

## ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

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**BOOK REVIEW**

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Robert Kegan (1994). **In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life**.  
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Robert Kegan has set an ambitious goal in his latest book, **In Over Our Heads**. This “constructive-developmental” psychologist seeks to establish a new synthesis about adult experience, essentially within middle-class American life, to counteract the fragmented “literatures” that reinforce the segmentation of such experiences as parenting and partnering, management, gender diversity, psychotherapy, and adult education. Kegan argues that the pressures of the culture (modernity) require a sharply definable “fourth” order transformation of consciousness in all areas of adult responsibility.

Kegan builds on his earlier work, *The Evolving Self* (1982). In that text, like his newer work, Kegan explores “personality development...in the contexts of interactions between the organism and the environment, rather than through the internal processes of maturation alone” (Kegan, 1982, p.7). Yet, in the latter work, Kegan shifts more of his emphasis in describing the demands of the culture, itself, in pushing the developmental trajectory of individuals.

This American Piagetian extends his mentor’s constructivist emphasis on cognitive development to the “affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal realms” (p.29) and brings the reader briefly through the first three “orders” of human (or is it Anglo-American middle class?) consciousness, leading up to early adulthood. The bulk of his effort is describing the differences between the third and fourth orders within adulthood. It is not that the third order is a lesser form of maturity than the fourth order. It is simply inadequate, Kegan insists, in meeting the complex social demands of middle class adulthood on the brink of the twenty-first century.

As a psychologist, Kegan leaves clues on why this so that the sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1990, p. 112) more fully articulates in his discussion of:

*Fateful moments...*when individuals are called upon to take decisions that are particularly consequential for their ambitions, or more generally for their future lives.

According to Giddens, in our “late modern” era dominated by the “Intrusion of abstract systems into day-to-day life” (p. 113), the preservation of any sense of self is “at risk” of disintegration without an existential effort to preserve its integrity through decision-making. With other support systems such as tradition, local culture, or religion lacking, the adaptive individual possesses nothing other than a highly focused sense of self to negotiate the nexus between the interiority of consciousness and the risks and challenges of the external world. On Giddens’ reading, “fateful moments” are compounded by the knowledge explosion of our times that necessitates decision-making as a way of gaining control of an otherwise unmanageable environment in the effort to “colonize the future” through “life planning.” Fateful moments are high risk culminations of decision-making as a routinized condition of human experience pervasive throughout late modernity where the exercise of existential choice is the precondition for the fulfillment of personal identity.

It is something like this existential, yet socially embedded sense of self that Kegan seeks to elevate through a “fourth order” consciousness to master the complex demands of “modernity/postmodernity” (Bernstein, 1991). As Kegan puts it without further elaboration of the social forces that Giddens identifies:

...the mental burden of modern life may be nothing less than the extraordinary cultural demand that each person, in adulthood, create internally an order of consciousness comparable to that which ordinarily would only be found at the level of a community’s collective intelligence (Kegan, 1994, p. 134).

Throughout his constructivist cycles, Kegan depicts the alternating rhythms between self assertiveness and the embedment of self within enduring social relationships, institutions, and normative ideologies. Thus, the second order sense of absolute self possessiveness gives way to social binding in commitment and relationship which he defines as “cross-categorical”

knowledge. The fourth order, in turn, is a move back toward self possessiveness in the sense of identifying a distinctive self, but only within the various roles and social commitments that emerge through the work of third order consciousness. The challenge of the fourth order is to create a distinctive self by which to navigate *through* the pressures of social conformity without sacrificing an extensive commitment to a broad range of role, ideological, and institutional responsibilities. As Kegan puts it:

The demand of this construction of the self-as author, maker, critiquer, and *remaker* of its experience, the self as a complex regulative of its parts-is again a demand for fourth order consciousness. The demand that we be in control of our issues [within the context of powerfully normative social settings] rather than having our issues be in control of us is a demand for fourth order consciousness (p.133).

