**Bridging Classroom and Life in Theological Reflection**

**(Perry Shaw, ANZATFE Conference, Morling College, NSW, 5 December 2017)**

**Neither theological nor educational?**

Paul Sanders has observed: “The problem with much of theological education is that it is neither theological nor educational” (Sanders 2009). The fragmented and cerebral approach that undergirds so much of what we do finds little if any basis in the scriptures, and in the realm of pedagogical research has been found to be impoverished, leading to little in the way of long-term impactful learning (Berrett 2016; Merriam 2007: 3).

The increasing recognition that something is awry in the traditional approach to theological education is hardly “rocket science.” Indeed in the world of the theological education we are seeing a growing number of experiments that seek to promote a more holistic and integrated approach to the development of men and women in service of God’s Kingdom. The paradigmatic language of theological reflection is a significant part of these innovations. In some schools (such as the school where I serve, the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Beirut, Lebanon) the notion of “theological reflection” has become the governing theme of the curriculum.

However, the practice of theological reflection continues to be seen by many schools and faculty members as something of an “add-on” – an exercise that a few “practical theologians” have pressed on us, and upon which we are happy to pass our “blessing” so long as it does not intrude on what we do in the classroom. This is hardly unique to theological education. Those gurus of the world of “reflective practice” Chris Argyris and Donald Schön have observed that even in fields such as engineering and law, “Faculty tend to resist the intrusion of field work into the curriculum, or, at any rate, tend to carry on the academic program parallel to field work as though the latter did not exist” (Argyris and Schön 1992: 187). And yet how can a school claim to be preparing men and women for competence in service unless it actively seeks to remove the false barriers between theory and practice (Drummond 2009).

Only when we bridge classroom and life can we hope for the sort of integrative transformation that the church so desperately needs in the twenty-first century. In this presentation I hope to play a short tune related to this topic through three verses:

* Theological education that is theological: The imperative of integration in the preparation of men and women for Kingdom service.
* Theological education that is educational: The deep learning that can potentially emerge by bridging classroom and life.
* Bridging classroom and life: Some practical suggestions.

**Theological education that is theological: The imperative of integration**

I begin with a statement of what should be obvious: good theology should shape theological education (Shaw 2016a). While this is widely acknowledged, in the past this process has tended to devolve into using select biblical texts to justify one’s own particular current practice – and as we all well know you can eisegetically justify pretty much anything from the Bible. However, quality theological foundations for theological education begin not with practice but with fundamental theological affirmations, and from these affirmations a consideration of possible implications for what we do educationally and administratively.

The Scriptures themselves point to an understanding of theological reflection that begins with God and his declarative acts. The Scriptures open with the words “In the beginning God …” (Genesis 1:1) and close with the hope of consummation (Revelation 22:20-21). It is not surprising, therefore, that virtually every text in systematic theology across the confessional spectrum begins either with a discussion of the meaning of revelation or with “theology proper” (the doctrine of God). In either case the realization – whether intuitive or intentional – is that the starting point of theological understanding is not with humanity seeking God, but with a God who reaches out to us to be known and loved and worshipped. As Wright (2006, 48) describes it, “the whole canon of Scripture is a missional phenomenon in the sense that it witnesses to the self-giving movement of this God toward his creation and us, human beings in God’s own image, but wayward and wanton. The writings that now comprise our Bible are themselves the product of and witness to the ultimate mission of God.”

Consequently, with Banks (1999), Cannell (2006), Cronshaw (2011, 2012), De Gruchy (2010), Kirk (2005), Wright (2015), and numerous others, I believe that the starting point for theological reflection on theological education must be with the “missionary” character of God. The central message of the Scriptures is of a God who reaches out in creation and redemption, and who invites us to participate in his great missional work individually and corporately. This should be the warp and woof of all that we do – understanding God and his acts and responding accordingly. As Cronshaw (2011) so eloquently expresses the missional nature of the church and seminary, “[I]f we want to be in step with the Spirit, then we want to be part of [the] Trinitarian movement of being sent into the world.”

