

What About *Learning* in Practical Theological Studies? Toward More Conceptual Clarity

SAGE Open
April-June 2015: 1–12
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DOI: 10.1177/2158244015592682
sgo.sagepub.com


A. (Jos) de Kock¹

Abstract

Because *learning* is an important concept in the reflection on young people in faith practices, practical theological studies on the theme of learning profit from a clarification of the concept of *learning*. Therefore, current (empirical) research projects conducted by the Dutch Research Centre for Youth, Church, and Culture and educational and religious education literature on *learning* have been analyzed. The results provide an overview of utilized descriptions of learning, (theological) interpretations of learning, normative positions regarding learning, and strategic considerations toward (the promotion of) learning. Implications for future practical theological research into (faith) learning in the context of faith practices of young people are discussed.

Keywords

learning, practical theology, religious education, formation, children, adolescents

“Learning is a lifelong activity. Learning occurs intentionally in formal Instructional settings and incidentally through experience. Learning encompasses a multitude of competencies, from knowledge of simple facts to great skill in complex and difficult procedures. Learning sometimes requires great effort and sometimes proceeds with relative ease. These are a few of the things we know about learning. But learning is a complex affair. The results of learning are often observable in human performance, but the process of learning is much less obvious. As a consequence, different theories have been developed to explain learning. These theories represent different perspectives, different assumptions, and different beliefs about learning.”

—Driscoll (2000, p. 4)

“What exactly is a “religious learning process” . . . is, conversely, not easy to define.”

—Schweitzer (2006, p. 115)

[Translated from the original German text]

Introduction

As a practical theologian, specializing in the field of religious education and religious pedagogy, I, and my international colleagues, deal with the concept of *learning*. Our research on learning is carried out in practical theological studies on the practices of religious education, whether in church communities or in schools or wherever these practices are located.

Increasingly, the primary focus is shifting from religious education toward studying young people in certain faith practices, which emphasize the concept of learning in academic studies (see, for example, Sonnenberg & Barnard, 2012). Although *learning* is becoming a common feature in many practical theological studies on young people in faith practices, the way *learning* is conceptualized varies. This is my observation in various research projects conducted by our Research Centre for Youth, Church & Culture (OJKC)¹ and has been my observation in the international field of academic studies on youth ministry and religious education.

Because *learning* is an important factor in the reflection on young people in faith practices, I will argue in this article that practical theological studies could profit from a clarification of the concept, including an explanation of different angles of use involved in current research and publications. *Learning in general*, for example, is often conceived of as a persisting change in performance or performance potential (Driscoll, 2000). *Faith learning* in particular, then, can be conceived as a particular change in how one performs in the religious domain. However, sometimes we see faith learning explained as a form of meaning-making process, whereas

¹Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:

A. (Jos) de Kock, Protestant Theological University, P.O. Box 7161, 1007 MC Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Email: adekock@pthu.nl



other authors approach the concept of learning as part of socialization processes, which is another angle of use.

By way of illustration of different angles of use of the concept, the article briefly describes current research projects carried out at our OJKC (section “Illustration: Current Research in the Dutch OJKC”). This illustration, at the same time, applies preliminary perspectives on how the concept of learning might be clarified. Next, the article provides a clarification of the concept *learning* regarding practical theological studies on young people in faith practices. This clarification, as will be concluded, is helped by distinguishing among descriptions of learning, interpretations of learning, normative positions regarding learning, and strategic considerations toward (the promotion of) learning. This argument is established based on a discussion of educational literature on learning, including Religious Education literature on learning.

The context of *learning* studied in the current article is faith practices. Practical theologians seek to understand religion and faith as they are involved in church life and everyday life; we could say it is about the hermeneutics of lived religion (Ganzevoort, 2009). Learning as part of the lived religion of people is rightfully an object of practical theological studies. Because of the importance, we need clarity in our focus on how learning is defined in child and youth studies. Recently, Schweitzer (2014), in his article “Religion in Childhood and Adolescence: How Should It Be Studied? A Critical Review of Problems and Challenges in Methodology and Research,” proposed criteria for empirical studies in religion among children and adolescents. These criteria emphasize the importance of clarity about the use of interdisciplinary frameworks and religious and nonreligious interpretive perspectives in these studies. This article aims at gaining such clarity, in particular on learning in practical theological reflections on youth and religion.

Different aspects of learning are stressed in empirical studies on learning (processes) regarding faith and/or religion conducted during the past 10 years by Le Cornu (2005); Burton, Paroschi, Habenicht, and Hollingsead (2006); and Niemelä (2006). Le Cornu (2005) presents a typology of four ways of *believing and learning* based on an interview study among 21 students, of whom the youngest was 21 years and the oldest 88 years, against the background of their theological educational contexts ranging from first-year theological studies to postdoctoral studies. The typology is grounded in a distinction between Christian faith content and day-to-day experiences. This results in four types of learner-believers. The first type is the *discrete learners* group, who largely hold their faith and their experience as two separate dimensions of their lives. The second type is the *related learners* group, who integrate faith and experience. The third type is the *assimilative learners* group, who assimilate their faith in their experience. The fourth type is the *interpretive learners* group, who tend to interpret experience according to faith principles premises.

Burton et al. (2006) report on a study of videotaped interviews with 12 five- to six-year-old children who attended

two different Sabbath school classes at a U.S. Midwestern Seventh-Day Adventist church. The study concerned the impact of the curriculum design (a traditional vs. a revised curriculum) on children’s learning. Learning was measured in terms of factual biblical learning and the ability to express messages from Bible stories.

