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Strategies and Educational Aims of Theological Teaching: A Practical Theological Reflection

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Abstract: While it could be argued that education (the process of teaching and learning) is one of the most central functions within man's existence, the primary goal of theological education is to equip thinking practitioners and practical thinkers. If they are good practical thinkers, the richness and virtuosity of their work can contribute greatly to both the life of the church and the common good beyond it. The primary question in this regard is - what strategies and insights does theological teaching require? In an attempt to deal with the above topic this paper aims to focus on strategies and educational aims of theological teaching whereby it will establish the norms and strategies of concrete situations in theological education.

Keywords: Educational Aims, Theological Teaching, Learning strategies, Curriculum strategies, Practical Theology

Introduction

Browning (1996:235) sees "the rhythms of Christian education as following the movements of practical theology whereby Christian education is also seen as a process of practical communal enquiry." It is a critical, constructive and grounded theological reflection by communities of faith, carried on consistently in the contexts of their 'praxis', which here denotes a combination of knowledge born of analytical objectivity and distance, practical wisdom and creative skills (Jaison 2010:4).

Pattison and Woodward (2000:7) view practical theology "as a place where religious beliefs and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions, and actions and conducts dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually critical and practically transforming." The educational vision embedded in Practical Theology seeks to develop this interdisciplinary skill in Christians to read their Bible, the world around them and the traditions and cultural practices they uphold for a much deeper perception of the situation rather than knowledge accumulation confined to classrooms (Jaison 2010:9).

Teaching and Learning Strategies

A teaching strategy can be defined as a broad plan of action for teaching activities with a view to achieving an aim (Fraser, *et al* 1993:143). According to Dreeckmeier (1997:100) teaching strategy refers to a comprehensive instructional plan which includes all elements – form content arrangements, principles, teaching aids and the like. Van Rooy *et al* (2000:25) looking at the teaching strategies for experienced based learning approach noted the following requirements:

1) Linking learning material with prior experiences.

According to Van Rooy (1997:18) linking learning material with prior experiences can be done by:

- Establishing similarities and differences between the old and the new.
- Pinpointing analogous relationships.
- Trying out new applications, and
- Making logical extensions and possible synthesis.

2) Relating learning to current experiences.

New learning material enables learners to solve immediate problems and concerns they experience. Learning becomes more successful as learners regard the activities as relevant and useful. Instead of asking, "How can I use my past experience to make sense of this material?" the learner now asks "How can I use this knowledge to make sense of my current experiences?"

3) Creating new experiences.

The trainer can provide for group experiences where the experience itself becomes the focal point of learning. This type of experience can be created through simulations, games and role plays in which the shared experiences result in learning. As a result of the active participation in the simulated experience and subsequent

analysis of the experience, learning takes place. The learner thus learns from direct experiences and not prior or current experiences from outside the classroom.

4) Using experience as the primary source of learning.

Rooy *et al* (2000:26) refers to two ways in which experience can become the primary source of learning:

- The meanings learners attach to their individual experiences are subjected to critical scrutiny by the group acting as medium. In this process learners' previously taken- for- granted interpretations of their experiences are queried, ambiguities and misconceptions exposed and, as a result, new interpretations emerge from this exercise.
  In this approach to learning from experience, the learners firstly have to talk about their experiences, analyze their experiences (individually or in a group), identify the implications of what has been revealed and, lastly, respond by acting upon them.
- Reflecting on experiences and events while "experiencing" them promotes learning. This implies that learners must, actively in real contexts, be able to test and experience ideas, skills and insights introduced in the classroom while at the same time reflecting on these experiences.