Our current approach to theological education has largely been shaped by Christendom presuppositions. As Rozko and Paul (2012) observe, “Incremental changes and clever adaptations to these current systems only serve to distract from the opportunity we have before us to develop a … missional vision of theological education ... [which is] praxeological—aimed at training reflective practitioners, mobilizational—aimed at training missionary leaders, and spiritual— aimed at training Kingdom citizens” – in other words an education that bridges classroom and life.

An essential element of the missional heart of God and the missional imperative of theological education is the centrality of incarnation. In contrast to Greek and Eastern philosophies and religions, with their glorification of ideas, the Hebrew Scriptures from the very beginning of Genesis affirmation the fundamental value of the physical realm, and most particularly our physical bodies. In a recent article Rolf Hille eruditely observed:

The long tradition of philosophical idealism has shaped western thought since the time of Plato and Plotinus … What characterizes this spiritual heritage? First and foremost, the deep conviction that the world of ideas is the real reality. Everything else that we have in mind … is only a shady, unclean, and, in fact, already defiled reality. … The contrast [with historical revelation] could not be greater. On the one hand there is the pure world of ideas, which is unaffected by all material earthly events and, on the other hand, the down-to-earth tangible stories reported by the Bible. (Hille 2017)

While the greatest act of incarnation is unquestionably that of Immanuel Jesus – “God with us” – we see repeated echoes throughout the Scriptures, such as in the first command “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28), and in the angels sitting down and eating with Abraham (Gen 18:1-15). In Creation God did not first make spirit and then place that spirit in a body, but rather made a body from the dust of the earth and breathed life into the body (Gen 2:7), thereby from the beginning sacralising our physical bodies.

The implications of the incarnate nature of our message on our practices of theological education are legion.

* In Christ “the word became flesh” – not “the word became text”. While critical reflection on texts certainly has value, equally significant is the critical dialogue between text and life – and hence the theological imperative of bridging classroom with life, text with context, theory with practice.
* An “enfleshed” understanding of theological education would see the need to view intellectual knowledge as a step towards practicing and applying the message. Jesus differed from the Pharisees precisely in that his teaching, deeply rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures, called for a life that reflects heart action in tune with God’s purposes. The Great Commission to make disciples (Mt 28:19-20) saw at its heart a teaching that led to obedience – not simply the knowledge of information. Whenever Paul writes theology, it is always followed by extensive application. In that the ultimate test of obedience comes not in the academy but in the field, it is crucial that a close relationship be built between the theological school and the communities it serves.
* In recognition of our being created as whole persons, and not simply “disembodied information systems called brains” (Ward 2001, p. 123), there needs to be a close interaction between intellectual excellence, heart formation, and practical application. The goal of Jesus’ teaching was ultimately for the hearer to enter into a relationship of love of God “heart, soul, mind, and strength” (Mt 22:37). Integration and integrity are related words, and likewise Jesus’ approach to the authentic life was always integrated and multidimensional – head, heart, and hands (cognitive, affective, and behavioural). An incarnational and authentic approach will see in every academic course reflection through formational and ministerial lenses. However, there will equally be an emphasis on profound biblical and theological reflection in the students’ formational and ministerial experiences.

I could go on. However, whichever way I look at theological foundations for theological education I find myself returning to the imperative of integration: integration of head, heart, and hands; integration between theory and practice; integration between knowledge and wisdom. This should hardly be surprising given that our God is Three-in-One, and only in the integrated life can we live out with integrity our identity as created in the image of our Triune God. And as my old New Testament professor Don Kenyon would remind us repeatedly, “A Christian’s integrity is his (*sic*) most precious possession.”