Niemelä (2006) reports on a questionnaire study among more than 1,000 young people before and after they participated in confirmation classes in Finland. The main question posed is about the quality and effectiveness of the classes and the outcome measures for meeting social expectations (such as attractive leisure time activities), meeting religious expectations (such as strengthening faith), meeting expectations regarding growing up (such as becoming independent), attitude toward Christianity, and belief in God.

Each study stresses different aspects of learning: the relationship between learning, faith, and experience (Le Cornu, 2005); the outcomes of learning—among which are factual biblical knowledge and the expression of biblical messages (Burton et al., 2006); and the relationship between or distinction between “general development,” religious development, and the social domain (Niemelä, 2006).

This comparison shows different aspects or angles of use of learning. This raises the question if these aspects and angles of use of learning, in the context of the religious domain, can be summarized or classified. This article strives, in the words of Driscoll (2000), as quoted at the very beginning of this article, for an overview of various theories, perspectives, assumptions, and beliefs about learning. This overview can advance the practical theological reflections and empirical research on youth and religion in which learning processes are debated.

I first briefly describe current research projects carried out at the OJKC (section “Illustration: Current Research in the Dutch OJKC”). Next, the way in which the concept of learning functions in projects such as those conducted by our research center is explained further focusing on definition and interpretation of learning, and on normative and strategic perspectives (section “Analysis: Definition, Interpretation, and Normative and Strategic Perspectives on Learning”).² This discussion is broadened by drawing into the debate additional educational literature on learning, including Religious Education literature on learning. The article ends with a conclusion and a discussion of the results (section “Conclusion and Discussion”).

Illustration: Current Research in the Dutch OJKC

To illustrate various angles of the use of learning, I now briefly describe current research projects carried out at the OJKC. This illustration is based on published articles as well as unpublished manuscripts produced by eight senior and junior researchers at the OJKC. This description aims at providing preliminary perspectives on how learning might be clarified.³

Definitions and Interpretations of Learning

When it comes to the concept of learning in the OJKC projects, faith learning in particular is often at stake. Only two times in the publications and manuscripts of the OJKC studies, however, is a definition of faith learning presented. An OJKC researcher, Meerveld (forthcoming), empirically studies how learning is strived for and the actual learning results of youth catechesis within different types of catechetical practices. In his study, he uses a broad definition of faith learning. Meerveld defines faith learning as a form of learning in which what is strived for or in which the result of the learning process is in the field of faith content, behavior (praxis), attitudes, experiences, or perceptions. Sonnenberg and Barnard (2012) present a definition of faith learning: They see, following Roebben (2007), the learning of faith as a “discovery of meaning.” Next, we observe several interpretative frameworks with which (faith) learning can be understood: learning as a socialization process, as an identity-development process, as a physical process, and as a quality of youth worship.

De Kock, Roeland, and Vos (2011) position learning practices in the framework of religious socialization and distinguish three types of religious socialization. First, the theory of *traditional* socialization conceptualizes religious socialization as the transition of religious beliefs and values: passing on of the Christian faith to the next generation. Second, according to the theory of *modern* socialization, adults raise children by supporting the youths’ personal identity development. In this socialization approach, learning practices are all about coaching. The third theory of socialization, called *tribal socialization*, points to the experiential practice of faith, which is felt and sensed rather than understood intellectually. In this approach, learning practices are directed toward participation: learning by doing and experiencing. OJKC researcher Van Wijnen (Van Wijnen, forthcoming & Van Wijnen, submitted) empirically investigated small groups of adolescents in youth ministry and based on that study states that faith needs tribalization, as a process beyond individualization: “There is a strong cohesion between the (communal) content of faith and the way faith tribes do experience faith” (Van Wijnen, submitted). Van Wijnen and Barnard (2014) conclude that faith happens, is practiced, and is lived out in the midst of the lives of the adolescents studied. The authors plead for a turning away from faith socialization based on an isolated cognitive basis and a faith language as a logical framework to a more narrative approach in which adolescents’ life stories are connected to narratives of the shared faith tradition of the local congregation.

Learning can also be interpreted as an identity-development process. Following De Kock (2014b), one of the goal categories for religious learning processes is goals in terms of identity development. In our research project on the religious identity development of highly religious Christian and

Muslim adolescents, we carried out an in-depth interview study among 10 young Christian adults and 10 young Muslim adults. The framework for the project was reported in *Religious Education* by Visser-Vogel, Westerink, De Kock, Barnard, and Bakker (2012). The research contributes to the development theories formulated by Erikson (1968), Marcia (1966, 1980), McAdams (2005, 2008), and Schachter and Ventura (2008). Identity in general, and religious identity in particular, is a process in which individuals explore and commit to a set of religious beliefs and practices that are constructed in relation to the context (including the societal context), situation, and reaction of others (Visser-Vogel, De Kock, Barnard, & Bakker, submitted-a, submitted-b). Van Wijnen and Barnard (submitted) in a study of small groups of adolescents stress the importance of the social context and the collective identity of different relationships for identity development. Themes such as relationships, sexuality, going out, and dress codes function as identity markers for orthodox Christian youngsters. For Muslim orthopraxy youngsters, acquiring knowledge (general knowledge, knowledge about Islam, and knowledge about underlying values), obeying Allah, and participating in and being involved with their community appear to be important themes in their religious identity construction (Visser-Vogel et al., submitted-b). Visser-Vogel, De Kock, Barnard, and Bakker (submitted-c; 2015) discuss the complexity and multifaceted character of the exploration processes of Muslim youngsters and discuss various sources for the religious identity development of orthoprax Muslim adolescents.

