How Do Students Learn Theology?

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Abstract. This paper explores the way students learn theology through a small qualitative research project. It is undertaken in conversation with current higher education learning theory. This learning theory suggests that it is important to discover how a student conceptualizes learning and how they perceive the teaching environment. Students interviewed increasingly spoke of the value of this academic or more cognitive side of learning as they learned “deep approaches.” Important in this movement to deep, transformational learning was the presence of a relational teaching environment in which peers and teachers played a crucial role. This present study offers support to the view that the tradition of the learning community remains important for deploying deep approaches to the learning of theology in higher education. The paper argues that these relational principals of teaching and learning remain important in the face of the increased use of technology-based tools and other pedagogical challenges to theological education today.

This paper explores the necessary and sufficient conditions for the learning of theology by students in higher education. It reports on the findings of a qualitative research project undertaken in late 2007 and early 2008 that asked students how they learn theology. The study was undertaken in conversation with current literature on learning theory together with other research into teaching and learning in higher education. The paper seeks to elucidate those aspects of the pedagogical process that students themselves name as important for their learning of theology and to draw some conclusions for the nature of a professional teaching environment. The measure of quality learning used in this discussion, well known in recent years, is the practice of deep approaches to learning. The implication in this paper is that the encouragement of deep approaches to learning is of critical importance for quality professional theological education within institutions of higher education: “Good teaching implies engaging students in ways that are appropriate to the deployment of deep approaches” (Ramsden 2003, 60).

Context
Written within an Australian context, the paper draws from the insights of students within a member school of an ecumenical consortium known as the Brisbane College of Theology. The question about the teaching and learning of theology is considered a key issue in theological education at a time of pressure on institutional development and change. Theological education in Australia is offered in a competitive market as students are able to study theology in a variety of modes and locations. The advent of “e-learning” also makes it possible for theological study through higher education institutions both in Australia and overseas (Pickard 2008). The scene is more complex in the face of economic pressures at a time when fundamentalist religion and more liberal
spiritual practices are resurgent (Bouma 2006). These issues have become a catalyst for institutional realignment and restructuring. It is within this broad social and economic context that churches seek to rediscover and affirm the strength of their religious traditions while being relevant to the day.

The pedagogical challenges within these theological institutions in Australia are equally important. They are not dissimilar to challenges found in the North American study undertaken by the Carnegie Foundation (Foster et al. 2006, 102–103). As that study states, our students enter colleges having been formed by a multiplicity of personal, cultural, and spiritual forces. Sponsoring churches also place expectations on ministry candidates and their families. Faculty and students face the mutual challenge of varying levels of resistance and subversion of learning that may require of faculty better and more creative, imaginative pedagogy. Our challenge as theological educators is therefore to assist students to grow out of naïve, pre-critical, sentimental or quasi fundamentalist piety while grounding them in the theological tradition in ways that are truly “formative.” All this we seek to do by helping them to remain open to engage in truths in other religious traditions, and to have a more expansive view of self, world, and God.

Of central concern for theological teachers and institutions within this social and pedagogical milieu is the desire for effective student learning. The ever present pressure for expedient compromise is ameliorated by quality assurance processes in higher education that ensure the continuance of high standards of teaching, learning, and research. The present study is undertaken with a view to sharpening our insights about the learning of theology in order to add to our discussion about the development of teaching professionalism and programming in theological education.

I chose St Francis Theological College as the institution at which to enquire about student learning and to test the findings against broader learning theories in higher education. At the time of this study I was the Principal and Director of Theological Education and Ministry Formation of the college, lecturing in systematic and moral theology. As with most theological colleges and seminaries in Australia and elsewhere the academic program at St Francis Theological College was integrated with the ministry training program, which was denoted as “ministry formation.” The college ecclesial and spiritual ethos was that of a moderate catholic Anglicanism. The learning of theology undertaken in this higher education context had at its heart the spiritual and communal practices of the Christian tradition of common prayer, word, and sacrament; it is a tradition that values critical and practical reflection on the biblical narrative and the developing tradition of ecclesial life and ministry in the world while valuing the aesthetic and the symbolic as vehicles of grace. It is also a tradition that views the interface between church and society, and engagement with the broader cultural and social life of its context, as important and of theological import (see Hardy 1996; Kaye, Macneil, and Thomson 2006).