Louis Malcolm (2002:1) argues that "seminaries are responsible for educating students for a different world and entails discerning God's justice and mercy in the full complexity of life, and to do that we cannot escape the difficult task of integrating the multiple dimensions of our lives." Foster *et al* (2006: 32 - 33) offers four areas that teaching in theological schools tended to focus on namely:

Interpretation of Texts

Most theological learning is textually based, and interpretation is crucial to theological learning and pastoral practice. Foster *et al* (2006:89) continues to say that, interpretation is never only about a text; it is a process of using a text in the context of situations and relationships. I therefore agree with foster that, "these characteristics of interpretation are closely associated with how theological educators understand critical thinking."

Formational Pedagogy

Formational pedagogy aims at students learning "dispositions, habits, knowledge, and skills that cohere in professional identity and practice, commitments and integrity. According Foster *et al* (2006:100) formational learning is critical to theological students, and it is central to the deepest intentions in professional service that are present in medicine, law, and teaching. Formational teaching therefore refers to students who have been formed for ministry and have learned the practice of the presence of God, who have learned to attend to the mystery that is the first and last chapter of true religion.

Contextualization

According to Cosden & Fairbairn (2001:125) "it is commonly recognized among Christian thinkers today that all theology is contextual. That is to say, every expression of theology has been significantly and necessarily, although not exclusively, influenced by the context in which it is done." Contextualization is therefore the "task of making explicit the socially situated nature of all knowledge and practice." To function faithfully in ministry, students need to learn the context of text, historical events, religious practices, and ministerial work (Aleshire 2008:66). Foster further notes that context are not just backgrounds that serve as settings for text or religious practices. Contexts consist of patterns of relationship and social structures, historical trajectories and local particularities, status and power configurations, values and commitments, and dispositions and habits (Foster *et al.* 2006:132). The process of contextualization relates to many activities in theological study and ministry practice and it is a way tobring religion's long and ancient traditions in dialogue with the current realities, and it is a crucial form of theological learning (Aleshire 2008:66). Werner *et al* (2010:126 argues that,

Theological education as a mechanism to spread theological knowledge is responsible for opening up the students' sights towards different contextual theologies developed from all kinds of contexts. Therefore, theological education should commit itself to inter-contextual or even multi-contextual approaches of doing theological education. There is no doubt that the inter-contextual or multi-contextual approaches adopted by theological education in order to study particular contextual theologies may bear critical fruits of connectedness between these individual contextual theologies which enrich as well as challenge a particular contextual theology.

Contextual sensibility is key to our theological attempt in seeking meaning and reading our world and the conventional practices (Jaison 2010:7. "The manner in which students are trained in seminaries has a bearing on how they perform in ministry" (Mvula 2006:6).

Performance

Ministry is a public profession, and students need to learn the performance skills that preaching, liturgy, public leadership, and other ministerial tasks required. Developing competence in the performance of the public dimensions of ministry is crucial to the leadership of communities of faith; it is not performance for its own sake. The minister or priest "performs" as a person of faith, and this performance guides the community into its own shared and corporate faith. Therefore the process of learning "to perform" should strengthen students' faith, just as participating in the "performance" in worship should strengthen the faith of worshipers. Foster *et al* (2006:181) concludes that "engaging students through pedagogies of performance includes paying attention to the importance of their spiritual and vocational formation."

Further it may be argued that God has established the educational process as the human mechanism for perpetuating and advancing life on earth (MacArthur 2003:241).

Curriculum Development in Theological Education

According to Fraser et al (1993:92) "a curriculum may be defined as the interrelated totality of aims, learning content, evaluation procedures and teaching – learningbactivities, opportunities and experience which guide and implement the didactic activities in a planned and justified manner." And curriculum development is defined as all the processes necessary to plan, design, implement and evaluate functional curriculum (Vander Schyff 2000:35). Prah (2016:30) asserts that "the curriculum lies at the core of all educational systems. It is through the curriculum that the larger social objects and values of the social order are implemented and achieved."