De Kock and Sonnenberg (2012) reflect on learning in terms of a physical process when they address the question of how embodiment can conceptually be related to religious learning processes in youth ministry. The background for this question is the observation that youth worship events can erase religious learning (as suggested by, among others, Astley, 1984), resulting in the increasing attention paid to a bodily and physical approach in youth ministry.

“Religious knowledge is embodied knowledge because it is constructed by personal and social acts, experiences, performances and gatherings in the religious community. At the very heart of religious learning is learning by doing and social interaction, observing and experiencing the religious life of others and of oneself. This is in congruence with growing attention in religious pedagogy to learning goals in terms of emotions and experiences in addition to merely cognitive goals. (De Kock & Sonnenberg, 2012, p. 15)”

As an implication, religious education should not only focus on mediation of the Word through speaking and reading but also through doing, feeling, and partaking of the sacraments.

One other interpretive framework for learning observed in the OJKC projects is learning as a *quality* of faith practices,

particularly in worship practices. Barnard and Wepener (2012) see worship as a spiritual implicit learning environment in which “more explicit cognitive knowledge” can be communicated. “Worship has a formative power in shaping believers, more specifically Christian believers, because it evokes and expresses basic attitudes that enable faith. Worship is the learning environment in which we become Christians through the power of ritual” (Barnard & Wepener, 2012, p. 7). These insights are further elaborated in OJKC researcher Ronelle Sonnenberg’s PhD project on the participation of adolescents in local youth worship services and national youth worship events in Protestant contexts (Sonnenberg, 2015). A key finding was that “learning faith” is one of the qualities of adolescents’ participation in youth worship. Based on empirical findings (collected by participative observation and interviews), Sonnenberg and Barnard (2012) distinguish learning impulses from learning products. Important impulses in youth worship events are discussions, sermons, speeches, and song texts. Learning products appeared to be information and support, knowledge about and insight into God, religious and social-ethical applications, relevance of tradition, and rules and freedom. Furthermore, the educational function of worship appeared to be apparent through its dialogical dimensions: One voice is not authoritative; the dialogue between voices matters.

Normative Considerations in Relationship to Learning

The OJKC research projects show various normative considerations regarding learning, all of which have implications for improving learning processes in faith practices. Starting from the vision of the church as a learning community, De Kock, Elhorst, and Barnard (2015) point at four characteristics of faith learning in the church as a learning community, which are mainly derived from Schippers (1977), Saris (1982), Nipkow (1982), and Osmer (2005): (a) faith learning as intergenerational learning, (b) faith learning as learning in relation (religious experience is there in encounters with Jesus Christ and with each other in His spirit), (c) faith learning as learning in (everyday) life, and (d) faith learning as emancipatory learning (learning is directed toward durable change).

In another article, De Kock (2015) raises the question how religious learning processes found in the missionary context of youth work and the guidance of these learning processes can be understood religiously pedagogically. To find answers to this question, the article presents the results of fieldwork into a case of Christian youth work outside the church and the religious pedagogical reflection in this fieldwork. In fieldwork, De Kock (2015) has detected five main themes regarding religious learning at the street level: (a) vision of God, man, and the street; (b) the message; (c) the means; (d) the didactical model; and (e) the relationship with the church. The main conclusion of this particular study is that religious learning processes are situated in the *encounter*. This can be

understood in various ways: as an encounter between youngster and youth worker, as an encounter by living and acting together, and as an encounter involved in discussing and thinking together about personal, societal, and religious questions. The concept of encounter or meeting is inspired by the concept of narthical religious learning introduced by Roebben (2007, 2009). The study also points out that due to various tendencies, the function of church communities serving as places for learning increasingly is displaced by contexts outside the physical boundaries of the church and even existing outside the institutional boundaries of the church, that is, at the “street level.”

Setting goals for learning practices is another normative consideration observed in OJKC research. De Kock (2014b) delineates (a) learning goals in terms of cognition and affection, (b) learning goals in terms of emotions and experiences, (c) learning goals in terms of the formation of one’s own opinion and social interaction, and (d) learning goals in terms of identity development. An interview study by De Kock (2014a), however, reveals that many formulations of goals that catechists devise for themselves do not fit in these pre-designed theoretical categories: for example, “‘learning to know Jesus,’ ‘to talk about something,’ ‘to find truth’ and ‘being served pastorally’” (p. 66). The author discusses the theological and biblical normativity in a reflection on religious learning. Differing orientations toward faith learning goals hark back to differences in the personal theologies held by catechists. “What specific biblical-theological concepts can probably be considered foundational to a catechist’s arrangement of catechetical learning environments?” (De Kock, 2014a, p. 68). This brings us to the final point of reflection observed in the OJKC material: the implications of how learning is conceptualized for improving learning processes in faith practices.