Methodology
The qualitative research aspect of this project involved interviewing all six final year theological students from among a class of Anglican ordination candidates. The students ranged in age (thirty-five to sixty-eight), were of mixed gender (two male, four female), drawn from a variety of academic programs (two MTh, two BTh, two undertaking miscellaneous BTh subjects or courses) and of mixed academic ability. All students were of Anglo-Celtic background. Students were sent an email inviting their participation with an outline of the project, possible time commitment, and aims of the project. Each inter-
view lasted for between thirty and forty minutes. Students were asked questions that followed the main theme of the study, namely, “How do you learn theology?” Other questions were asked to encourage further thought and to help clarify students’ conception of and approaches to learning such as “What kind of teaching and learning experiences did you find helpful? How do you know when you have learned something? How have your expectations about learning theology changed?” Questions were deliberately brief, kept to a minimum, and were open-ended, to encourage longer answers and in-depth reflection about their experience of learning (Kvale 1996, 125–133, 145–151; Knight 2002; Seidman 2006, 78–94).

The underlying principles for this qualitative study follow those set out by Eisner (1998, 32–39). From its location within the field of theological education the research sought to observe, interview, record, describe, interpret, and appraise student learning within the context in which the learning occurs. As researcher I drew out what I considered to be the relevant categories or qualities expressed by the students interviewed in relation to their conception of and approaches to learning in order to ascertain the “necessary and sufficient conditions for learning” theology (Brockbank and McGill 1998, 46; Ramsden 2003). While the research reports the language used by students in ways that reflect their personal conception and approach, analysis and interpretation of this data sought to draw out aspects that exemplified meaning not directly described, though this was undertaken with an eye to the wider scholarship. Finally, the study offers a coherent or cogent interpretation of the research as found through student interviews but drawing on and in conversation with the wider scholarship concerned with learning theory.

Learning Theory
Learning theorists offer a wide range of views about how learning takes place. In recent decades learning theorists have not turned only to philosophers or cognitive psychologists but also to students themselves for their own perspective. Following the work undertaken by Marton and Saljo (1976) and developed by others such as Biggs (1987) and Ramsden (1988), the student learning context has been deemed important: the learner’s perspective becomes crucial, rather than what the teacher intends should be learned. This is not to say that program and course content is unimportant; the subject matter is shaped by the institution. But the issue of concern is student learning, for, as learning theorists suggest, “less is often more.”

The approach to learning is important and is “a pivotal concept in teaching and learning” because it relates to a qualitative aspect of learning concerned with how people experience and organize the subject matter that is the focus of the learning task. One of the most prominent schools of thought that have evolved in learning theory follows constructivist theories about how learning takes place: learning occurs as students continuously build upon and amend previous structures or schemata, as new experiences, actions, and knowledge are assimilated and accommodated. “Constructivism tells us that we learn by fitting new understanding and knowledge into, with, extending and supplanting, old understanding and knowledge” (Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall 2003, 10). This means that as teachers we must learn about what students know by discovering their conceptions and models of learning, and apply our findings in order to improve our teaching. Changing students’ conceptions, however, demands more than a teacher transferring concepts to students. Teaching methods must look to a supportive teaching environment in order to help students to work on the discrepancies. The construction of knowledge is affected by students’ perception of the educational setting in which this
learning takes place (Ramsden 1988, 20–21). Thus if learning is a process of individual transformation as students actively construct their knowledge then the lecturer’s role is to consider how to bring about a transformation of a student’s preexisting knowledge and approach to learning (Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall 2003, 10–11; Biggs and Tang 2007, 20–21).

Approaches to learning have been classified as deep or surface, though these conceptions of learning have increased in sophistication following the research of Biggs (1987) and Ramsden (1988, 2003). It is important to realize that by “approach” researchers do not mean a characteristic of a particular person. Approach to learning is not something implicit in the make-up of a student but is something between the student and the task and is both personal and situational. “Approaches to learning are not something a student has; they represent what a learning task or set of tasks is for the learner.” Everyone is capable of both deep and surface approaches, and our efforts to change approaches to learning is not an effort to change the person as such, but to change their experiences, perceptions, or conceptions of the subject matter (Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall 2003, 18; Ramsden 2003, 40–45). Of course the end result of the learning in this way is, most likely, personal transformation.