The term "curriculum" is a broad one, and its meaning has changed greatly over the years, especially in the course of the twentieth century (Dreeckmeier 1997:8). The purpose of the curriculum and methods of education changed dramatically as a result of the enlightenment (MacArthur 2003: 243). Curriculum can be defined as the teaching and learning activities and experiences provided by schools (Booyse & Du Plessis 2008:1).

The definition of Booyse & Du Plessis includes the following: Aims and objectives of the education system as well as the specific goals of the school, selection of the content to be taught, how it is arranged into subjects, programmes and syllabi, and what skills and process are included, ways of teaching and learning and the forms of assessment and evaluation used. A broader definition of curriculum is that of NEPI (1993) in Booyse & Du Plessis (2008:3) that: "curriculum refers to the teaching and learning activities and experience which are provided by schools."With regard to the curriculum Lopes (2014:255) asks the following question:

- "How can an academic institution promote reflection on and practice of holistic mission as the centre of its theological curriculum?"
- What are the consequences of developing a holistic framework for the theological method and classroom practice?

In an attempt to answer these questions, it is appropriate to note that the overarching goal of the theological curriculum is a "theological understanding," which is an aptitude for theological reflection and wisdom pertaining to responsible life and faith (Aleshire 2008:30).

Key elements to enhance theological reflection

According to (Kinast 1990) "theological reflection describes the process of learning directly from our experience. As an intentional and systematic activity in the classroom as well as through personal assignments, it attempts to enable individuals to discover God's presence in their experience, the difference God's presence makes in their lives, and what God expects as a result."Barns (2002:11) identified eight steps in the pedagogical process for effective theological reflection:

- Reflecting on "practice stories."
- Reflecting on the structural challenges of the profession.
- Reflecting on the ethical framework of professional practice.
- Articulating the gospel as a framework for public faith.
- Living a Eucharistic way of life.
- Recovering the vocation of the Kingdom of God.
- Christian casuistry in professional practice.

- Fostering Christian solidarities.

The educational vision embedded in Practical Theology seeks to develop this interdisciplinary skill in Christians to read their Bible, the world around them and the traditions and cultural practices they uphold for a much deeper perception of the situation rather than knowledge accumulation confined to classrooms (Jaison 2010:9). Reflective processes are characterized by acute observation and analysis of roles and context (Graham 2017:175). So in the final analysis when all is said and done in the words of Trokan (2013:144) the nature and purpose of Christian theological education must:

> Promote personal wisdom. As students pursue answers to their life questions they surface the core foundational issues of personal identity, right relationship, and human agency. Theological reflection is an excellent tool to enable students systematically to explore life's experiences, to reflect critically upon their meaning, and to theologize explicitly about the God event in their lives in light of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Tapping students' life and relational experiences can be a treasure chest of rich theological insight and growth.

Selecting Learning Content

Reflecting upon the development of pastoral education, Bunting (1980:119) writes, "theological education and pastoral training are like other branches of education: suffering from a constantly growing mass which threatens any trulyeducative process. Proliferation of curricular andsyllabuses is no way at all to tackle future needs of the pastor. The aim must be to train the person to be able, when need arises, to educate himself in the particular subject, skills and areas at that time. Therefore selectivity is the guiding principle."

To sum up what Bunting is saying above I think it is appropriate to note what Anderson (1999:51) would be appropriate:

> To develop a Christian view of education we must first discern a Christian vision of life, and then look within it for what affirms both about an ideal stature for persons, and then about processes of intervention aimed at developing such stature. From a Christian viewpoint, the mature person and the mature community are expressions of a worthy stature of Christ; and the related process of intervention is edification or up-building, its transforming factor being love or *agape*. Both person – building and community – building are achieved through involvement in personal relationships, which, together with understanding, are central to a Christian view of education. A Christian vie of schooling, developed in the light of a Christian view of education, envisages groups which function as "communities", and which are subject to evaluation according to the central criteria of: the total nurture of participants; their selective exposure through involvement in purposeful enterprise; cognitive breadth and interpretive clarity in curriculum design; and the provision of pastoral care and physical welfare.