In De Kock’s (2012) work, three models of religious or catechetical education are elaborated: a behavioral model, a developmental model, and an apprenticeship model. De Kock and Sonnenberg (2012) indicate that within the last few decades, a change can be observed—from using behavioral models of religious education to adopting developmental and apprenticeship models. De Kock (2012) elaborates that in religious learning environments set up according to a behavioral model, the teacher directs the content of the lessons. This requires the learners to acquire the content and the teachers to conduct assignments and to check whether the content is mastered. Whereas, in religious learning environments that follow a developmental model, learners learn from observing the teacher’s performance: He or she questions, contradicts, and challenges the learners’ personal theories. The content of what should be learned depends on what the learners want to learn and the ideal of independent critical thinking. In religious learning environments set up according to an apprenticeship model, the person of the teacher—who he or she is and does—directs the learning process. Religious content and the learners’ specific interests

are embedded in the personal relationship between teacher and learner and embedded in the tradition of a particular religious practice.

In “a typology of catechetical learning environments,” De Kock (2014b) elaborates further on the three models of religious learning environments. Based on a literature review of studies about catechetical learning environments and learning processes, De Kock develops a typology of catechetical learning environments in which the author distinguishes between the roles of catechist and catechumens and highlights the learning goals of religious learning processes. The role division follows the distinction among behavioral, developmental, and apprenticeship models of learning environments presented earlier by De Kock (2012): In a behavioral model, the role of the catechist is instructing the catechumen; in a developmental model, the role of the catechist is questioning, contradicting, and challenging the catechumen’s personal theories; and in an apprenticeship model, the catechist and the catechumen participate in a shared world, the faith community.

Analysis: Definition, Interpretation, and Normative and Strategic Perspectives on Learning

The different ways in which the concept of learning appears to be discussed, as shown in the previous illustration of the OJKC research projects, is now elaborated on in terms of definitions, interpretations, and normative and strategic perspectives. This discussion is broadened by including additional educational literature on learning and Religious Education literature on learning.

Definitions of Learning and Descriptions of Learning

The illustration of the OJKC research reveals a few straightforward definitions of learning in general, of faith learning in particular, and of religious learning. Meerveld (forthcoming) defines *faith learning* as a form of learning that leads in the field of faith content to results in terms of behavior (praxis), attitudes, experiences, and perceptions. Sonnenberg and Barnard (2012) compress the field of *faith learning* into a discovery of meaning.

“Learning is discovering meanings that are presented in liturgy, the Bible, tradition, culture and by peers and adults and so we name this process of acquiring theological knowledge a “discovery of meaning” in its own right . . . we do not consider the discovery of *meaning* as the final learning product, for the final discovery is the existential relationship between God and the individual . . . This meaning can be considered as theological knowledge because it can be located in the relation between God and the worshipper.” (Sonnenberg & Barnard, 2012, p. 3)

These two definitions of faith learning treat it as a general process of learning in a particular domain, namely, the domain of religion or faith. In this respect, the definitions lean on a general definition of learning, as for instance provided by Driscoll (2000): “Learning is a persisting change in performance or performance potential that results from experience and interaction with the world” (p. 3). Or in the words of Boekaerts and Simons (1995),

“We claim that someone learns or has learned something when we detect a relatively subtle change in his or her behaviour or can determine changes in behavioural dispositions when these are results of learning activities and have a certain degree of agility . . . Learning as such we generally cannot observe. We conclude on the basis of changes in behaviour that people have learned or we hear from people that they regard themselves as having learned” [translated from Dutch]. (p. 3)

And again, in the words of Van der Veen and Van der Wal (2012),

“Learning is realizing mental processes by way of selecting, absorbing, processing, integrating, establishing, utilizing of and attributing meaning to various forms of information (experiences, happenings and phenomenon in reality), which lead to sustainable changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, motives and/or the ability to learn” [translated from Dutch]. (p. 30)

Boekaerts and Simons do not regard learning itself as observable because we can speak of realized learning based only on its observed outcomes. This contrasts with considerable reflections in the literature that try to grasp the essence of what transpires in learning. This also holds for the OJKC research projects. If, for example, one considers learning synonymous with identity development, then what transpires as *religious learning* might be observable as a process of religious exploration and making commitments to a set of religious beliefs and practices (see Visser-Vogel et al., submitted-a, submitted-b). It raises the question whether concepts can be used to depict what transpires during learning itself, in particular in the realm of faith learning. At least four types of descriptions of learning can be distinguished, regarding the essence of learning, termed approaches to learning.

The first type of learning description concentrates on the relational basis: (Faith) learning is a *relational process* because the religious experience is derived from the encounter with God or Jesus Christ and from an encounter with other people (in His spirit), both inter- and intragenerational. The second type concentrates on the process of acquiring principles of faith and mainly *cognitive religious/faith content* (as supplied by leaders or the tradition). The third type concentrates on the process of the individual believer engaged in subjectively *constructing the (religious) self* and doing this based on independent critical thinking. The fourth

type concentrates on the process of *faith in action*: doing and experiencing social interaction in faith practices (whether formal practices or practices in everyday life).

These four approaches complement the three approaches to (faith) learning distinguished by Alii (2009):

- Learning by doing, based on the principle of trial-and-error
- Learning with and by heart, a form of cognitive learning
- Learning as an intersubjective activity: reflecting together on experiences regarding faith. (pp. 196-203)

Regarding the first approach to faith learning, this corresponds with what Nipkow (1982) claims in his “Grundfragen der Religionspädagogik” where he points at the intergenerational heart of the process of learning: In his view, Christian formation means “living together and faith learning in between the generations [translated from the original German text]” (Nipkow, 1982, p. 33). Regarding the second aspect of faith learning (acquiring principles and content), we reference the work of Sfard (1998), who identifies two metaphors for learning: the acquisition metaphor and the participation metaphor. I will explain in terms of OJKC research how the second type of learning description (acquiring principles and content) fits the acquisition metaphor and the fourth (faith in action) fits the participation metaphor.

