**ANZATSFE 2015 CONFERENCE PAPER**

*The Promise and Synergy of Integrative learning:*

*Reflections on Recent Classroom Experience*

**Abstract:**

In what Trygve David Johnson describes as a period of ‘twilight’ (between the dusk of one age and the dawn of another), education for ministry practice is itself reaching forward into a shaded unknown. Released from linear and highly rational constraints of modernism, it is in constant need of re-imagination, if not experimentation.

At Uniting College, SA, as a two-phase core element of the Bachelor of Ministry program, I have been teaching *Integrative Ministry Practice* for 3 years. Through it, we examine pivotal aspects of the Christian life, e.g., hope, compassion, imagination, each in conversation with present Field Education experience, contemporary culture, bible, theology and tradition.

The dynamism of such conscious integration, both in thought and practice, has revolutionised approaches and dispositions toward the multifaceted ministry of Christ. I would like to share something of that pedagogical experience and trajectory with the Conference.

\* Trygve, David Johnson. *The Preacher as Liturgical Artist*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014.

In May 2012, two weeks after joining the faculty of Uniting College for Leadership and Theology (UCLT) in the capacity of Coordinator of Ministry Practice, the then Principal, Andrew Dutney, unexpectedly offered me a teaching position of still yet-to-be taught, core units of the Bachelor of Ministry program,[[1]](#footnote-1) namely, *Integrative Ministry Practice, A & B.[[2]](#footnote-2) (IMP)*

Keen to teach anything in a classroom setting, I happily agreed. However, I had little or no idea what the unit entailed, other than an emphasis on theological reflection, which apparently I had a reputation for doing well within the pastoral arenas of preaching, teaching and writing. Irrespective of such, my understanding and practice of theological reflection at the time was highly intuitive. Indeed, I had never even heard of the Whiteheads, Kinast or Killen & de Beer in such a disciplinary context, thus passing on and encouraging such integrated ‘knowledge’ without clear theoretical frameworks was going to be problematic at worst, slow at best. My Internet searches, book buying and reading gathered a needed urgency and pace!

In any event, Andrew forwarded me the Unit Outline (very much in draft form) and within 6 weeks I was fronting a class with my own revisions and additions, though only a tad wiser as to what the unit’s goal and content was all about.

By way of needed information, *IMP A & B* are upper level topics of the B.Min and core subjects to be completed successfully by Uniting Church ministry candidates before ordination. Supervised Field Education 1 needs to be finished before enrolment, whilst SFE 2 (or beyond) can be undertaken simultaneously, giving ripe opportunities for theological reflection upon supervised practice and the peer interaction that *IMP* can and does provide.

So far as an educational purpose or ‘aims’ statement is concerned, and here (top of Page 5), slightly beyond the formal language of the Adelaide College of Divinity *Handbook*, exists my own redaction that perhaps has the audacity to include the word ‘soul’ along side growing competencies; its paralleled enlargement being integral, I believe, to any expression of *wise* service in Christ’s name. Formation *for* ministry practice, within the ongoing practice *of* ministry, is, I believe, an imperative for Theological College’s such as our own:

Developing skilled, reflective and reflexive ministry practitioners is a key component of the Bachelor of Ministry (BMin). This unit seeks to build both competencies and soul. It will provide theoretical frameworks and tools, so as to facilitate considered reflection via key learning moments and peer reflection. It will also serve to enhance a desirable integration across the four streams that help create the structure of the BMin.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As one might glean from the Unit Outline, the semester-long course is made up of a number of interrelated components. Central to these are the various Theological Reflection *Methods* and illustrative *Sources* impressively compiled and listed by Graham, Walton & Ward.[[4]](#footnote-4) Every time the class is offered, and that is presently once a year, two of six different methods of theological reflection are chosen for discussion and scrutiny. Each student can choose one of those methods or ‘lens’ when writing their final Assignment, though I should say after four semesters of teaching and grading *IMP*, that this *specific* rarely proves to be the pivotal element in the students learning. Knowing a particular method of theological reflection does not guarantee that searching theological reflection is willingly entered into. More seems to be at play *at depth* in the student than good and tight theory. We can perhaps return to this later.

Secondly, a different ministry practice theme is chosen each time the class is offered. To date, these have been, *conversion, hope, compassion and imagination.* For at least 6 weeks of the Unit, faculty members of UCLT present for half of the two-hour class, expounding the given theme in relation to their own discipline. Prior to their attendance, each is invited to make their readings or notes available on ACD Online so that the discussion is not entered into ‘cold.’ You will see this pattern clearly represented on Page 6 of the Unit Outline.