The essential integrative nature of theological education grounded in sound theology is a far cry from the experience of most of our students. As David Wells so astutely describes the experience of too many in the world of theological education:

Subjects and fields develop their own literatures, working assumptions, vocabularies, technical terms, criteria for what is true and false, and canons of what literature and what views should be common knowledge among those working in the subjects. The result of this is a profound increase in knowledge but often an equally profound loss in understanding what it all means, how the knowledge in one field should inform that in another. This is the bane of every seminarian‘s existence. The dissociated fields—biblical studies, theology, church history, homiletics, ethics, pastoral psychology, missiology—become a rain of hard pellets relentless bombarding those who are on the pilgrimage to graduation. Students are left more or less defenseless as they run this gauntlet, supplied little help in their efforts to determine how to relate the fields one to another. In the end, the only warrant for their having to endure the onslaughts is that somehow and someday it will come together in a church. (Wells 1993: 224-225)

Of course, the cry for integration is hardly unique to theological education. Even so venerable a philosopher of education as Alfred North Whitehead (1929) warned us that “above all we must beware” of “inert ideas” – intentionally punning on Plato’s reverence for the innate variety. Ideas escape inertness by being used, tested, or thrown into fresh combinations. Application is not only the ultimate test, it is the crucible within which ideas come alive and grow (Shulman 2004: 23). Whitehead continues, “Pedants sneer at an education which is useful. But if education is not useful, what is it? Is it a talent, to be hidden away in a napkin?”

And yet nearly a century after Whitehead penned these words students continue to describe their experiences of college and university as “fragmented and loosely organized, unfocused with undefined outcomes, classes that emphasize passive listening, and lectures that transmit low-level information with little connection to life” (Gardiner 1998). Sound familiar? Parker Palmer muses that perhaps we avoid integrative approaches because a fragmented approach is safer, more easily understood, and can be more readily controlled. Frankly, integration is messy! “But it gets no messier than life itself and, done well, can help bring order to chaotic raw experience, as is the case with any well-crafted cycle of action and reflection. The real question is whether we want higher education to be about life” (Palmer 2010, 36).

**Theological education that is educational:**

**Deep learning through bridging classroom and life**

Integration is a theological imperative. It is also the basis for deep and transformative learning. As I suspect you all know far better than I do, Les Ball’s *Transforming Theology* (2012) project revealed that students find their most formative learning takes place where course material takes personal experience into account. While students experience this process systematically in spiritual formation classes and supervised reflection on field education, they also have expressed the value of learning through reflective journaling, collaborative projects, problem-based instruction, case studies, and field trips (Cronshaw and Menzies 2014). These results are consistent with research on the factors that contribute to deep and transformative learning (Shaw 2014: 129-140).

It has been found (Sousa 2006, 48–49) that what we need to survive is readily recorded in long-term memory. For example, you do not need to relearn every day that walking in front of a moving bus or touching a hot stove can injure you. Beyond survival, there are three elements which contribute to deep and transformative learning: emotional connection, sense, and significance.

*Emotional Connection*. Strong emotional experiences have a high likelihood of being permanently stored (Willingham 2009, 44–45; Barkley 2010, 101). We tend to remember the best and (even more) the worst things that have happened to us. It has been said that the worst experiences make for the best retelling, and if you were asked to recount your worst teaching or travel incidents, you would have little difficulty remembering – and the reason is the strength of emotions you felt at the time. Strong emotions lead to strong connections in our memories. In the classroom strong emotions are elicited in learners through experiential learning activities such as field trips, case studies and role plays. By definition emotional connection entails an approach to learning that seeks integration between text and context, between theory and life.

*Sense*. For deep and transformative learning to take place it is also important that the learner understand what is being said and can connect it to past experience (Sousa 2006, 48–49). Where strong foreign or dialect accents make it difficult to understand a teacher, it is likely that learning will be deficient. But the use of technical or theological jargon can equally create a barrier to learning. Explaining concepts in simple everyday terms is essential to learning. When a student says, “I don’t understand”, it means the student is having a problem making sense of the learning and is unlikely to process it beyond working memory. A significant part of understanding is the ability to connect new material with previous concepts and ideas. Does it “fit” into what the learner knows about how the world works? Famed educational psychologist David Ausubel (1968: vi) once asserted, “The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly.” Through connecting new learning with previous life experiences students have a sense of mastery that nurtures engagement and retention.