Surface learning occurs when students approach learning with an emphasis on the task of gathering facts and information, where memorization is for later use with no distinction between new ideas and existing knowledge. It epitomizes low quality learning as it focuses on quantity without quality; it is instrumental, reproductive and minimalist and information is gathered and learnt without the context of a meaningful framework. It is geared to short-term requirements and is rarely emotionally engaging. More seriously, the superficial relation with the subject in question leads not only to poor long-term recall but a misunderstanding of fundamental principles and concepts, and an inability to apply learning to the broader issues of living.

Deep learning on the other hand is about quality and quantity; it is holistic in nature as reflects an orientation in learning – an intention toward finding meaning and understanding. Deep learners undertake critical evaluation and relate learning to earlier experiences and to the world in which they live; it opens a window through which the real world can be seen more clearly. Engagement with deep approaches to learning requires motivation and personal involvement. Thus fulfillment and pleasure which includes relationships of mutuality and dialogue are also identified as crucial to deep learning as a transformative process (Brockbank and McGill 1998, 34, 42–43; Marton and Booth 1997; Ramsden 1988; 2003, 45–49). It is this deep approach to learning which exemplifies the type of learning that teachers expect and employers rely upon. Deep learning results in the changing of oneself in some way (Ramsden 2003, 20; Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall 2003, 18).

By way of example, surface approaches are evident when students fail to engage with a set question in relation to a selected text and primarily prefer to summarize the text – to focus on the text itself rather than how it relates to the larger question. In comparison, a student approaching learning from a deep orientation focuses on the overall view of the argument within the text as it relates to the question within a larger whole. In sum, students conceptualize learning either as “primarily reproducing and learning” or as “primarily seeking meaning” (Marton and Booth 1997, 35, 38; Wilson and Fowler 2005, 88).

It is a general consensus within higher education that a deep approach to learning is desirable, and is perhaps its key task (Wilson and Fowler 2005, 88). There are obviously
implications for teaching, as approaches to learning, rather than being an individual or innate characteristic of a learner, are a response to the teaching environment in which the student learns. As Biggs and Tang have elaborated, these constructs of surface or deep learning are modified by a range of personal and contextual factors. Motivation, for example, is a key factor in a student’s desire for deep learning. Given the resources, skills, and knowledge, a well motivated student can strategize and utilize appropriate methods to achieve these aims and this, suggests Biggs, identifies a third approach to learning, the strategic or achieving approach (Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall 2003, 18; Biggs and Tang 2007, 31–49).

### Student Responses and Discussion

The data gathered from student interviews indicated a diversity of approaches to learning ranging from surface to deep approaches. Diverse strategies were also apparent as students reflected further about their approach to learning throughout their studies. Tables 1, 2, and 3 present a summary of student comments; their content is offered as summary illustrations of key student concepts, concrete strategies, and developing approaches to learning. The tables are structured around the key approaches to learning represented in Biggs’ SOLO taxonomy (structure of observed learning outcome). This taxonomy is also helpful in suggesting that learning passes through various stages from a more quantitative phase (surface) to a more qualitative one (deep) as learning tasks develop and academic complexity increases. It is “a hierarchy, where each partial construction becomes a foundation upon which further learning is built” (Biggs and Tang 2007, 76, 79; Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall 2003, 19–20).

Tables 1, 2, and 3 represent a hierarchy of movement from the more quantitative aim in the spectrum of learning (the surface approaches which focus more upon increased knowledge), toward a more qualitative aim, or deeper approach. The SOLO taxonomy is used here to clarify student responses within learning hierarchies as they reported their conception of, strategies for, and approach to learning theology. Statements reported within these tables reflect the verbs used in this taxonomy but are only divided between the surface (quantitative) and deep (qualitative) phases, without any attempt to further delineate into the unistructural, multistructural, relational, and extended abstractions categories.

Table 1 outlines student conceptions of learning as expressed in initial responses to the question of how they learn theology. This was often labeled by students as “academic” theology as they responded to the question. The summary of responses offered in Table 1 reveals changing perceptions as they reflect further about their approach to learning within their respective degrees. Table 2 provides instances of some practical strategies students use to move toward deep approaches to learning. Table 3 summarizes the more general sense of students’ approach to learning, thus giving examples of their descriptions of the movement into deeper understanding of learning and its implications.