There is a tangible richness to this practice; common theological, biblical and pastoral threads are progressively woven together over the weeks, while significant differences are increasingly held with greater capacities of respect. My faculty colleagues enjoy the experience too, as it is not arduous re time or preparation and by in large they encounter a highly receptive group. I, for one, learn a great deal about them and their chosen discipline, if not their hermeneutic for the Christian life itself!

Thirdly, there is a weekly lecture based in and around set readings until the Case Study ‘season’ begins towards the end of semester. Initially these addresses theological reflection and method yet I think more significantly, quickly extend to the chosen pastoral theme in relation to my own reflective understanding of integrative ministry practice *per se.*

Over timeI have learnt - and welcomed - the dexterity demanded of me as teacher, hence just prior to the Semester Break earlier this year, I relied upon the face-to-face class discussions (10 members, no enrolments of synchronous learners) to plot the course of my own input for the final 4 lectures. Given the space and opportunity, much ‘grist for the mill’ had arisen from the students reading in relation to practice and lived experience. We came *back* to topics as often as I sought to launch out into new ones. And given that our theme was imagination, I did want form to follow function to a discernible degree.

As you might notice by way of the absurdly long Unit Reading List, my interests and inspirations are broad, if not eclectic. In relation to (Pastoral) *Imagination* I was keen to introduce the process (unfolding) nature of *Theopoetics*,[[5]](#footnote-5) as well as the potential of the novel, myth, film, and poetry to challenge, direct and inform the students being and doing; all consciously offered in a theological or ecclesial context that commonly displays a one-dimensionality of belief and practice, thus a certain suspicion of the religious imagination and its capacities, not to mention a limited understanding of what ministry formation [in Christ] is or might *possibly* be.

However, very early on in the semester, students expressed an energetic freedom, within the defined boundaries of the class, to talk about formative imaginative experiences *and learning*, recalling how at one time – usually in childhood - these had been really important yet had been largely forgotten as vitals sources for spirited living in the *grown up and serious* church they are now seeking to serve.

Indeed, the articulation, thus honouring of lived experience - pivotal to all theological reflection methods and modelling - has been liberating to many students over the semesters I have taught *IMP.* That is not to say there has not be some dogged resistance to trusting what some have described as the ‘sin-tainted’ or ‘subjective’ nature of human experience, it therefore being in constant need of biblical correction. Yet in the main, students have welcomed the thought that God speaks and leads through their interactions with common human realities, however complex or ambiguous as they might be. To see students progressively take their own unique (sacred) experience more seriously, as a primary source of theological reflection, is one of the great joys of teaching such a unit.

And in that regard, *IMP A & B* always has the potential to unsettle or even unseat the powers that be, either internally within the student or externally in the face of oft-resistant institutional structures of certitude or a corresponding anxiety of demise. The theme of imagination was particularly subversive in such a context and for me as teacher, the power of integrative, exploratory education was at times breathtaking due to internal shifts made within many students over the course of the semester. In general, these took the shape a broadening of core convictions about themselves and the Christian faith, hence a greater freedom within ministry practice itself; the birthing and shaping of a pastoral wisdom, no less.

In short, and deliberately not seeking to be specific here, it enabled some students to confidently stand up against dominant cultural forces within the employing church, embodying less certain, yet highly imaginative and *congruous* faith paths forward. Grading their final papers and listening to their Case Studies in class was moving, to the point of a certain neurotic alarm that I might be held to account for the demonstrative changes in their faith disposition!

Fourthly, the presentations of Case Studies within the class environment often proved to be the most fruitful learning experience for the students across the whole semester. The high level of respectful attention given one another, coupled with the peer group’s ability to *theologically* reflect, that being, a growing attunement to questions of God’s presence, further invitations for growth and insight, or even God’s seeming absence in light of the situation presented, was indicative of the qualitative and communal learning experience.

It is a tad confronting to hear students suggest in their evaluations that the Case Studies were the highlight of the *IMP* Unit, given that the lecturer simply facilitates these sessions, but I am heartened that much pedagogical groundwork had preceded them. To quote but one response from the ACD *Student Evaluation of Teaching*[[6]](#footnote-6) for the first semester of 2015, re ‘What aspects of this topic most helped you learn?’