*Significance*. While the question “Does it make sense?” is important, ultimately students will only make an effort to remember material if they believe that it is important enough to do so. Unfortunately for most students, the only level of significance they are ever given in the classroom is “It’s going to be in the exam”. And so they make the effort to engage with the material for as long as it is significant – which is until the end of the course. As soon as the papers are written and the grade is delivered, the material is no longer significant, and whatever might have been “learned” quickly drops out of memory. But as serious Christian educators with a calling to stewardship of what God has given us, this cannot be enough. We must seek deep learning in students, and deep learning will only take place if the student considers the material to have significance for life. Students find significance and personal relevance when they are able to connect what they are learning to their past, to what is going on presently in the world around them, and to what they see as potential challenges in the future (Barkley 2010, 101). In short, deep and transformative learning – theological education that is educational – takes place when we bridge classroom and life.

**Bridging Classroom and Life: Some Practical Suggestions**

Making connections between classroom and life in theological education is both a theological and an educational imperative. However, in practice it is not generally seen as central to the warp and woof of our schools and their programmes. In this final section I want to suggest some steps on the journey – first at an institutional level and then at an individual level.

**Shared Vision**

From my experience the greatest barrier to integration is a lack of an integrated and shared understanding of our purpose. Only when we are unified in vision can we hope to develop cooperation among faculty, staff, and administration around that vision. And only through joint effort can we bridge the territorial divides that are the essence of our current curricular fragmentation. And so if you want to promote integration the starting point is to promote open and visionary conversations. While any member of faculty can initiate such conversations, ultimately quality vision needs promotion and advocacy from the key power-brokers of the school.

As many of you know, we at ABTS have made such a shift in our thinking. However, it did not happen overnight, and it required a concerted effort and a shared commitment – and particularly a commitment from the school’s leadership. Key to the change was our President, Elie Haddad, who made his first priority in taking over leadership a revisiting of our Vision and Mission statements, and a clarification of our core values. Elie saw as essential that the establishment of our new vision, mission, and values statements needed to be a collaborative effort with representation of key stakeholders, so as to ensure widespread ownership. Once these statements were in place, Elie then pressed on the faculty, staff, and administration that the vision, mission, and values become more than mere “ink on paper”. Rather they should be the lenses that shape every decision we make in the school – including the design of our curriculum.

Foundational to our discussions was a fundamental question that every school should ask on a regular basis: What is the ultimate purpose of our existence? Is it to serve the academy or is it to strengthen the church in being an impactful community in the world? Of course I suspect that the majority of faculty and administrators in most theological schools would say “We exist for the church in the world.” But too often our priorities and our practices speak the opposite. Too often our implicit curriculum is driven by secular values such as “publish or perish.” In the contemporary world of higher education it would seem that we do indeed need the acceptance and credibility of the secular academy, and the legal demands of government accreditation often push us in this direction. But great caution is needed with the inevitable status-markers – professorial titles, university charters, and the like.

While many of these features of the “academy” are not in and of themselves wrong for theological colleges, if they become our primary focus then frankly we have lost the game. And as with so much of the secular academy these values promote the sort of inwardly looking individualistic competition and territorial jealousies that make integration difficult if not impossible. And we end up with theological education that is neither theological nor educational.

If, however, we exist primarily for the church and its impact on the world, this pushes us to look outward and to recognize how much we need each other. For the church to impact the world we need to recognize that there are major contextual challenges that confront us. The church needs men and women who have the knowledge, attitude, and skills to help it confront these challenges and accomplish its missional mandate. The preparation of such men and women needs all that we currently offer not in and of themselves but as lenses through which the church can be guided in its decision-making and advocacy for societal impact.

As such we need a major shift in our thinking. The shape of theological education that continues to predominate today is rooted in the university model developed in Europe and North America in the early nineteenth century. Within the modernist framework of that day it was important that theology find its place within the general schools of knowledge, and was consequently “landed” within the humanities, alongside fields such as literature, philosophy, and history. The location of theological education within the humanities is seen clearly in the close parallels in the traditional emphases in theological education: biblical studies (literature), theology (philosophy), and church history (history). It is not surprising that in many cases the “professional” component of preparation for ministry has been seen (either consciously or unconsciously) as peripheral or even irrelevant.