The acquisition metaphor characterizes learning as “acquisition of something” directed toward the goal of individual enrichment. In this metaphor, the “student” is a recipient and (re-)constructor, while the “teacher” is a provider, facilitator, or mediator. Knowing in the acquisition metaphor is conceptualized as “having” or “possessing,” and thus, knowledge is an individual or public property, as a possession or commodity.

When it comes to the participation metaphor for learning, Sfard demarcates learning as “becoming a participant” and directed toward the goal of community building. The “student” is an apprentice or peripheral participant, while the “teacher” preserves practice and discourse or acts as an expert participant. Knowing in the participation metaphor is conceptualized as “belonging,” “participating,” or “communicating,” and thus, knowledge is an aspect of practice, a discourse, or activity.

Adding to the model of acquisition and the participation metaphors, Paavola and Hakkarainen (2005) advance a third metaphor for learning: the knowledge-creation metaphor, which they present as an emergent epistemological approach to learning. Important background for introducing a knowledge-creation metaphor is the current rise of knowledge societies. The authors hark back to, among others, Sfard (1998), when they characterize the acquisition metaphor as “monological” within the mind approach to learning and the participation metaphor as a “dialogical” interaction approach (Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2005, p. 539). According to the authors, neither

metaphor “appears to be sufficient when addressing processes of deliberately creating and advancing knowledge” (p. 538). The knowledge-creation metaphor covers a “triological” approach: “developing collaborative shared objects and artefacts” (Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2005, p. 539).

The first type of learning description (with a focus on the relational basis of learning) and the third type (with a focus on the individual construction basis of learning) conceptually combine into what is suggested by the knowledge-creation metaphor of learning. The knowledge-creation metaphor sees learning as individuals and groups creating social structures and collaborative processes that support the growth of knowledge and innovation, generating new ideas, conceptual knowledge, new practices, and new social structures. In the religious domain, this triological learning approach results in the creation of new faith practices, in terms of structures and theologies. Thus, we see the four types of descriptions cover the various concentrations in existing metaphors for learning.

Interpretation of the Process of Learning

This discussion tells us that learning has multiple aspects and is embedded in practices. The OJKC research shows various attempts to interpret what happens when faith learning processes occur. First, we acknowledge four general interpretations of learning, which are not strictly theological, derived from various disciplines such as Sociology (of religion), Psychology (of learning), Developmental Psychology, Anthropology, and Educational Sciences. After discussing these nontheological interpretations, I will consider theological interpretations in particular.

We can distinguish four general interpretations of the learning process. First, learning is understood as a *cognitive process* of exploring ideas, convictions, and beliefs and making commitments to one or the other. Second, learning is understood as a *process of action* where practices, behavior, and actions are explored and commitments to one or the other are made. The latter interpretation of learning is also related to the interpretation of learning rooted in flesh and blood bodies in which not only the cognitive aspect but also the physical aspect of learning processes is addressed. Third, learning is understood as a *social process*: Learning is relational and intergenerational, and thus, it is a product of (a fluid combination of) socialization strategies and individual choices. Fourth, learning is understood as a *communal quality*: Learning is embedded in the daily life contexts of communities, and thus, it is not an individual but a collective process.

These four broad interpretations *partly* mirror the attempts made in the educational literature to interpret what happens when learning processes occur. In the educational sciences, these interpretation attempts are classified in six families of educational theories (based on the elaborations by Verschaffel, 1995, and Driscoll, 2000, as utilized by De Kock

& Sonnenberg, 2012): (a) behaviorist theories, (b) cognitivist theories, (c) developmental theories, (d) motivational theories, (e) constructivist theories, and (f) biological theories. It is *partly* mirrored because our four broad interpretations of learning form another kind of categorization framework compared with the summary of the six families of educational theories.

Thus, what theological interpretations can be observed in particular? First, as illustrated, for example, by the OJKC research, several *learning impulses*, elements that evoke learning, are put forward. These impulses are the external checking of acquired faith content, attention to learners' personal interests, learner participation in religious practices (e.g., worship), and the encounter between (personal) longings and (representatives of) religious perspectives, discussions, sermons, speeches, and song texts.

Second, it can be determined that various elements are advanced, which are expected to have impact on and steer (faith) learning processes. A type of element concerns setting particular *goals*: for example, cognitive goals; affective goals, goals such as learning to know Jesus or finding truth, realizing durable change, or being initiated into a faith community, having an existential relationship with God, and so forth. Another type of element is that *religious authority* can be found (regarding what should be learned and how and what is true and worthwhile), leading to a question such as, "Is the authority located externally in the tradition, or in the religious leader, or in the learner himself or herself, or is it embedded in the debate within the religious community?" An additional element concerns how learning processes can be understood as a result of *theological and denominational positions*, including beliefs about the role and function of the Bible, the church itself (and in relationship to society), the tradition, and the actuality.