Three of the six students interviewed initially spoke of their conception of academic learning in ways that reveal an expectation of a surface approach to learning in order to cope with the nature and demand of academic theology. This perception also colored students’ sense of expected work load. This suggests parallels with the findings of Lizzio, Wilson, and Simons (2002) and their study of student perceptions of the learning environment and academic outcomes. Perceptions of a heavy work load influence students toward surface approaches to study. Thus academic study was viewed initially more as an exercise in reproductive, informational learning, rather than a holistic
process beyond – as “watching, listening, assimilating, structuring, repeating, absorbing, and seeking information” (Table 1). While three students in this study especially held this understanding prior to their entry into higher education, this view was modified in varying degrees as the interview progressed, particularly as they reflected more deeply about their learning and learning processes. Table 1 shows this progression represented in the examples given on either side of the surface or deep approach. Students refer to

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### Student 1
Witnessing, watching, and listening to others and their comments on God and take on board and assimilate their comments and move on... It’s a memory bank for me.

It’s a continual process... I’ll make connections... someone will say something here, someone there, and there’ll be some academic thing here and the light will come on and I’ll make the connection.

### Student 2
I am tempted to say by osmosis... there’s the academic learning which you are purely absorbing information but to me that doesn’t really mean I can then assimilate it or regurgitate it. I have to roll it around... So I find that what I actually learn and that I remember and use tends to be something that’s gone around a few times in conversation.

That my whole focus in doing the academic side is really important but my focus is what can I get out of this to use later on. It’s not doing it for the sake of doing it; passing is the essential story. But I am not driven by the marks but what I can get out of it further on.

### Student 3
Initially I was too busy seeking information and knowledge... I had limited understanding of the word theology... The thing that I struggled with mostly was the terminology, the language of theology.

It gave me different perspective on things and that allowed me to think... why do I believe this? And does that need to be changed? Or can I sit with more than one view on things?... [theology] provided me with alternative views so I think it provided me with more information about things so I could think things through more deeply... [it] challenged about what you believe...

### Student 4
Initially I was too busy seeking information and knowledge... I had limited understanding of the word theology... The thing that I struggled with mostly was the terminology, the language of theology.

Someone once said to me that I would develop my own theology... now I think I think you cannot help but develop your own theology from your own learning.

### Student 5
I am not sure that my understanding of how to learn has changed. I am used to training others so am aware of how people learn how to observe others learning, structure outlines... repetition and examples, putting into practice and so on.

I have become used to scanning and formulating, you know outlining the flow in my head and then being able to pick out details of what I want... one can be reminded of the experiential side – maybe not clarified at the time. These are the “aha” moments even in informal study you are suddenly able to relate something that makes sense.

### Student 6
Probably this [learning] process was always there but I did not have the language.

It is very much about story for me and making sense of things within what I have come to understand as the story... it’s meaning making because in the end theology is about meaning to make sense of what we are doing.
the deep or qualitative phase of learning as “making connection,” relating what is learnt toward “later use,” thinking through knowledge “more deeply,” making one’s “own theology,” and “meaning making.” These deeper conceptions are born out further in Table 3.

It was evident through interviews that student motivation for learning was increasingly complemented by their strategies to achieve, to engage with, and successfully utilize the material presented and to move with deep learning as they understood the task (Biggs and Tang 2007; Wilson and Fowler 2005). Students commented that, particularly in the beginning stages, their theological learning required a focus on the tasks or “signs” (Brockback and McGill 1998, 36; Ramsden 2003, 47). This necessary groundwork was undertaken as they grappled with new theological vocabulary: as their literacy and understanding developed so did their deeper conceptual frameworks of meaning. Table 2 outlines key learning strategies as named by students.

The strategies for learning used by students was a process of discovery for students, no less for those at postgraduate level as they created new frameworks in which new vocabulary and theological concepts made sense and could be effectively utilized. The learning of theological vocabulary and essay skills meant that the repeated reading of texts figured prominently especially among students new to higher education. These strategies varied between surface and deep orientation, even when students were deep learners. As Ramsden found, the approaches can become fused together in a student’s deep learning approach given that they will draw on both qualitative and quantitative phases. The techniques of a surface approach may be called upon to meet the requirements of a specific learning task (Ramsden 2003, 43–44; Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall 2003, 18–19).

