous, and enjoyable aspects of dialogue at its best—an emphasis...intended to offset current tendencies to consider teaching as a technique.”

Many of the elements of Burbules’s argument for dialogue being a game (namely, the rules and moves of interaction) are pertinent to SR. In arguing for dialogue as a game, Burbules is highly indebted to Gadamer, who claims that “play” is defined intrinsically by a “to and fro” that is unbound by a particular end. It is thus active and passive, and basic to being human. Play is also intrinsically communal. Dialogue is an end unto itself, and it is that end that SR must come to understand and appropriate. Dialogue is relational, hospitable, and joyful. Burbules claims, “[T]here is something about the interchange that stands on its own; it is a relational activity, as a game is, that we pursue because of curiosity, interest in others, and a sense of enjoyment in the process itself.”

Though the articulation and appropriation of rules is by no means uncontested by the SR community, as we saw above, SR does have its own set of rules. All games have rules, and these rules serve both a regulative and constitutive function. Rules serve as guideposts for steering the conversation the way it should go. Rules provide an avenue for appropriating ethical norms into our learning, and rules keep everyone on the same page about what to expect in and from the dialogue itself. They therefore comprise an integral part of it. Burbules articulates what he sees as the three “rules” of dialogue, each of which I would apply to SR: (1) the rule of participation; (2) the rule of commitment; and (3) the rule of reciprocity. The first rule implies that dialogue, in its best forms, should involve participants in the process voluntarily. People are given the freedom to express themselves, and they do so. The second rule suggests that each of the interlocutors is open not only to the process of dialogue (including taking it to an end of some sort), but also to the myriad disclosures and understandings that may arise throughout the process. If the first rule creates a pedagogical component (i.e., expression), then the second creates a learning component. The third rule has to do with relationality, defining the type of relationship the interlocutors might have. Interestingly, Burbules claims that his “rules” are really just extensions of the virtues he suggested for dialogue. The complicated relationship between rules and virtues is one about which SR studies have not yet reached a meaningful conclusion. Much work remains around the issue of whether or not SR can be rule-based, or whether or not it is a context for virtue.

As I conclude this discussion of Burbules, I would note again that in my view, the best metaphor for understanding the dialogue of SR is not in calling it a game. The specific branch of dialogue that makes up the SR experience is best understood as a laboratory. A distinction between game and laboratory plays on the similar relationship both entities have to rules, but highlights the laboratory’s educative purposes. In this departure from Burbules, I am drawing on some of the

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97 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 108. See also Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 50.
100 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 70-71.
101 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 80-83. This short section in Burbules is particularly dense with regard to relevant information, and I encourage the reader to spend some time with these rules.
102 Burbules, Dialogue in Teaching, 82.
resources already present in the SR community, particularly those referenced above from Peter Ochs and Nicholas Adams.

**Conclusion**

In this essay I have not fully developed my thesis that SR is an educational entity. I have only begun here to lay some of the groundwork for that larger project in clarifying the definitions of some key terms that such an endeavor would necessitate. My intent with this essay has been to prepare for a new interpretation of SR, noting how definitions of terms like learning, understanding, and dialogue might help scholars of SR see the practice more clearly. This essay has grown out of the realization that there are too few scholars of interreligious engagement (and I would include those investigating SR here) who are drawing on the resources of educationally-oriented philosophers and thinkers. Lest I pose a question I am not willing to answer, I have also offered what I hope are resources to help those of us in SR circles think more concretely about this practice and its educational implications.

This exercise has been risky business on two levels. On one level, it sets my work a bit at odds with some of the existing thinking on SR, and it opens space for different trajectories in SR studies. I am suggesting that scholars of SR will find more relevant conversation partners for expanding our understanding of SR among educational theorists than among even those philosophers who are traditionally celebrated as offering insights into SR practice (Peirce, James, Gadamer, and Levinas immediately come to mind). It is my conviction in writing this piece that SR also has much to learn from thinkers like Kolb, Burbules, and others who are investigating education as a philosophical category.

On another level, though, this educational approach to SR is one that has risky theological implications. *Is the religious other really one from whom I can and should learn?* That simple question teases out related and corollary questions about the nature of truth, the ethics of relationships, and the imperative for interreligious engagement. Scriptural Reasoning provides one way to answer that question in the affirmative.

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