

Transforming Theology

Lead Article:

- What, Why and How: A Plea for Transforming Theology

Inside:

- From the Research: Key Principles for Integrative Learning
- Final Word
- Contact

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

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What, Why and How A Plea for Transforming Theology

Several important insights and aspirations have emerged clearly during this research project. The first is that teaching the Bible and its associated theology is the central plank of all theological education: the chief motivation for students, the core business of delivery, and the most valued outcome by graduates, church leaders and other employers. It is the *sine qua non* of our theological education enterprise. The content of our programs is shaped by the Bible and its associated theology: that is the *what* of our teaching curriculum; it is sacred and beyond question.

However, within this commitment to the biblical and theological base of our teaching,

there is a real need to question seriously the *why* and the *how* of such teaching; these elements are not sacred and may well be in need of radical revision. The key concept in transforming these dimensions of theological education is that of the student as the centre of the educational process. In teaching the Bible and theology, we do so with a personal purpose: the purpose of forming people theologically. To do this, we need to develop strategies to develop persons not just knowledge/skills, with a consequent change in emphasis from “how I can teach” to “how can students learn”.

As I come to the end of this project, I am

convinced that as theological educators we need to review and even transform the way we see our students and their relation to our world of sacred theology. My plea is for an integrating educative experience for our students. Their life's journey does not start or finish with their theology degree; rather, their theology degree is allowed to form a part of their continuing journey. If we can connect our theological teaching coherently and meaningfully with the actual lives of our students – in all the fullness of those lives – then our world of theology will be infused into their lives so it may be a formative part of their overall journey, wherever that may be leading.

From the Research: Key Principles for Integrative Learning

The research study has examined closely many institutions and practices in theological education in Australia. From this, a number of key principles have been deduced that typify those institutions which are successfully implementing effectual integrating and potentially transformative learning experiences.

Key Governing Principles

- i. philosophical coherence of the institution**
When all college personnel (faculty, staff, council, students, stakeholders) are coherently committed to a known and articulated theological and educational philosophy, the climate of the institution will infuse the learning experience and avoid fragmentation and unintended contradictions.
- ii. defining the institutional purpose**
The attempt to be “all things to all people” is unrealistic and so an institution needs to define its core business clearly and work strategically to that end. This will generally mean limiting its offerings to focus its resources.
- iii. locating theological education in the context of community engagement**
If theology is to be relevant, it must engage contemporary society. This is not just a matter of a field placement in a local church. It includes all sorts of creative ways of engaging the full spectrum of contemporary society and culture – in and beyond the Christian world.
- iv. intentionally connecting with the students’ life experience**
To teach theology, we need to know the persons we are teaching and to connect our teaching meaningfully to the lives of those persons. This includes their past life, their individual motivations and aspirations as well as their present situations and learning styles.
- v. proactive consultation with stakeholders**
Theological schools exist primarily to serve the mission of the churches. In a time of constant change and development in churches, colleges which keep connected to the community they are serving and which take this as their responsibility have more scope for meeting needs and adapting to change.
- vi. incorporating the concept of deep learning**
Transformative learning is more than the recall and marshalling of factual knowledge or disconnected doctrine. It requires an integration of all strands of learning and life and the personal appropriation of theological concepts.
- vii. expansion of faculty horizons**
Faculty who continue to expand their intellectual and cultural horizons beyond the primary study of their own field of teaching are well placed to lead a wider range of students in creatively formative ways.

Final Word

This month's Newsletter will be the final issue. The research has been completed. The book is being prepared for publication (due for release in October 2012). The project has been a two year adventure in drawing on the insights of around 1,000 people – students, faculty, staff, graduates, heads of schools, deans, bishops, numerous church and missions leaders and other employers – who have given me a warm and helpful reception at all times. Because of their readiness and abilities, I have been able to gather far more data than I had anticipated, which has been incorporated into the overall analysis and recommendations. While reading the secondary literature has been informative, the richness of the data provided by these participants in the field research has been outstanding. I can only express my personal and professional appreciation of the breadth and depth of their input and the inspiration I have drawn from their enthusiasm.

I must acknowledge the excellent work done by the Project Team appointed by the Council of Deans of Theology. The Project Leader, Prof. Paul Beirne of MCD University of Divinity, led the team until his retirement early in 2012, when the leadership was assumed by another team member, Assoc. Prof. Gerard Moore of Chares Sturt University. At that stage, Paul's successor at MCD, Prof. Peter Sherlock, joined the team. The other members for the entire project were the Revd Dr Mark Harding (ACTh), Dr Neil Holm (SCD), Assoc. Prof. Robert Mclver (Avondale College), and Prof. Neil Ormerod (ACU). Where many other project managers have reported difficulty in extracting their team's productive contribution, I have had the luxury of working with a team of leading theological educators who have shared a high level of commitment and competence throughout the entire project. My main problem has not been in getting all members to follow through on their allocated tasks from our meetings; it has been in getting the record of those allocated tasks to them before they completed the jobs. The excellent work of this team has been a major factor in the successful execution of the project.

Finally, the personnel of ALTC/OLT deserve our thanks for their helpful and enthusiastic support and encouragement of this project. They have been much more than a financial facilitator; they have provided cooperative and creative assistance at every turn in equipping me as manager and in promoting the project in many ways.

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