When writing about curriculum development and design MacArthur (2003:256) says teachers need to be very sensitive in the selection of topics to be taught and also in the way selected topics are presented, to avoid inadvertently cultivating nay of these possible negative side effects in the lives of their students. Schyff (2000:49) asserts that, "trainers use instruction to achieve aims, and this is only possible through the use of appropriate subject material whereby the subject content selected should therefore contribute to the development and realization of the instructional aims and objectives." Fraser et al (1993: 129 – 132) identify and discuss a number of criteria which should be used to select learning content for instructional purpose as follows:

- **Applicability:** Trainers regard relevance as an important criterion for the selection of content. If certain tasks are to be excused and performed by learners, the learning selected should bring about the development of the skills necessary for these tasks.
- **Validity and significance:** The selected learning content should contribute to the development of skills that the trainer wishes learners to acquire as a result of instruction.
- **Learnability:** The learning content should coincide with the learners' intellectual abilities and level of development. Cultural differences should be taken into consideration. Learning content which is appropriated for one cultural group will probably have to be adapted before being presented to another group of learners.
- **Durability (life span):** The subject curricula should be changed to and adapted on a regular basis to make provision for change.
- **Viability:** To be viable, content should be selected and incorporated into subject role curricular not only "for the sake of knowledge itself", but because it has a major role to play in the development of the learner. The development value of the subject content should always be considered, since it should keep up with the reality of life by relating to the learner's frame of reference.

- **Balance between superficiality and depth:** The selected content should not only represent a wide spectrum of reality to learners, but also give them the opportunity to study the given themes in greater depth.
- **Intrinsic interest:** The learning content selected will be considered interesting if it coincides with the learner's objectives, experiences expectations, needs and problems. Learning content selected to achieve a particular long – term objective (such as preparation for a vocation and vocational training) should relate directly to the learner's immediate objective and problems.
- **Cultural and environmental compatibility:** Learning will be enhanced if the new subject content to be taught is user friendly and culturally compatible. This means that the content taught should be taken from the cultural environment of the learner.

According to Bunting (1990:119) in the context of pastoral training the above should lead inevitably to only two major requirements for the future ministry name: (1) training in the area of personal and inter – personal relationships, and (2) training in openness and readiness to find out. Bunting further declares that the college can, however, foster by courses and learning – experiences the kind of openness which will approach the ministry equipped with tools rather than ready – made solutions. Mvula (2006:14) says:

> "Seminaries can at the same time be so preoccupied with ideological debates that have no relevance to the ministry. There is a need for a healthy meaningful interaction the church and seminaries so that there may be academic excellence and practical training without compromising the needs of the church and the needs of the students which are varied."

To facilitate learning with students is to humbly acknowledge the eclectic if not messy nature of teaching and to trust the process of collaborative learning (Trokan 2013:157). The following tips for facilitating theological reflection are noteworthy:

- A positive and cooperative learning environment based upon trust, mutual respect, and openness is essential. Establishing group ground rules and modeling appropriate self-sharing strongly enhance the learning environment.
- Develop small groups as learning communities. Wisdom is most often exchanged in personal conversation where experience is valued., listened to, and empathized with. Build upon the insights and learning from these small learning communities.
- Develop learning contracts to preserve confidentiality, enhance listening skills, and integrate homework reflection with class activities. Utilize group theological analysis as a springboard to address the questions of Christology, ecclesiology, and salvation.
- Model appropriate self-sharing which focuses on the personal interpretation of the experiences reflected upon.
- Focus the reflection and processing of the experiences in the class setting on the specifically theological dimensions of the event, so as not to deteriorate into the therapeutic classroom.