Normativity Regarding Learning

Let us now turn to normative considerations regarding learning. What (theological) normativity can be observed in the description of the OJKC projects? First, learning (and teaching) is presented as following one of the basic functions of the church or congregational life. The vision of the church should be one in which it sees itself as a learning community. Thus, learning in itself is a core quality of the Christian (faith) community. Second, light is shed on biblical-theological concepts that might be foundational to (faith) learning and the guidance of (faith) learning. Discipleship is an example. Another example is the encounter of a Christian with Jesus Christ as foundational for learning. This points toward the phenomenon of relational learning, understood as learning situated in the encounter with God and each other. Furthermore, different concentrations can be laid on learning, which should result from mediation of the Word by speaking and reading or result from the sacraments by doing and feeling.

Normative orientations, such as the encounter with Christ and following Christ as disciples, are often observed in the practical theological literature on learning. For example, Dingemans (1991) stresses the centrality of the person of Christ: Faith learning is not about a set of dogmas but about a Person. Theologically, Dingemans translates faith learning into "following Christ": "Our choice for the term 'following' is because it represents all elements of the cognitive, affective and attitudinal learning [translated from Dutch]" (Dingemans, 1991, p. 138). Where Dingemans applies the holistic approach of learning (cognitive, affective, and attitudinal) to the theological concept of "following Christ," De Kock and Verboom (2011) legitimate a similar holistic approach by referring to the biblical vision of humankind in which the heart (Hebrew: *leb*) is central when it comes to learning: "(A) notion of learning from the heart (Hebrew: *leb*) forming the core of our humanity moves towards head, affection and the attitudinal [translated from Dutch]" (De Kock & Verboom, 2011, p. 22).

De Kock and Sonnenberg (2012) argue that the six families of educational learning theories (see "Interpretation of the Process of Learning" above) function as not only interpretation frameworks but also normative frameworks: Each family of theories mirrors certain *ideals* when it comes to learning processes, including faith practices:

"It should be emphasized that distinguishing one family of educational learning theories does not in all aspects exclude other families of theories. Although often in practice one or two families are prominent, we note that characteristics from different families can be simultaneously observed. However, the distinction between the six families can help us to analyse what kind of ideals are at stake in different religious pedagogical approaches and in different religious learning practices." (De Kock & Sonnenberg, 2012, p. 13)

Ideals are not necessarily fixed. Sfard (1998), for example, presents a "patchwork" regarding education and learning in general. She concludes that one should not have too great a devotion to one particular metaphor for learning. Instead,

"It seems that the sooner we accept the thought that our work is bound to produce a patchwork of metaphors rather than a unified, homogeneous theory of learning, the better for us and for those whose lives are likely to be affected by our work." (Sfard, 1998, p. 12)

Normative positions have consequences for strategic considerations followed in practices of (faith) learning. The next section will discuss some of these strategic issues. One should, however, keep in mind that often normative positions and strategic choices (in terms of developing learning environments for [faith] learning) cannot be clearly separated from each other. This can be observed, for example, in the work of Osmer (2005), who elaborates on the formation and education task of congregations by describing three core

tasks in Paul's teaching ministry as he observes in his letters:

"(1) *catechesis*: i.e. handing over Israel's Scripture and early Christian tradition; (2) *exhortation*: i.e. moral formation and education; and (3) *discernment*: i.e. teaching congregations how to understand the circumstances of their everyday life and world in terms of God's promised future for creation." (pp. 26-27)

These three core tasks can be read as normative positions taken from Paul, but at the same time, they can be read as strategic landmarks. Faith communities should develop learning environments in which Scripture and tradition are handed over, in which moral formation and education take place, and in which current life is interpreted in terms of God's promises.

Another example of the interconnectedness of normative positions and strategic considerations is in the work of White (1988), who stresses the intergenerational character of religious learning processes. White explains that education has to do with Learning/Growing/Living:

"Each word needs the other because "learning" alone too often suggests strictly the cognitive acquisition of information . . . "Growing" conveys a fuller development of persons, especially in terms of one's inner or subjective side, having to do with the affections but also to do with the psycho-motor or physical aspects of the self. Together "learning" and "growing" have to do with life "living" which . . . relates to faith *lifestyle* development." (p. 26)

Intergenerational religious education thus contains cognitive, affective, and lifestyle developments that according to White (1988) are supported by four "patterns of relationship: (1) In-Common-Experiences, (2) Parallel-Learning, (3) Contributive-Occasions, and (4) Interactive-Sharing" (pp. 26-29).

Strategic Considerations Regarding Learning

In the OJKC research described in the section "Illustration: Current Research in the Dutch OJKC," various strategic considerations regarding (the promotion of) faith learning can be observed. Educational or didactical models for stimulating learning processes are presented, involving a focus on transmission, clarification, or communication. Narrative, sacramental, and proclamation approaches are examined. The most pronounced strategic contribution is the recently presented typology of 12 catechetical learning environments (De Kock, 2014b). This typology combines strategic choices regarding four types of learning goals to be strived for and three models of religious or catechetical education (De Kock, 2012): a behavioral model, a developmental model, and an apprenticeship model. The latter distinction harks back to following particular instructional paradigms. We can distinguish between three instructional paradigms (based on a

classification scheme of Farnham-Diggory, 1994), further expanded by De Kock, Slegers, and Voeten (2004) and De Kock (2005):

"(a) a behavioural paradigm reflecting a social system in which the expert has a high status and the novice has a low status but is expected to acquire more of the expert's expertise; (b) a developmental paradigm reflecting a social system in which the novice learns by developing his or her own personal theories with the support of the expert, who may question, contradict, and challenge those theories; and (c) an apprenticeship paradigm reflecting a social system in which the learner must clearly participate in the expert's world to learn (through acculturation)." (De Kock, 2012, pp. 184-185)

These instructional paradigms shed light on an important strategic consideration: What role does the teacher (whether a pastor, a youth worker, a parent, or a peer) have in the learning process? Is he or she directing the content of lessons and checking acquisitions? Is he or she questioning and challenging learners' personal theories? Or is he or she modeling a Christian life?