As studies have shown, the surface approach used by students in this study was a strategy toward deep learning especially in the initial encounter with higher education in theology. Students can learn new concepts and develop meaning by memorizing a definition of a concept, even though it is more representational in nature (Novak 1998, 56; Bain 1994; Entwistle and Entwistle 1997; Marton et al. 2005). However, the focus in this early stage was on the task of learning rather than the meaning. Students began learning theology by extending their vocabulary (use of dictionaries and so forth), looking for guidance, building on previous learning experience, and gaining other skill such as essay writing and research.

Also prominent among all students in the beginning of their theological study was the desire to get into the experience behind the theology, to make broader connections to their spiritual, life, and communal experience. This was an important part of their motivation and learning strategy and highlighted the desire of students to learn meaningfully. As Ausebel’s theory of learning suggests, meaningful learning is a process of relating new learning to relevant aspects of the student’s existent knowledge structure (Novak 1998, 51). Once students had the groundwork in place their strategies for learning tended to move toward more personally and communally engaged learning pursuits: understanding or seeking meaning that engaged the heart as well as head, as they said. A key issue was the increased motivation toward learning about particular subject matter by being able to place what was being learnt in a familiar context, experience, or practical connection. An important part of this was engaging in conversation or dialogue in order to reframe their understanding or knowledge with peers and teachers.

As students reflected further about developing learning strategies and about the value of the more rigorous critically reflective requirements encountered in their learning, they
**Table 2: Strategies for Learning**

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<td><strong>UNISTRUCTURAL / MULTISTRUCTURAL</strong></td>
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<td>Student 1</td>
<td>I get into the experience; I don’t often get into the meaty stuff [academic theology], I skim it, I acknowledge that... I read this two or three times... I have to write down dot points and list this, this and this... try and get it.</td>
<td>Quite often if I get my head around it I can feel it as well. If I can’t feel it as well and have that difficulty, it’s foreign and I really have to think about it to come to a more, I guess, emotional understanding.</td>
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<td>Student 2</td>
<td>I don’t read quickly if I am taking it in, I do it very slowly if I am underlining things and taking it in... and I’d go through the readings and it would take me hours...</td>
<td>. . . most of the lectures here would start or end with a meal at my place... I am constantly challenged by questions... things I have not got the answers to. I have really learnt more over the dinner table in the last three years... So my actual learning or cementing the learning I guess is always through conversation and discussion and that sort of thing.</td>
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<td>Student 3</td>
<td>I tended to focus assignments toward a history based question... because then I felt a little bit more that I was on solid ground...</td>
<td>I think that theology is something where it is good to be in a class where you can ask questions, and talk through ideas to know if you are on the right track... I find it easier to learn a theory if I have a context to put it in...</td>
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<td>Student 4</td>
<td>It would have been quicker if I made my knowledge of the language better... it forced me to go away and to learn them so I could understand... presentation in essay was a problem initially and I struggled until I had done it several times and then I got used to it.</td>
<td>I still look at it and say yes, keep reading... I look at context to get a meaning... I get the meaning across without using that language. . . . It was only when I read someone who appealed to head and heart.</td>
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<td><strong>RELATIONAL / EXTENDED ABSTRACT</strong></td>
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<td>Student 5</td>
<td>I would be dependent on guidance initially and that would give me boundaries to do my own research... It would be hard to go in entirely cold without having starting points, especially with regard to different aspects of theology.</td>
<td>I think the experience comes first... the “aha” moments even in informal study you are suddenly able to relate something that makes sense. I have become used to scanning and formulating; you know outlining the flow in my head and then being able to pick out details of what I want.</td>
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<td>Student 6</td>
<td>. . . it has to be for me that possibility of dialogue and reframing. But I very much work out the idea that there is story and my story somehow weaves in and out of that; it also gains meaning in that way... So that’s why I am always looking for and asking how this helps me or someone else make meaning in a situation. I need to be able to put them in context, the debates, notions of person and substance etc...</td>
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increasingly deployed deep approaches. Table 3 outlines their key responses and shows the varying degrees to which students moved beyond their earlier conceptions of learning. Prosser and Tigwell found that if a student’s previous experience of studying is surface in nature, then students are more likely to adopt this approach to their studies (1999, 27). One can observe from the student comments in Table 3 that previous learning experience was initially an obstacle to learning, for some. Help from peers and teachers was needed to draw them away from previous conceptual models that were more representational approaches (for example, help with the terminology of theology, or essay research and writing skills), toward deep models that at times connected with their own sense of how to proceed (for example, “this process was always there but I did not have the language”).