But are the humanities the most appropriate location for an understanding of theological education that seeks to develop men and women who can help the church impact the world? Would not a more meaningful location of theological education be with fields such as medicine and law (Shaw 2016b)? These fields demand the highest quality of knowledge, but the ultimate measure is not knowledge for the sake of knowledge but the ability to apply that knowledge in quality practice.

Steve De Gruchy’s (2010) comparison of medical and theological education is a sobering challenge:

In the former [medical education], the education of the next generation of health professionals is driven by constant attention to clinical practice, drug trials and technical breakthroughs. It makes no sense, and in fact endangers lives, to train students in procedures which are no longer up to date. By contrast, theological education often proceeds on the basis that we have learnt nothing new about the Christian faith in the last centuries, and students can be educated solely on the basis of the wisdom of the ages. Without negating the importance of history and tradition, the truth is that missional practice provides an ongoing contextual laboratory for theological reflection raising new issues and new perspectives on old issues almost daily. Our commitment to life, and to being on the cutting edge of responding to life, should be as profound as that of medical educators.

If we were to re-land theological with fields such as medicine and law then it would be an anathema for an instructor not to make bridges between classroom and life. As with the medical educator so with the theological educator questions would be raised as to whether such an instructor would be qualified to teach – irrespective of the instructor’s publication record in his or her own arcane field of expertise.

Moreover an understanding of theological education as comparable to medicine and law would also invite integrative approaches such as problem-based learning. Problems and life issues inevitably raise questions that a traditional curriculum ignores, taking students into areas that are highly significant for effective practice, but which don’t naturally fit traditional boundaries. A re-landing of theological education with fields like medicine and law would likely require a shift from a focus on text-based courses to context-driven learning.

In the longer term a move towards an integrative understanding comparable to medicine and law would necessitate a rethinking of faculty training and recruitment, in which faculty development would eschew narrow research in a specific traditional “discipline”, rather urging “inter-disciplinary” research that empowers a missional vision for the church. Recruitment practices would gradually move from specialists in narrow arcane fields of study to the building of a cadre of faculty with broad interdisciplinary training and experience. Such moves need commitment from the Board, the administration, and the faculty themselves – many of whom themselves prefer to remain within their established “comfort zones.”

**What Can I do as an Individual?**

I recognize that I am probably “preaching to the choir” and you are already convinced, but that you feel powerless to address the systemic inertia that exists in your school. But “be not afeard”: you may not be able to change the school, but you can certainly change your own classroom. And so, here are a few practical suggestions that I have found helpful in bridging classroom and life. I am sure there are others.

***Why am I teaching this?***

The most fundamental suggestion is to continually ask yourself: “Why am I teaching this material anyway? Why should the students consider this material meaningful and important for their present and future lives and ministries?” If you ask these questions every time you prepare a course, every time you enter the classroom, your response to these questions will press you to bridge classroom and life.

I often find it helpful to imagine sitting down with a group of local leaders who could choose whether or not to take this class and my job is to convince them that this course is crucially important for them. What would I say to them? If I am unable to say anything convincing then I should question why I am teaching this material at all. Certainly if I cannot articulate reasons for the material’s significance for the students’ future life and ministry I can be guaranteed that my students to see the material’s significance. And the students will view the class as informational rather than transformational. Of course in order to answer these questions we must know our students. Teachers can bridge classroom and life only if they take the time to understand what students care about and where they are headed (Lattuca and Stark 2009: 141).

As we consider how our material might be significant for our students we will find ourselves reconceptualising theology as a process rather than a product (D’Orsa 2015). Rowan Williams’ (2000: xii) observation that “the theologian *is* always beginning in the middle of things” points to the need for us not so much to “study theology” as to “do theology” through which our understanding of God grows not through the “consumption” of a supposedly context-free and static body of doctrine, but through a dynamic engagement between our tradition and our context.

***Journaling***

One of the most powerful ways to connect classroom with life is through daily journaling. Willingham (2009: 60) has observed that “students remember what they think about,” and the pathway is by doing something with knowledge. Even writing a line or two makes a substantial difference (Cullen et al. 2012:143). Best is where the writing connects multidimensionally between content and life. I have found the following series of questions (Shaw 2014: 211-212) a helpful way to conclude blocks of learning and help students to make connections. I have shared these with other faculty members and we have seen them effective with virtually every field of study and any sort of learning activity.