Kegan utilizes the metaphor of the school and the curriculum of modern life to weave his constructivist thesis through the literatures and experiences of middle class adulthood. A major point he makes is that while the culture is suffused with challenges pushing individuals toward the higher level order, it provides little by way of support. *In Over Our Heads*, then, serves as a critical text in the new “curriculum” by providing some bridges to help adults to make the transition. He articulates its major “disciplines” in sections II and III summarized below.

According to Kegan, modern parents “are expected to be leaders of their family: to take charge, to assume responsibility, to institute a vision and induct family members into it, to look out for the development of the children, to take stands, and to embody and express some theory, ideology, or overall set of values by which the family operates” (p.78) These are the demands that require an advanced curriculum which the fourth order of consciousness supplies.

In the embedded third order consciousness, dialogue and honesty are viewed as among the *ultimate* values that must be maintained in any relationship. Thus, when Alice’s young daughter Anne asks her mother whether she has engaged in sexual relationships since her divorce, her third order consciousness provoked guilt as a result of her lying in denying that she had. A fourth order consciousness would place priority elsewhere, in the ability of the mother to discern what was in the best interests of the child. Yet not through denying the truth, but in

identifying a higher order value system in keeping from her child “information she feels will only be a burden to her” (p.93). On this interpretation, Alice is not violating her relationship to her daughter in refusing to answer the question. Rather, by establishing boundaries and assuming a leadership role in her family, “she has only strengthened it all the more” (p.92). Such autonomous decision-making, not in opposition to intense social belonging, but as a product of it, is a type of fourth order consciousness promoted in Kegan’s curriculum.

In the realm of “partnering,” the fourth order of consciousness is characterized by the ability to engage in "I" statements as a means of *strengthening* relationships. Evolving beyond enmeshment, or various degrees of “co-dependency,” the advanced curriculum requires partners to define the boundaries of their own “space” and not to take on the psychological issues which are the responsibility of the other. Thus, an individual embodying a fourth order of consciousness “exists apart from the organization of the relationship, however much that self is committed to that relationship or however greatly it values the relationship” (p.121).

Kegan draws on the “self-actualizing” management literature that encourages individuals to become “creators,” of their work place. Such a state is attained not through maverick or idiosyncratic behavior in isolation of the organizational culture to which individuals are connected (order two), but rather, from a subtle encounter with the environment in the articulation of the individual's unique space and contribution. This, in turn, establishes the individual as a significant player in the on-going construction of the organization's vitality. Kegan's summarizes the demands of the work place curriculum in the following ways:

1. *To invent our own work* (rather than see it as owned and created by the employer).
2. *To be self-initiating, self-correcting, self-evaluating* (rather than dependent on others to frame the problems, initiate adjustments, or determine whether things are going reasonably well).
3. *To be guided by our own vision at work* (rather than be without a vision or be captive of the authority's agenda).

4. *To take responsibility for what happens to us at work externally and internally* (rather than see our present internal circumstances and future external responsibilities as caused by someone else).
5. *To be accomplished masters of our particular work roles, jobs, or careers* (rather than have an apprenticing or imitating relationship to what we do).
6. *To conceive of the organization from the “outside-in,” as a whole; to see our relation to the whole; to see the relation of the parts to the whole* (rather than see the rest of the organization and its parts only from the perspective of our own part, from the "inside-out"). (pp.152-153).

More cryptically, “what the person has to manage psychologically is himself or herself” (p.167) in the fourth order curriculum.

Kegan aptly summarizes some of the major challenges of the fourth order in the modern workplace as depicted in the literature. Missing in this chapter is much of a discussion of the support systems needed to help people transit from the third to the fourth order of consciousness, although Kegan does suggest some bridge building, later, for some of the other disciplines.