Students interviewed highlighted the importance of personal identification with the subject matter. As noted above, motivation increased with a sense of personal involvement or connectedness, fulfillment, and pleasure, and an important part of this was the development of learning relationships of mutuality and critical dialogue. These were named as key factors by students in their movement toward deep learning. More fruitful meaning and personal transformation was the result. Students spoke about it in terms of connection to their practice and of “emotional understanding,” that is, of theology touching heart as well as head. Theology became part of their “experience of God” and touched them at all levels of their humanity. This was also important for post-graduate students. For other students this motivating connection arose from theology’s usefulness or application, “what can I get out of this to use later on” that is of “practical affect or outlook.”

The development of learning relationships of mutuality and critical dialogue with teachers and peers was important and reflected a socio-emotional approach to learning (Brockbank and McGill 1998, 37). It was a common sentiment among these students that they desired helpful learning relationships with teachers and peers both formally and informally. For most students interviewed this was a key factor in developing deep approaches to learning. When this relational learning climate of openness and critical dialogue was lacking students reported that they actively sought to establish it.

Comments in Table 3 that reflect deep learning approaches show the kind of relational interaction valued and initiated by all students to develop their learning. Whether in classroom, initiated by them in their homes, or in less formal times of college gatherings, students reported that personal and group interaction helped them in the development of critical thinking and argument, in the development of their sense of meaning and understanding of the subject at hand, and to open windows on the real world. This happened in peer groups but was particularly valued when it occurred with teachers present. Upon hearing of the approaches of other students they reported that this enabled them to develop strategies for learning as their conceptions were challenged and reformed. While students stated that this kind of dialogical teaching and learning environment importantly involved teachers themselves, the peer groups experience, as a less threatening climate, helped them build upon (and in some instances replace) skills workshops offered by faculty. This was especially the case in the instance of students who were initially of lesser academic experience or ability. In general, the value that students placed on this kind of relational learning climate is expressed in the comment that it was a matter of “learning to take account of people” – it was a crucial part of the student’s “broadening field of vision.”
### Table 3: Approaches to Learning

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<tr>
<th>Student 1</th>
<th>It was difficult, I freaked out, and came back to personal response to that woman and where I was.</th>
<th>I went [on retreat] to get into it . . . to write to think . . . and get from it physically, mentally, emotionally and to think.</th>
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<td>Student 2</td>
<td>Doing the academic side is really important but my focus is what can I get out of this to use later on . . . it drives me to learn more . . . to get more information . . .</td>
<td>This academic stuff is absolutely vitally important . . . where concepts come from and how they are formed and how you’ve taken them on board . . . [then you are] able to help these people. . . . Yes I’ve had a lot of things challenged and changed.</td>
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<td>Student 3</td>
<td>Theology was actually the most challenging area for me . . . I had not studied it before so I was sort of learning as I go. I tended to focus assignments toward a history based question particularly in my earlier theology subjects because then I felt a little bit more that I was on solid ground.</td>
<td>I find that I learn it better face to face teaching . . . theology is something where it is good to be in a class where you can ask questions, and talk through ideas . . . If I find ways of explaining it to others I feel like I have learnt something.</td>
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<td>Student 4</td>
<td>the atmosphere of the college helped. All students were prepared to help me when I first arrived especially third and second years; that was very encouraging and other students because of language and other problems were also struggling</td>
<td>. . . what he was saying was making tense and it was the kind of theology I was looking for I guess. I was surprised and happy and pleased as it was something I could relate to it suited me personally. So I took a liking to theology as a result of that . . . Classes were open you were allowed to explore . . . that encouraged me to form my own opinions . . . and be confident . . . I have done it and have a liking for it and it’s why I took an extra two subjects this year . . .</td>
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<td>Student 5</td>
<td>I depended on guidance initially . . . ideas from which I could expand . . . starting points.”</td>
<td>I think actually being in a thinking environment has been one very helpful learning process . . . It’s being part of a thinking community not confined to the classroom but these naturally overspill. The growth in the experience has not been much but the growth in the mental understanding has been huge . . . I think the important thing was that satisfying need to academically understand, to intellectually understand better.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
<td>. . . this [learning] process was always there but I did not have the language.</td>
<td>My default setting is to sit down by myself and read, it’s instinctive. And my big learning in the last few years is the value of group work . . . “Narrative . . . gives meaning to thoughts and feelings, the possibility of dialogue and reframing . . . [it] connects things together . . . being attentive to the wisdom when it comes from other people.” It’s meaning making because in the end theology is meaning.</td>
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Conclusion

