

'I tell stories, I am stuck in the middle, I am vulnerable' – selected themes and threshold concepts from religious education and spirituality

Dr. **Peter Mudge**, D. Theol.(MCD), BADipEd (Macquarie)

Consultant and Lecturer

Religious Education, Spiritual Formation, Theology, Transformative Catholic Pedagogy

Baulkham Hills, NSW, Australia, 2153

Mobile: 0400 571 154 (9 am to 5 pm)

Email: pjpmudge@gmail.com

The author's earlier research has examined the potential of pedagogies of disorientation or displacement for learning in religious education (RE) and spirituality, within a pedagogical framework shifting from secure orientation through disturbing disorientation, and towards surprising re-orientation (Brueggemann, 2007; Mudge, 2013a, refereed article; M. Taylor, 1987). More recent research (Mudge, 2014, refereed article) has explored links between threshold concepts (TCs) (cf. Land, Meyer & Smith, 2008) and threshold word webs (TWs) in the same disciplines, with particular reference to the transition between kataphatic and apophatic knowing and spirituality. It employed the spider web as a metaphor for crossing TCs and suggested a pedagogical cycle that might assist and illuminate such transitions. Yet the same research also asserted that it remains the prerogative of each individual as to whether or not they respond positively to the challenge of any threshold, disorientation or reorientation that confronts them.

The aim of this current article is to take the foregoing research one step further by reflecting, firstly, on three prominent TC-related themes that consistently challenge the author's RE and spirituality students – the importance of stories, 'stuckness', and vulnerability. Secondly, it considers four crucial TCs (TC transitions and TWs) encountered by students in the author's two courses in RE and spirituality – from informational to neuroscientific approaches to learning (e.g. Medina, 2012; Berns, 2010); from arboreal to rhizomatic learning and processing (Sajjadi, 2008); from instrumentalist to praxis and wisdom ways of knowing (Habermas, 1984); and from living a controlled life to living productively with uncertainty and change (Chödrön, 2013). Both sections are threaded throughout with student narratives extracted from some 600 plus student reflection learning logs written by the author's RE and spirituality students (Mudge, 2013b). The paper argues that such narratives are foundational for the human journey in general, and for the identification of TCs and TWs in particular.

The paper then closes with a consideration of key conclusions and a discussion of future directions. The findings from this paper have the potential to make a constructive contribution to ongoing TC research within religious education and spirituality, and to assist the development of similar frameworks and themes within other areas such as medicine, the arts, engineering, science and many other disciplines.

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Dr. Peter Mudge is Lecturer in Religious Education and Spirituality at The Broken Bay Institute, Diocese of Broken Bay, and Conjoint Lecturer, School of Humanities and Social Science, The University of Newcastle, both in NSW, Australia. His areas of interest and research include – religious education, spirituality, threshold concepts, connected knowing, transformative, critical and subversive pedagogies, Studies of Religion, interfaith/interbelief dialogue, philosophy in the classroom, and the role of the arts and spirituality in religious education. He has received formal training in drawing and painting which he pursues in his art studio.

A selection of his copyright-free art images can be found at: www.flickr.com/photos/ceoreals/sets
His contact email is: pmudge@bbi.catholic.edu.au