Kegan realizes that what may appear as a valorization of the “autonomous” self may be interpreted as a bias toward male development which deprecates the emphasis that many gender studies place on “Women's Ways of Knowing” (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986) through connectedness. His response is that both the quest for autonomy and connectedness are inherent in both third and fourth order consciousness and what he views as autonomy is sometimes mistaken for “separateness.” What may be considered as the polarities of autonomy and connectedness, Kegan views more as “stylistic differences,” serving as “figure and ground” for each other within the fourth order of consciousness. Following Kegan, autonomy only emerges through committed relationship, which requires, in turn, a sharp individualization of role identity to remain vital. Some individuals start with autonomy and move toward connectedness, the reverse is true for others. What is important for Kegan is development and the shift from the third to the fourth order of consciousness.

It is in the areas of psychotherapy and adult education where Kegan most completely identifies both the challenges *and* support systems needed to “graduate” into the fourth order of

consciousness. He sets out the modernist challenge through a neat deployment of the various “self” psychologies of Carl Rodgers, Fritz Perls, and Albert Ellis in their handling of patient Gloria, stuck in a third order of consciousness. He chides them for not respecting the self-world that she has created because it does not comport with the ideological programs of the therapists.

Through a series of examples, Kegan teases out progressive ways in which those enmeshed in the third order may build bridges in therapy to the fourth order. Thus, we learn of “psychological mitosis” where a monolithic self breaks into “two” selves, with one part evolving more toward the more advanced order. He speaks of the metaphor of “internal committees” in the articulation of the various voices of the self, with a sense of fourth order direction emerging in identifying the Chairman of the Board. Through sensitive bridges like these metaphors, the therapist can nurture “the self’s gradually greater identification with the emerging fourth order structure” (p.264).

The ultimate therapeutic task, according to Kegan, is to “leave home,” or to emigrate from the “family religion,” by which he means the family’s construction of social and psychological reality, whether cast in a religious or secular idiom. The “orthodox faith” of the “family religion” is nothing other than third order consciousness, or, to stay with Kegan’s metaphor, “tradition.” The demands of modern life do not require a complete repudiation of the family faith, but they call for a distancing, and a finding of one’s own way in life. It is to such a call to a fourth order sense of autonomy that Kegan describes throughout his book.

Kegan seeks to resolve what seems like a contradiction between the goals of “self-directed learning” and the many “practical” reasons why adults return to school. This is possible, he argues, “[i]f adult educators would seek not so much to train for self-directed learning but to *educate* for the order of mental complexity that enables it...”(p.275) On Kegan’s reading, this would be the most practical education possible, satisfying the need for “growth” while providing the development of various skills to function more effectively in the “real world.” Much of Kegan’s emphasis in his chapter on *Learning* focuses on the negotiation of

students between third and fourth order development and the potential role of schooling as a supportive as well as a challenging environment to stimulate such growth.

Kegan provides an example of bridge-building at work through a course at Harvard, taught by his mentor, William Perry, on helping students to master the voluminous reading they face in their classes. This included exercises in “eye-ball” training and skimming to stimulate faster reading, but also more complex work in reading to find specific information, and ultimately to encourage students to bring their own questions to the text. On this evolutionary trajectory, all the stages are important and the latter are only possible by going through and transcending the former. This example on Perry’s class, *writ small*, contains the thesis of Kegan’s book. Internalizing such a reader-response view of literacy would signal a major source of growth toward self-directed learning.

Kegan concludes the chapter with the role of school, itself as a bridge, with a need, finally, to graduate in order to achieve a fourth order identity. Then, “[y]ou will have to stop journeying and arrive” (p. 299) so that schooling (whether in an ABE or a university setting) becomes only an important aspect of an individual’s life experience rather than synonymous with it, but a bridge, nonetheless, by which to transform the self.