* “Briefly list the main points from today’s session.” This question helps the student to review the cognitive substance of the lesson, and enables the instructor to assess with his or her message has arrived.
* “For you personally, what was the most important thing you heard or read in today’s session? Why was it important for you?” What students value is generally what they will remember and apply. I have found it extremely helpful to ask this question routinely at the end of a class or as a part of weekly journaling – sometimes orally, sometimes in written form. Through such a question we can gain a glimpse of what the students’ greatest Teacher is doing in their lives.
* “In what ways did the material from today’s session impact your relationship with God? With others?” Part of our goal in theological education should be a growing relationship with God. Simply asking the question communicates to students our desire for the material they are studying to enhance that relationship. Asking the question also holds us as instructors accountable to the fact that our education should be genuinely “theo-logos” (a word from or about God).
* “Was there anything you found challenging in this week’s class or readings? Why? Was there anything that made you uncomfortable or with which you disagreed? Why?” Asking questions such as these enables us to work alongside our students as they struggle to understand, apply and grow.
* “Have you ever seen the principles discussed in today’s session at work in your own life or in your church? Briefly describe what happened.” This question presses for more immediate connection between classroom and life. I recognize that not every class we teach can elicit such connections, but if students habitually struggle to respond to questions such as this then our education is mere information.
* “In light of today’s session, describe at least one specific, measurable and attainable action you could take during the next few days as a response to what was discussed.” It is noteworthy that Jesus’ last words to the disciples were not “make disciples … teaching them everything I have commanded” but “make disciples … teaching them to obey everything I have commanded”. Theological education that is both theological and educational will see as the end goal obedience and action. People’s actions are themselves a kind of theological voice (Cameron & Duce 2013: kindle loc. 336). It could even be claimed that one’s real theology is not so much one’s stated beliefs as it is the beliefs reflected in one’s actual practice (Shaw 2012).
* “In light of today’s session, describe at least one way in which your future life and ministry might be impacted by what was discussed.” This simple question keeps before both the instructor and the students the end goal of a life of service for a church that is impacting the world.

Apart from the theological integrity of the connections embedded in these questions, the practice of journaling has been found to have high educative value. Through such exercises it has been found that: thinking skills are fostered (Williams & Wessel 2004); students are trained in reflection on personal experience (Kallaith & Coghlan, 2001); the practice serves as an aid to internal dialogue (Spalding & Wilson 2002); students discover personal qualities they were previously unaware of (Pavlovich 2007); and students are encouraged to be self-directed and determine their own focus in assignment, to anchor new learning in experience, and to develop problem-solving skills (Varner & Peck 2003).

***Case Studies***

Another suggestion for bridging classroom and life is through the use of case studies. The moment I mention this topic most people think, “Ah, yes, case studies. The sort of thing you use in counselling or conflict management classes.” While case studies are essential to quality training in practice, I have found case studies equally valid and useful in Bible, history, and theology classes. Case studies are one of the most significant means by which our theological education better meets the criteria of being theological and educational: the connections between classroom and life intellectually engage and practically challenge our students.

Elsewhere (Shaw 2014: 217-229) I have written in some depth about the design and use of case studies, but the key is to move beyond information delivery to ask the fundamental purpose question I mentioned above: “Why am I teaching this material anyway?” In answering this question key issues will emerge, and these issues can then become the catalyst for a dialogue between theory and practice, between classroom and life. Once you have the issue in mind the following five-step process can move the idea to story:

1. *Think of the key controversial issue* that you are seeking to address in your lesson as a whole.
2. *Consider a real situation* you have encountered related to this issue or dilemma. The key is to present information so that a “right” answer is not obvious.
3. *Change all names and places*, and perhaps all the incidents.
4. *Give sufficient seemingly “irrelevant” details* to make the situation seem real, but not so many that the issue gets “swamped” in the details.
5. *Provide appropriate discussion questions*. I find three questions are essential: (1) an analytic question such as “What were the main factors that led to the crisis?” (2) an engagement question such as “If you were a friend/counsellor … to [the key character] how would you advise him/her?” (3) a connection question such as “What issues from the case study are addressed in the material from class today.”