Ministerial work requires knowledge and skills, to be sure, but skills, abilities, and knowledge are not the ultimate goal of theological education (Aleshire 2008:30). Farley (1983:128) argues that the more theological education focuses on ministerial tasks, the less qualified the minister will be to perform those tasks. Refusing to limit itself to academics or certain areas of pastoral practice, training has to extend to the personal and spiritual needs and queries of people by maintaining the hermeneutical balance in theological reflection (Jaison 2010:10). Freire (1987:54) mentions few pedagogical models namely:

- The banking - Model (the teacher owns information and the student is a passive recipient of the knowledge),
- Expert-Apprentice Model (The teacher is the master who moulds and trains his/her disciple),
- Consumer Model (the student is a consumer and the teacher is a sales person; the student buys whatever interests him/her), and the
- Therapeutic-Individualistic Model (the teacher helps, gives wise counsel to select courses that would help the student to find satisfaction and personal edification) operate within the traditional patterns of theological education.

Foster (2006) in Lopes (2014: 158) wrote that in theological education and training especially in designing the curriculum we need to overcoming the dichotomy between theory and practice. Lopes quoting

Boff and Boff (1987) further explains that this could be done by embracing the theological process or methodology known as a 'seeing – judging – acting model.'

Toward a Curriculum for Ministerial Training as Holistic Formation

The ultimate aim of theological education is the production of capable leaders, such as would be able to produce committed Christians (Ogunewu 2008:74). Logan (2007:182) argues that if theological education is to extend to the whole people of faithand if it is to be accomplished by means of reflection – action, there should be different levels to those means. Logan further mentions three level which should be discerned when ministerial training is conceptualized:

1. The Grassroots level

This is where most members of the community are. Education at this level must be characterized by practical Christian life, that personal existential knowledge of God motivated by the deep love for God. The biblical and theological understanding that this habit of the Christian life produces would have both *relational* (inner and outer) and *ecclesiastical* elements. The curriculum for theological education at the grassroots level is, in significant ways similar to that found in the formal school setting. The similarity is in terms of the broad areas of divisions of the course of studies, so that most things in the school curriculum may conceivably be covered at the grassroots level. Vital to the promotion of grassroots theological education is the leadership of the church – both lay and professional. This leadership must be so trained as to facilitate at the grassroots level an education that is similar to what leadership itself has received. Believers must be trained in action –reflection as they respond to situations - in - life.

2. The Middle (Professional) level

This is the level that historically served and catered to training of the professional clergy whereby the seminary served a double function: first as a place for the movement of the mind toward God, second as a centre that provides service for the church's other activities, such as bringing criticism to bear on those activities. Training at the middle level is both strategic and pivotal. Those trained at this level must be able to facilitate in the faith community a level of biblical and theological understanding necessary for the faith life and for the role and functions of the church in the world.

It is worth noting that Logan (2007:186) continues to argue that on this level the practical Christian life and the practical skills of ministry should be both be guided by informed reflection and that in the same manner reflection should be balanced at every level with informed action.

3. The Specialist/Technical level

Students trained at this level possess skills in carrying out high level, pure research. These individuals deal with the mode of understanding that attends the life of enquiry and scholarship. While specialist concern is about self-conscious inquiry under scholarly and scientific requirements, for such specialist concern to be genuinely Christian in character, it must be carried on at the same time as the scholar personally develops in his/her Christian life and in his/her personal relationship with God.

"While training at the professional level should not primarily be geared to specialist interest, training in action – reflection should, at the same time, help to cultivate the Christian mind as well as the discipline basic to the life of inquiry and scholarship" (Logan 2007:188). For this reason Logan adds that, it is not justifiable to have a curriculum at the middle level that assumes everyone is training for a technical and specialist career.