Kegan realizes that a postmodern repudiation of “foundationalism,” has the capacity to turn his constructive-developmental psychology “to dust” (p. 333). His response is to incorporate postmodernism into his evolutionary trajectory as an advanced degree in the curriculum of life. Thus, his depiction of consciousness *beyond* autonomy serves as a next step for some, but he cautions the reader that for many, attaining the fourth order is a lifetime achievement not lightly to be dismissed. Moreover, he turns the tables on *deconstructive* postmodernism by identifying it as a lower evolutionary trajectory from that of *reconstructive* postmodernism. It is not that the latter has *philosophical* priority over the former, but that in the developmental scheme that Kegan presents, “[d]ifferentiation precedes integration...in time” (p. 326). By loosening up on the absolutes inherent in a fourth order valorization of autonomy even within relationship, and moving beyond deconstructive disintegrations of the unity of the self,

reconstructive postmodernism provides a looser, more flexible means of galvanizing the resources of the culture. This more flexible postmodernism better enables individuals to meet the mental demands both of “modern” and “postmodern” life.

On Kegan’s reading, such space becomes, at this time in our history, a tool “not to transcend a fourth order but to construct one!” (p. 337). It does so by expanding the realms of inclusiveness so that more and more individuals of diverse groups and constituencies can obtain the resources to achieve the level of autonomy required to meet the mental demands of modern life, no mean feat, according to Kegan’s research. Thus, before people can identify with the multiplicity of the self, for example, they need to feel truly at home first, in the ownership of their autonomy, that is, if the self is to be experienced as a constructive phenomenon at all. Thus, as Kegan puts it, “More people can be appropriately challenged by the postmodern curriculum when there are more people who have mastered the mental demands of modernism” (p. 351).

There is little question that Kegan has written an impressive book that will appeal to a wide constituency, and particularly to adult educators (Daloz, 1996). He successfully writes to the “literatures” within the diversified fields that so typically remain unconnected.

From the point of view of a non-specialist, there is something that rings true of Kegan’s “subject-object” constructive-developmentalism that in some ways parallels the work on “perspective transformation” of adult educator Jack Mezirow. Clearly, Kegan has constructed a typology, and one with considerable heuristic power. He has built well on the psychological tradition which he has played an important role in expanding since the publication of *The Evolving Self* (1982).

Before I read this book, I had sometimes confused Kegan’s third order of social constructivism, with a fifth order deconstruction of the (autonomous) self. Kegan has helped me to grasp the importance of autonomy within social embedment as a higher stage of psychological evolution, and as a prize to be sought after in its own right. This is so, I believe, because autonomy is such a central value, particularly in the American imagination. The mental demands



of modern life are complex in all of their disciplines, which, throughout the world, might beckon a variety of responses. It is because they push us to the limits of and sometimes beyond our self-constructions, that they force us to draw upon all the cultural resources that we can. The American cultural experience has always been characterized by the twin energies of the ideal community (the search for connectedness) and the autonomous self. When push comes to shove, it is the latter which generally prevails in the iconography of the American imagination, although the communitarian pull remains strong as subtext (Fowler, 1991). Interpreted in this relative way, autonomy as Kegan describes it, is part of a postmodern sensibility in the reconstructive mode, a perspective that provides legitimacy to a powerful cultural ideal which then may become transformed into something more complex for more of the population.

Whether such a sensibility transfers *beyond* the middle-class is another issue, one that Kegan did not examine in any depth in this text. As Kegan continues his research, in part, through the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (*Focus on Basics*, 1997, p. 26), his work promises to shed important light on the mental demands of modern life of adult literacy learners across a wide spectrum of socio-economic, ethnic and racial backgrounds. This, combined with the emerging work of the National Institute for Literacy's Equipped for the Future project in identifying "role maps" and purposes of adult literacy learning in the key areas of work, citizenship, and family life, promises to give shape to a "curriculum" of modern life that does span the spectrum of the American social experience (Stein, 1997).

*In Over Our Heads* makes a vital contribution to the "literatures" that Kegan describes. In his juxtaposition of engaging case study material to the theories that he draws upon, he has written a book that is both intellectually elegant and immensely practical. As adult basic educators we would do well to draw upon Kegan's ideas and sensibilities in thinking through the curriculum we seek to construct (particularly in family and work place literacy), the dynamics of our own workplace, and the broad cultural and psychodynamic terrain out of which we operate and live.

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