Jesus used stories as the foundation of his teaching. While we recognize that this was natural in a largely oral society, it was also a product of Jesus’s practice of seeing his “learners” as whole people. For Jesus, making a connection between text and context was an imperative, and stories were an ideal methodology for driving his learners to do this. While Paul did not use story as much as Jesus did, nonetheless we see in his letters a profound commitment to embodied faith that is consistent with a storytelling approach to theological education.

Case studies are powerful and effective as an educational methodology:

* The most effective learning moves from the known to the unknown, whereby the learner is introduced to new concepts and skills from the starting point of prior experience. Case studies give points of connection through which students can better remember and understand the details of the new content.
* Quality case studies challenge the students to think about contextual issues through the lenses of principles that are found in texts. This comparative work generally entails high levels of cognitive engagement.
* Case studies help students vividly and concretely to see the relevance and value of otherwise abstract concepts and theories (Ambrose et al. 2010: 83). In medical education it has been found that students remember diseases and conditions not by their generic descriptions but by the first patient they ever encountered with that condition (Svinicki 2004: 108). Likewise in theological education case studies hold potential for providing concrete schemata for understanding abstract concepts. This sort of connection has been found in the professional fields to lead to better quality decision making.
* When the situation described in the case study is close to the life experience of the learners, it thoroughly engages them, and frequently elicits a strong affective response. As with all stories, case studies call on us to integrate our feeling and thinking, and this interaction is the essence of significance (Walch 2015).
* Case studies help build problem-solving skills, particularly those that are valuable when applied but are likely to be used infrequently.
* Realistic case studies help bring meaning to theoretical material, and hence encourage reflective practice and deliberate action (Merseth 1991). Case studies are a sign that our teaching is alive, rooted in society and today’s church, and related to real people and real situations (Tulipan 2014).
* Specifically in the realm of theological education, case studies are ideal for integrative seminars or integrative papers in which students are trained in bringing a variety of biblical, theological, historical and pastoral perspectives to bear on a practical situation.
* Case studies can promote team-building. When a team gets together to solve a case, different opinions, methods and perspectives need to be heard. The development of effective responses to the case will emerge to the extent that the group works cooperatively towards the shared goal. The hidden curriculum of the group work that generally accompanies the case-study approach promotes the sort of team cooperation that is an essential element of effective Christian ministry.
* Most importantly, case studies help learners to evaluate themselves, but from a safe distance, thereby isolating key issues from personalities.

**Cooperative Integrative Projects**

As some of you know, we at ABTS have made “theological reflection” the central theme of our academic programmes. The cognitive portion of our “profile of the ideal Christian leader” opens with the words “We seek to equip faithful men and women for effective service who are characterized by a mind committed to reflective practice, who are able to interpret Christian life and ministry through the multiple lenses of Scripture, Theology, History, and Community.” The development of cooperative integrative modules culminating in integrative projects was an almost inevitable outcome. While I recognize that you may be limited in your school as to what you may be able to do, let me give you a taste of what is possible and challenge you to think of possibilities for your own context.

The essence of our curriculum has been to see both our great heritage of biblical, historical, and theological scholarship as well as more recent fields of learning in the social sciences become lenses for promoting informed transformative initiative. Consequently each of the six major modules incorporates biblical-theological, historical-theological, social-contextual, and personal-ministerial engagement.

By way of example, our module on “The Nature and Character of God” has the following courses: “The Self-Revealing God in the Old Testament” and “The Self-Revealing God in the New Testament” (biblical-theological lens); “Understanding God Through History and Context” (historical-theological lens); “Responding to Islamic Understandings of God” and “Responding to Popular Christianity Understandings of God” (social-contextual lens); and “Worship in Word and Deed” (personal-ministerial lens). Our module on “The Restored and Restorative Community” includes: “The Restored People of God in the Old and New Testaments (biblical-theological lens); “Historical Perspectives on Salvation in the Community of Atonement” (historical-theological lens); “Social Restoration Through the Restored People of God” (social-contextual lens); and “Salaam: People and Communities” (personal-ministerial lens).