5.4.1 Core formation components and knowledge areas

Robinson (2000:32) identifies a two – level purpose for theological education: "in a broader sense it is for preparing the people of God for doing God's will in this world; and in a narrower sense it is for preparing candidates for doing ministry of the church. Carroll (1985:28) has given three dimensions of expertise that are required of ministers and which should be cultivated right from theological colleges:

- As 'definer of meaning' especially in their roles of preacher, teacher, counselor, bringing the Word of God to meet the needs of their situation.
- As 'builders of community', bringing theological insight into the nature of the Christian community and assisting them to be built up into maturity as Christians.
- As 'mediators' in the "church – social context interface" mediating not only between individuals and God but between individuals and society.

Figure 1. (Adapted from Dr. R Marie's presentation to the BCE: 07/11/2018)

Spirituality	**Personal Growth/Social Skills**	**Personal Morality/ Ethics**	**Transformational Leadership**	**Vocational Praxis**	**General/ interdisciplinary Knowledge**
Living in the presence of God.	Psychometric Evaluation	Personal Integrity	Defining Leadership	Practice of Ministry	Language Skills
The Spiritual Disciplines	Skills for healthy relationship	Professional Ethics	Theory of Leadership	Worship	Computer Literacy
Spiritual Direction	Caring for your family	Gender Sensitivity	Inspiring Vision	Preaching	Cognitive/ Learning Skills
Rule of life	Marriage Skills	Sexual ethics	Inspiring Vision	Ministry of the local congregation	Introduction to Sociology
Sacramental Life	Parental Skills	Financial Honesty	Leadership traits	Christian education	Introduction to Anthropology
Forms of Spirituality	Communication Skills	Understanding and Use of power	Ethical Leadership	Pastoral Care of the congregation	Introduction to Economics
Call/ Vocation	Relating to Social Environment	Trust and Loyalty	Building leadership	Denominational Studies	Introduction to Environmental Studies

Conclusion

The ministry is indeed beyond doubt the highest calling. It calls for great sacrifice. Undoubtedly the people who claim to be called should have a desire (1Timothy 3:1), should have qualifications which are visible to the church (1 Timothy 3: 2-7) and they must be accepted by the people of God (Acts 20:37 -38).

When we think about ministry preparation and theological education in particular we need to thoroughly answer the following question: Is a completed course of theological training a guarantee of ministerial success? There is therefore a great need and space for theological training. As Marie (2018) put it, There is undoubtedly a need for ongoing and quality equipping leaders, pastors and Christian workers by providing the spiritual formation, academic training, vocational and practical training required to develop skilled leaders of integrity, faithfulness and excellence.

The challenge facing theological education includes the need for balance between academic, spiritual and practical dimensions. Because spiritual formation according to Logan (2007:173) "is about the practical Christian life, the habit of personal existential knowledge of God motivated by deep love for God. When we integrate the above into our notion of teaching we will discover that our teaching is shaping lives and deals with every aspect of our lives. Therefore our training should ultimately bring the insights of scripture to bear on the daily lives of our students by modeling, instructing, encouraging, advising, urging, exhorting, guiding, exposing and convicting. At the end of it all as Marie (2018) noted: our vision of theological training and ministerial formation should consider the following:

- Biblical and theological spirituality.
- Personal growth and social skills.
- Personal morality/ethics.
- Transformational leadership.
- Vocational praxis.
- Academic/ theological education.
- General/ inter-disciplinary knowledge.

In simplicity what it means is that our ministerial candidates must be able to listen to God and read the bible much more than the average member of his/her congregation. They must also be able to talk to God. That means their prayers as preachers and leaders should be far better than the people they are ministering to. The training should equip them to be able to prepare and preach relevant sermons that are contextually relevant. They must not be satisfied in their preparation unless and until they clearly see Jesus Christ in the passage. Reading must not be an exercise which is left out for formal theological training in preparation of assignments and examination, but once in the ministry that habit should be maintained. As part of spiritual formation pastoral

candidates must be readers by so doing they will avoid disappointing people who listen to their sermons. As Schmidt (2008: xiii) puts it anyone engaged in theology would have made a personal faith commitment; a theologian's credibility depended on such a commitment.

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