*The nature of the classroom and its teacher were conversational, open, reflective and deeply creative. It was a safe space to be authentic and questioning and dreaming. (Also)The creativity and diversity of the readings and guest lecturers.*

And from one class member of *IMP* from the first semester of 2015:

*Integrative Ministry Practice has helped me see what I think part of me knew all along. Everything we do, think, and ‘be’ is so connected...so intricately connected…I've realised I may have been approaching my training with a checklist and a spread-sheet with little groupings of knowledge to be consumed and digested before hurrying to the next.*

*IMP has helped me realise that my head, heart and body simply can't keep up with each other when only one is being attended to or filled with new knowledge. At some point, I need unpacking and to let go of all the "right things" to rather listen for the truth that I believe is inherently part of all of us as people who are image bearers of God. Integrative Ministry Practice has reminded me that I am far simpler, yet also have the capacity to be more insightful than I dared ever believe. This insight is something I thought I gained through consuming vats of knowledge, but was actually a part of me all along. And I feel inspired to foster this intuitive intelligence in myself…Remembering that we're not weaving to produce a quilt or a tapestry, but, because we are a part of a family of weavers who have spanned history and we follow the Spirit who is inviting us to be weaved together, appreciating and nourishing our unique and beautiful thread and the many threads of lives around us. I've learnt I'm not a means to an end as a minister, but I'm part of a billion new beginnings that don't all make sense, or meet checklist requirements, but are intended for weaving regardless of their apparent effectiveness. IMP has helped me recognise my 'factory line' approach to ministry just doesn't work and I'm learning to let it go as I seek the genuine and humbling transformative path of Christ, which looks a lot less 'glossy', but a lot more like myself walking slowly, being surprised along the way.*

And another:

*Integrative Ministry Practice has been crucial in my training to become an ordained minister. Looking at key themes through the different streams the college provides has stretched how I think about my ministry practice. There were many weeks where the material presented and discussed in class was exactly the issue I was struggling with in ministry. One of the best aspects of the class were the students’ case studies. Wrestling together with colleagues in a safe framework around those key moments in ministry has increased my resilience, my network of people to contact and the joy of knowing I am not alone in this!*

Well, perhaps I can come back to some of these descriptors through any questions you may have. In the short time remaining, I want to return to the notion of an expanding soul or a growing integrity of being within the learning environment that is *IMP A & B.*

It is evident to me through the students and my own lived experience, that what is being stirred up through such a deliberately integrative, thus explorative pedagogy, is no mere intellectual framework for the sake of right and *rational* choices in the exercising of professional ministry. Something of a far more *affective* and *spirited* climate is created when critical thought, art, searching self-awareness, renewed *spiritual* vision and soulful receptivity are brought together as a dynamic whole. In such a potentially fertile educational space, theology has a chance to live and breathe in tune with the yearning human heart in the expectancy of truly wise and fruitful practice.

Indeed, the vulnerability displayed at times by the students in class and through their writing – sometimes by virtue of the teacher’s example – would plainly suggest to me, that genuine learning for fruitful ministry practice is as intentionally seeking or *reaching* as it is but functional. In other words, without the formation of the person at some depth, that is, a growing integrity of mind and heart in Christ, the listed Adelaide College of Divinity Graduate Attributes (Page 5), *Reflective Thinking; Skilled Practice; Life-long Learning* and *Effective Communication,* are but predictable, even clichéd phrases; ticks for an evaluative box, not the relational substance of a genuinely wise and humble practitioner.

Admittedly, such maturity of faith and wisdom of praxis will not occur overnight or because one has taken an *IMP A & B* class at Uniting College. But if we are first able to conceive and then offer theological education, cum theological reflection, from a soulful, *affective* practice and premise – a *Deep calling to deep* – then we do stand a good chance of helping students on their own paths of personal integrity, grace and truth, thus serving the Christian Church with the spirited leadership that it so urgently needs and deserves.

As suggests Parker Palmer in relation to such a counter-cultural pedagogical approach, that is a movement away from certainty toward genuine humility (love) and wholeness:

Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves…the connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts – meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In sum, teaching *Integrative Ministry Practice* is not a technique or program but an unfolding process of honest, informed, soulful dialogue. It would seek to bring diverse elements of thought and practice into meaning-making conversations for the sake of a third point of departure; that being, ministry practices in keeping with the mind and heart of Christ; God’s very embodiment of applied wisdom. Indeed, truly spirited practices offered beyond *and within* present institutional constraints and fears.

1. Offered through the Adelaide College of Divinity of which *Uniting College is a constitutive part.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The most recent *Unit Outline* is included here Appendix 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These four streams being, Biblical Studies, Leadership, Education and Discipleship and Mission. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, Elaine Graham, Heather Walton & Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods,* (London: SCM, 2005) and *Theological Reflection: Sources,* (London: SCM, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Largely based in and around Amos Wilder’s mini classic, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination,* (Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This document is available for sight but not copy. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life,* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)