While these elements are delivered through a somewhat traditional classroom-based approach, the faculty work as a team and know that the culmination of the module (and 40% of the module grade) is an integrative project. We have intentionally used a variety of approaches to these projects so as to ensure student exposure to different approaches and understandings of classroom to life engagement.

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| Module | Project Shape |
| Nature and Character of God | A portfolio of research papers tied together through integrative reflections, and concluding with practical and realistic recommendations on a specific ministry context. Completed individually. |
| Restored Community | An “action research” project dealing with a situation of brokenness needing reconciliation. Completed individually. |
| Disciples Making Disciples | Autobiographical reflection leading to biblical-missiological principles of spiritual formation and disciple-making in the MENA context. Completed individually. |
| Kingdom of God | Engage in a significant Kingdom-action ministry project that seeks to apply the class content in church and/or society, with reflection on action through multiple lenses. Completed in teams of 2-3. |
| Missional Church | An action plan for helping a local church move towards becoming a missional community, informed through multidisciplinary lenses. Completed individually. |
| Empowering Leaders | Problem-based learning approach, through multidisciplinary reflection on an extended case study. Completed in teams of 3-4. |

I recognize that many of your schools may not be willing or able to engage in this sort of applied integrative engagement, but might you nonetheless take steps along this path? Certainly this approach is more theological and educational than our tradition of disjointed and fragmented courses. Even before we moved to our integrative curriculum we experimented at a smaller level:

* Team teaching a course with instructors coming with notably different expertise. For example: a New Testament instructor working with a Church History instructor to teach about persecution; a theology instructor and a counselling instructor cooperating in a class on personal and spiritual development. Even better if three or more faculty work together – as we did in an early experimental course on the spiritual disciplines.
* Including as an elective the completion of an integrative paper. In field testing our concept of integrative study at ABTS we recruited some of our final year students and guided them through substantial integrative papers in which they were required to consult with faculty across the traditional disciplines, engaging with significant local topics such as identity (a major issue for believers from a Muslim background), persecution and discrimination, and church conflict and division. The integrative papers did not demand a lot from faculty, but the students learned far more than they would have from a traditional graduate paper that researches a very specific piece of minutia.

The possibilities are exciting. At a recent workshop I led in Korea I asked the participants to work in groups of three to create an integrative course, in which each member would teach a separate “sub-course” contributing to the whole, but which was bound together by a central theme, and culminated in an integrative project. The ideas that were generated were extraordinary, and the school is now embedding many of these creative integrative courses in their new curriculum.

**Conclusion: Towards an Education that is Theological and Educational**

I do not believe that it is coincidental that quality education is also profoundly theological. God knows us and in the incarnate Christ the integration between head, heart, and hands was manifestly clear. Each step we take on the path towards bridging classroom and life is an affirmation of who we are as created in the Image of the Triune God. As we investigate the possibilities through this coming week let’s be encouraged and challenged to take meaningful steps on that journey.

**Discussion Questions**

* Consider one or two other major theological themes, beyond those mentioned in the first section of this paper, and suggest some implications for the practice of theological education. Some possibilities: the perichoretic nature of the Trinity; the missional nature of the Trinity; the Bible is a story of God’s saving acts; salvation history – Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation; the covenantal people of God as light and salt; the imperative of lifelong discipleship following Jesus; the cross and kenosis.
* How good do you think your graduates are in reflecting meaningfully on ministry challenges through the lenses of all their studies at your school? What are their strengths and weaknesses in this regard, and what areas of their theological education are currently most formative in their reflective abilities?
* Consider a course that you taught recently. Why is this course crucial to the future life and ministry of your students? Why should they care about it? With a partner, try to convince him or her of the course’s importance.
* What are some barriers to developing shared vision at your school? Suggest one or two practical ways in which you could address these barriers and be a catalyst for creative change.
* With one or two others imagine an integrative course that you could teach together that would culminate in integrative reflective practice. While the best is if all faculty members can be in every class, generally this is unrealistic, so design the course with “units” that contribute to the whole.

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