

# Transforming Theology

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## *Incorporating Student Experience and Transformative Learning into Curriculum Design and Planning of Undergraduate Theological Degrees.*

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AUSTRALIAN LEARNING & TEACHING COUNCIL and the  
AUSTRALIAN & NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL OF DEANS OF THEOLOGY

## How deeply do our students learn?

In his recent doctoral thesis on *Deep Learning in Higher Education*, Charles de Jongh analyses the difference between *deep* and *surface* learning.

Deep learning is concerned with the quality of the relationship between the learner and the object of learning. The learner makes a choice with respect to an approach influenced by an internal (personal) motivation and an external (learning environment) impetus. It is essentially motivated from within the learner and results in learning that has *deep* consequences and significance. The process is internal: the students are concerned with integrating the new material with their personal experiences, knowledge and interests. It embraces a sense of the student's *intention* in taking up a learning task as well as *how* he/she goes

about the task (processing it). A key motivation is the belief that the studies are an opportunity to learn about reality and to develop one's way of thinking about reality.

In contrast, surface learning arises from an intention to get the task out of the way with minimum trouble while meeting the course requirements, be that at assignment, unit or course level. Learners regard the learning and related demands as external or extrinsic to themselves. Surface learning is typified by the accumulation and reproduction of unrelated facts, the meeting of requirements by mechanical or rote learning, and an instrumental and pragmatic approach to learning. That is, learning is seen as a task to be completed with the least

effort and maximum return - and seldom more.

Ways of encouraging deep learning include: teaching and assessment tasks that encourage a deep approach, rather than a breadth of coverage; meaningfully building on learners' previous experiences and prior knowledge; an emphasis on principles and structure, rather than examples and facts; affording the learner the opportunity to choose aspects of the content and method of learning; the rewarding of more than the recall of facts or information.

What sort of learning typifies your theological students?

(I thank Dr Charles de Jongh of Malyon College, Qld, for his permission to draw extensively on his EdD thesis for material in this article.)

## From the Research: Deep Learning in Practice

***In the course of the recent project surveys and interviews, numerous examples of deep learning practice have emerged in a variety of contexts. Some illustrative examples are given here as a small sample of what teachers are currently doing.***

### *In unit design*

TH107 *Thinking Theologically* (a Core introductory unit) has been re-designed to de-construct students' assumptions and to develop an openness to theological processes in five fields (biblical, systematic, historical, etc). It studies primary and secondary texts in new ways, using a *sic et non* approach of supporting and opposing criticisms. This leads to a re-orientation of the theological process, not one theological model.

### *In classroom discussion*

- “Within 20 minutes into a lecture, I will ask the class, ‘What have you learned in this lecture so far?’”
- “We intentionally include moments in the classroom where students are asked to de-construct and re-construct their assumptions regarding Bible, theology and history. This has its moments!”
- “We always finish the lecture before the end of class time to allow reflection on how it impacts our life and to make regular pastoral applications.”
- “If you were to take this passage seriously, what difference would it make to the way you live your life?”

### *Beyond the classroom*

- “I took my World Religions class on a field trip to a mosque. They were initially somewhat apprehensive about going, as they had theological concerns as to whether such a visit was acceptable, whether they should be entering such an invalid religious space, etc. These fears were openly if somewhat fearfully expressed in the car on the way to the mosque. On the return trip, many spontaneously told of changed perceptions. The field trip was followed up by a reflective paper dealing with their pre-suppositions and the personal impact of the trip. The students later gave an account of their changed perceptions of Islam in chapel. One hour at the mosque was worth more than 10 hours in the classroom.”
- “In *Australian Church History*, we take a day to visit historic churches in Melbourne and analyse the theology behind their construction. This sort of experience helps to achieve an integration of the various fields.”

### *In an exam paper*

Imagine that you have been asked to teach the unit CH305 next semester. Devise a detailed unit outline, explaining why you would include the various themes, and indicating which crucial primary source documents should be considered.

### What matters to you?

There has been considerable data collected from students, faculty and other stakeholders regarding their aspirations and experiences in theological education.

In preparation for the April Workshop, the project manager would like to hear from you with regard to just what sort of information and further development you would find beneficial from the research.

You are invited to forward any such thoughts to Les Ball by the end of February 2012.

### Workshop: Sydney: 27 April 2012

Flyers have been distributed to all theological providers. If your college has not received them, pleased contact the Project Manager. Please be sure to consult the flyer for details.

Registration Forms and Workshop requirements will be distributed in February 2012.

Since registrations are limited, it is imperative that we receive all registrations by 15 March 2012, so that we may extend the original invitations to as many participants as possible.

Please mark this workshop as a priority event as it has great potential for professional collegiate processing of vital issues.

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