Conclusion and Discussion

This article aimed at gaining clarity regarding the concept of learning in practical theological reflections on youth and religion. How might the variety of aspects and angles of use of learning, in the context of the religious domain, be summarized or classified? The conclusion might follow the quote by Schweitzer (2006): "What exactly is a 'religious learning process' . . . is, conversely, not easy to define [translated from the original German text]" (p. 115). Although it is not easy, the descriptions and reflections in this article provide clarifications, which are helpful for future practical theological studies on learning in faith practices. To clarify, it appears helpful to distinguish between descriptions of learning, interpretations of learning, normative positions regarding learning, and strategic considerations toward (the promotion of) learning.

This brings us to the first conclusion: The concept of learning as present in practical theological reflections on youth and religion cannot be clarified by giving a univocal, universal or undivided, sharp definition. The analysis in the current article shows the many ways in which the concept of learning might function in practical theological accounts. In the first place, the concept functions on different levels: on the level of definition/description or on the level of normative approaches, for example. In the second place, within each level, various approaches can be observed. For example, there are multiple interpretations of what is going on if learning occurs, and there is not a single Bible-based normative approach toward the enhancement of faith learning, for example; there are multiple approaches. Thus, it can be concluded that clarification of the concept of learning in practical theological reflections on youth and religion is helped by showing learning is multilayered. Therefore, learning can be

clarified from the angle of different levels. This is what the analysis in the current article shows.

A second conclusion, then, is that four types of descriptions or approaches to learning can be distinguished. The first type concentrates on the relational basis: Faith learning is a relational process, a process embedded in the encounter with God and other people, both inter- and intragenerational. The second type concentrates on the process of acquiring principles of faith and mainly cognitive religious/faith content as supplied by leaders or the tradition. The third type concentrates on the process of the individual believer subjectively constructing the (religious) self, based on independent critical thinking. The fourth type concentrates on the process of “faith in action,” involving doing, experiencing, and interacting socially in faith practices, including the lives of oneself and others.

The third conclusion is that four general interpretations of the process of learning can be distinguished. First, learning is understood as a *cognitive process* of exploring ideas, convictions, and beliefs and making commitments to one or the other. Second, learning is understood as a *process of action* in which practices, behavior, and actions are explored and commitments to one or the other are made. Third, learning is understood as a *social process*: Learning is relational and intergenerational, and thus a product of (a fluid combination of) socialization strategies and individual choices. Fourth, learning is understood as a *communal quality*: Learning is embedded in the daily life contexts of communities, and thus not an individual but a collective process.

The fourth conclusion is that at least three theological interpretations in particular can be distinguished: Learning processes are shaped by (a) goal setting, (b) the place of religious authority, and (c) theological and denominational positions.

The fifth conclusion is that in addition to normative ideals stemming from different educational learning theories, different biblical-theological concepts appear to be (theologically) foundational to learning and the guidance of learning. I showed examples of a discipleship approach and the theology of Paul. Two approaches can be observed: One might opt for one core biblical-theological approach to lead; one might also choose to follow a patchwork approach in which ideals and theological normative approaches are context dependent.

In addition, the sixth conclusion is that different strategic considerations are to be dealt with. Special attention, then, should be given to the role of the teacher, whether he or she is the pastor, parent, youth leader, or peer. These teachers as practical theologians are not simply applying normative standpoints or putting definitions of learning into practice. They are, instead, involved in a creative process with “rules of art” (Osmer, 2005, p. xvi) that arise contextually in a confrontation between observations, interpretations, and normative positions. And this brings us back to the first conclusion that showed learning was a multilayered concept, to be clarified and dealt with from the angle of different levels. This is

a creative process for academics and practitioners in the field of faith practices of young people.

Gaining clarity on descriptions, interpretations, normative positions, and strategic considerations regarding learning can advance practical theological reflections and empirical research on youth and religion in which learning processes are debated. The same is true for practitioners in the field of religious education that involves all kinds of contexts: The different definitions, approaches, and ideals regarding learning as presented in the article can be used to reflect on our own professional practices and can be of help when we develop learning environments for (faith) learning. Dealing with descriptions, interpretations, normative positions, and strategic considerations is in line with the four main tasks for the practical theologian, whether he or she is an academic involved in research or a practitioner in a particular professional field, as elaborated by Osmer (2005, 2008): (a) the descriptive-empirical task, (b) the interpretative task, (c) the normative task, and (d) the pragmatic task. Of special importance for the practical theologian is of course to bring into discussion the theological (biblical, systematic, or springing from lived religion) considerations with the educational/pedagogical, psychological, and sociological reflections on learning, in the interpretative task and in the normative task.