While this study has limitations with regard to its small and homogenous sample, its findings nevertheless have much in common with other studies into learning in higher education, and the findings offer a valuable insight into deep learning from a student centered perspective. The nature of St Francis Theological College and the student cohort chosen for the study also implies certain limitations because the research was restricted to students training for the ordained ministry. It is true that as candidates for ordained ministry these students have more than a “purely academic” interest in theology and are well motivated because of a sense of vocation or call. They were also of more mature years. Motivation combined with the use of action learning models (as with well integrated theological education and ministry training) are key factors in encouraging deep approaches to learning among higher education students (Wilson and Fowler 2005; see also Lynch and Pattison 2005). This study supported these perspectives while also naming particular aspects of the teaching climate that assist motivation and the use of deep approaches to learning theology. As students moved through their degree they reported a deeper involvement or devotion, practice, and pleasure in the learning of theology. I now outline the main findings of this study and the resulting implications for teaching.

First, students interviewed in this study reflected conceptual changes in terms of their approaches to learning during the process of these interviews, as they reflected more deeply about their learning approach through the progress of their theology degrees. The deployment of deep approaches varied according to the student, and this was due to various reasons. Initially in interviews students conceived of a conceptual split between “academic” theology versus theology as “experience-relevance.” This was paralleled by a conception that what was required was a corresponding surface approach to learning (for example, “the academic learning in which you are purely absorbing information”; “dotting the i’s and crossing t’s”; “theology rather than academics”). This conception was weighted in this way for numerous reasons. Those new to higher education degrees drew on previous learning experience and initially modeled their approaches to learning accordingly. Some tended to feel overawed by the “academic” expectations of their courses. In part this was because they needed to learn the basic building blocks such as essay writing and research skills; in part it was because of the pressure of study alongside work and responsibilities at home; in part it was due to the fact that most students had hitherto experienced theology primarily as conative (doing) and affective (feeling) and were now being asked to give prime place to the cognitive (knowing) aspect of learning. This more cognitive emphasis to the academic learning of theology also tended to create in some students an expectation of surface learning.

The student comments about their understanding of learning paralleled the findings of learning theory more generally, that learning is about changing one’s conceptions and that this is more than a matter of transferring ideas from teacher to student. To make this change in comprehension it was apparent that students had to actively work on and interact with their old ways of thinking and the face of the new. These conceptual changes then focused learning as a matter of finding the meaning or “what is signified” and on the larger questions of the subject matter at hand (Ramsden 2003, 47). We might compare the following student comments: “This academic stuff is absolutely vitally important . . . where concepts come from and how they are formed and how you’ve taken them on board . . . Yes I’ve had a lot of things challenged and changed; Someone
once said to me that I would develop my own theology...now I think you cannot help but develop your own theology from your own learning.”

Over the time of their degree students increasingly recognized the value of the more cognitive, disciplined, and rigorous critical and reflective pedagogical process that formed part of a whole approach to learning that was essential and personally transforming. As one student commented, “I think the important thing was that satisfying need to academically understand, to intellectually understand better.” That this agrees with the view of learning in higher education more generally should not be surprising (Brockbank and McGill 1998, 41–42).