The latter brings us to the final (seventh) conclusion that can be based in the analysis in the current article thus far: Clarification of the concept of learning should be seen in light of an epistemological perspective, a perspective that is part of what Osmer (2011) calls “meta-theoretical considerations” of the practical theologian. This is important because a particular epistemological approach functions implicitly or explicitly as a set of assumptions, grounded in either philosophy, psychology, and/or theology, that shape theories on (faith) learning. Criticizing a description of learning or an educational model for enhancing learning is sometimes a critique on the level of assumptions: The assumptions are wrong, and therefore, as a result, the description of learning or the proposed educational model is wrong.

Epistemological approaches can focus on the nature of knowledge or on how knowledge is acquired (Driscoll, 2000). Based on the work of Sfard (1998) and Paavola and Hakkarainen (2005), we already distinguished three metaphors or epistemological approaches to learning: (a) the acquisition metaphor, which characterizes learning as “acquisition of something” directed toward the goal of individual enrichment; (b) the participation metaphor, which characterizes learning as “becoming a participant” and directed toward the goal of community building; and (c) the knowledge-creation metaphor, which characterizes learning as a process of deliberately creating and advancing knowledge directed toward developing collaborative shared objects and artifacts.

Driscoll (2000), for example, distinguishes three main epistemological traditions, each giving distinct orientations on how to understand learning: objectivism, pragmatism,

and interpretivism. Is “reality” out there, and if it is, is it to be considered as external to and separate from the knower, is it knowable directly or indirectly, or is it a construction of individual knowers? Such questions are, in the words of Osmer (2011), questions on the “meta-theoretical” level, answers to which shape the way in which the descriptive, interpretative, normative, and pragmatic tasks of practical theologians are performed.

Assumptions about the nature of learning and how knowledge is acquired influence the views one has about learning. Furthermore, the assumptions religious educators, pastors, youth workers, or parents have also affect how likely they are motivated to take certain strategic considerations seriously. Professionals or volunteers who hold objectivist assumptions on learning hold reality as external and objective and believe knowledge can be acquired through experience. Those who hold a pragmatist position hold reality as interpreted through signs, both internal and external, in which knowledge is negotiated from experience and reason. The interpretivists among all those involved in (faith) learning see reality as an internal thing, relative to a frame of reference where knowledge is constructed. Epistemological approaches that guide individuals in dealing with learning and the enhancement of learning are often rooted in broader developments in cultures, societies, or church denominational subcultures. For example, a knowledge-creation metaphor or interpretivism is observed in innovative missionary church contexts where new faith practices are constructed, in terms of structures and theologies. The (cultural) development here is one of secularization and the decline of participation in institutional church practices. As a counterreaction, religious professionals and volunteers critique the dominant voice of the acquisition of church dogmas when it comes to church education and replace this voice by stressing the individual construction of religious truth based on their own interpretations of experiences.

I suggest that further practical theological research on learning of young people in faith practices can be helped with explicit clarifications from the outset of what is meant by “learning” or what can be observed about “learning” in terms of descriptions, interpretations, and normative positions and strategy, as well as from a broader epistemological perspective. In particular, I suggest more empirical research into the experiences of young people in faith practices and to gain more understanding of the concept of learning based on their experiences, using concepts and language from the young people themselves. Reflections on learning in the different OJKC studies, for example, appeared to be based on a mix of theoretical considerations and visions of educators (e.g., catechists), and only partly on direct interactions with young people themselves. I ask for more empirical studies on learning in faith practices in which the voice of young people themselves is the foundation.

This plea is in line with Schweitzer (2014) who recently presented six criteria for gaining additional understanding of religion. These criteria are also relevant for understanding

the learning of young people in faith practices. One criterion is that the understanding of religion must “be open for the special experiences of children and adolescents and should not make the religion its tacit model (‘adultocentrism’)” (Schweitzer, 2014, p. 32). Another criterion taken from Schweitzer is that the understanding of religion must “combine non-religious interpretive perspectives with the openness for the religious self-understandings of believers, particularly of children and adolescents” (p. 32). The plea is also in line with Faix’s (2014) observation that “more research needs to be undertaken in the future with regard to the methodological approach of using mixed methods and also in relation to adolescents’ ability to speak about and understand their own faith constructs” (p. 51). Especially in societies where predefined frameworks of faith, religion, and faith institutions are losing ground, young people’s self-understanding of faith and faith learning becomes more important to describe and interpret the essence of what learning is about. The special role of the practical theologian is to observe and listen intensely, and to bring these empirical data, which are the experiences and voices of young people themselves, in debate with both traditional and new, both theological and nontheological interpretative and normative frameworks, with the goal of strategically serving the learning function of current faith communities.

Acknowledgment

I thank Dr. Johan Hegeman, who did the English language editing.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Notes

1. www.ojkc.nl/en
2. By “strategic” as used in this article in *strategic perspective* or *strategic considerations*, I mean “directed toward a vision on (the development of) practices, or directed toward pragmatic or operant choices in practices.”
3. The Research Centre for Youth, Church, and Culture (OJKC) is an academic research center of the Protestant Theological University in The Netherlands. The center conducts research into the religious education, religious development, and religious communication of children and adolescents. See <http://www.ojkc.nl/en> for an overview of the research program and researcher profiles.

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Author Biography

A. (Jos) de Kock is an assistant professor in education and catechetics at the Protestant Theological University (PThU), The Netherlands. He is a research member of the Research Center for Youth, Church, and Culture. His fields of interest are youth ministry, religious pedagogy, religious education, processes of faith learning, and religious formation in church communities.