This study also supports the view that the relationship between the student and the context, that is, the teaching process or teaching environment, is a key issue for learning theology in higher education. “An approach to learning, far from being an individual characteristic of a learner, is a response to the teaching environment” (Ramsden 1988, 20; Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall 2003; Biggs and Tang 2007). Student comments supported these wider research findings. From the interviews it was clear that this valued teaching environment included the groundwork taught to students by peers and teachers: essay writing skills, explanation of vocabulary, concepts, and the critical tools of theological inquiry. Also important here was the sense of a curriculum design, of “constructive alignment” of intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment, though they did not say that these matters were always optimally in place. In other words, students placed high value on courses as “designs for learning” (Biggs and Tang 2007, Ramsden 2003).

Their sense that courses are “designs for learning” was greatly assisted by a teaching environment that encouraged and enabled interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers in a spirit of supportive but critical dialogue and discussion. The provision of space to develop relationships of mutuality and dialogue assisted their motivation due to a sense of personal involvement, fulfillment, and pleasure in their courses of study. This finding is supported by studies elsewhere (Brockbank and McGill 1998, 42–43; Ramsden 2003). Deep approaches to learning are assisted when teaching environments enable personal interaction, personal challenge and achievement. Becoming “embodied enquirers” was an important, even central aspect in learning to deploy deep approaches to learning. This term is used by Gayle Baldwin meaning that students “not only learn terms and concepts that are fundamental to understanding a variety of religious traditions, but that they reflect on these fundamentals in dialogue with their own spiritual and religious experiences and those of others within a community of trust” – a community that could trust enough to disagree, to have conflict (Baldwin 2006, 169).

This kind of teaching environment is crucial for the stimulation of deep learning and for the transformation of the religious or pastoral imagination (Foster et al. 2006). Lizzio, Wilson, and Simons found in their study that perceptions of a good teaching environment influence students toward deep approaches while perceptions of bad teaching environment influence surface approaches. Furthermore, they found that “generic academic and workplace skills are perceived to be best developed in learning environments characterized by good teaching and independence.” Learning environments and not prior academic learning or success contributed most to academic outcomes (2002, 43).

This present study therefore offers support to the view that the tradition of the learning community – or a constructive relational teaching environment – remains important.
for the deployment of deep approaches to learning theology. As others have argued, theological education entails a relation between the cultivation of dispositions and competencies on the one hand, and academic disciplines such as research on the other (Kelsey 1992, 228; Farley 1983; Banks 1999). Attention to the teaching climate and to the underlying pedagogical principles of student centered learning is crucially important. A key feature of this relational view of learning is the relations between students, what they are required to do, and what teachers do as part of a whole teaching and learning environment (Ramsden 1988, 26–28).

The ecclesial and spiritual disposition evident in the tradition at St Francis Theological College seeks to develop a relational teaching environment such as that desired by the students interviewed. Whether it has done this well is another question, but it is the underlying ethos of this institution of higher education (as indeed is the case with its sister Uniting Church and Roman Catholic colleges). This was reflected in my own college’s desire to integrate the academic, formation, and ministry practice with community life and worship. The findings were important in a decision to encourage small theological reflection groups to become a central aspect of the ministry formation program as a key time and space for peer and teacher dialogue in order to help motivate students through discussion and critical dialogue (compare Lynch and Pattison 2005, 153; Entwistle 1997). Student “ Evaluations of Teaching” in my own subject areas has also suggested that such groups in class also assist students to develop their approach to learning. As Paul Ramsden suggests, “(t)ime for contemplation, reflection, working things out, and discussion with others learning the same subject is thus not a luxury, but a necessity” (1988, 22).

More generally, the findings and argument of this paper suggest that institutions of higher education that teach theology need to give an important place to researching student approaches to learning and to seek appropriate ways to support constructive teaching environments, especially offering times and places for critical discussion and dialogue amongst peers and teachers. As this study suggests, the ethos of this kind of learning community is vital in higher education and no less in institutions of theological education.

This relational view of teaching and learning is not new to theological education. The early church was a learning community pursuing paideia, that is, a full and rounded educational process: “education was not just dogmatic but ‘maieutic’, an adjective which comes from the Greek word for midwifery” (Young 1996, 229, 232). The relational principles of teaching and learning outlined in this study will be no less important today as we move to increase the use of technology-based tools in the face of economic and competitive institutional pressures on higher education in theology.

References


Saines


