Toward Redemption in Theological Education

Teaching and Learning Theology

Notes

1 Brian Head, 'Introduction: Intellectuals in Australian Society', in Brian Head and James Walter (eds), Intellectual Movements and Australian Society, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p. 3.

Teaching and learning are key issues in theological education. For teachers within these institutions it is important to know how students approach learning because not all approaches to learning bear the kind of fruit that teachers or employers cherish or indeed that students themselves are capable of performing. In this article I will summarise recent findings into student approaches to learning and learning theory in higher education. This research offers theological educators important insights into learning in the face of a changing pedagogical, social and cultural climate. These findings also make theological sense as we ponder God and God's world from a trinitarian perspective. Findings from student-centred learning together with a desire for theological pedagogy raise issues that require

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further consideration for theological educators. These issues will be the focus of the final section of this article.

**Context**

The need for a student-centred approach to the teaching and learning of theology is an important corollary to the developing scenario of theological education in Australia and in the Anglican Church in particular. Reports into theological education around the Anglican Communion tell us that there is a growing and diverse mix of people who study theology today in the Anglican Communion. This is no less the case within the Anglican Church of Australia and it is been commented upon that the student cohort seeking to study theology today are similarly diverse and come to the study of theology from a range of backgrounds and with a range of intentions. Students who study theology are either concerned about the deep issues of faith, life and meaning or simply want to sort out their religious beliefs. They do not necessarily seek ordination but may use theological education to inform their own work and sense of ministry. At the same time, these students (including those seeking ordination), compared to many of a generation ago, often come knowing less about the tradition and have less time for study as they work to support themselves and their families. It can no longer be presumed that knowledge of the tradition or understanding of congregational life is the case, and they may not have been formed by some involvement in church life. Theological education is for many reasons undertaken today in a much more complex time, and those whom we educate may face issues that are increasingly more complex.

Of course the study of theology is not restricted to institutions of higher education. The study of theology is also practised by members of faith communities such as parish churches, though in varied and less rigorous ways by those and the many whose lives are shaped by their religious faith. Furthermore, what is said in this paper about learning theology is certainly not restricted to the clerical few, nor is it intended only for the more highly educated. Theology belongs to the whole people of God, and is situated within the realm of the sensus fidelium, what the early church called the ‘sense of the faithful’. The learning of theology is, because of its subject matter (God), a life-long concern for all people of faith. From the very early centuries ‘the church was a lifelong, “comprehensive”, learning community’. Put simply, the study of theology is part of the work of the people of God, it is, as we have increasingly realised in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a work to be undertaken ‘from below’, that is, in the light of the ordinary experiences of women and men of faith. However, it remains the case that theological educators must seek to deploy the best approaches to learning for all who seek to study theology. It is this matter of approaches to learning that I now turn.

**Learning Theology**

As a teacher of theology I know that theologians love to teach theology. We are often ‘burning with passion and yearning to teach’. However, such passion, while infectious, is not in itself sufficient for the process of learning theology. Recent learning theory also suggests that teachers must learn about what students ‘know’ and then seek to apply what is discovered to improving teaching. This is especially so in the face of the changing character of our student population. Researchers and theorists also argue that a key aspect for quality student learning is student perception of the teaching environment. Let me illustrate.

In late 2007 and early 2008 I undertook a small research project with final year students at St Francis Theological College in Brisbane. Students were asked how they learn theology and the findings were compared with current learning theory arising out of the wider research into teaching and learning in higher education. The measure for the discussion about student learning in that study and in this paper also is that of a deep or holistic approach: ‘Good teaching implies engaging students in ways that are appropriate to the deployment of deep approaches.’ It is a general consensus within higher education that a deep approach to learning is desirable, and perhaps its key task.

The desired deep approaches to learning have been contrasted to surface approaches. Compared to surface approaches to learning where the emphasis is on gathering facts and information, memorisation and reproducing information, deep approaches to learning entail an orientation toward finding meaning and understanding in a way that opens windows through which the real world can be viewed. This is an engaged learning that requires motivation and personal involvement, relationships of mutuality and dialogue.

There are obvious implications here for teaching and for theological education more generally. Importantly, as contemporary learning research
has reminded us, student approaches to learning can be changed as a result of the teaching environment in which the student learns. Given the resources, skills and knowledge, and an appropriate relational learning environment, a well motivated student can strategise and utilise appropriate methods to achieve these aims. Therefore, our efforts as teachers to help 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. Deep approaches are then personally transforming.

This was born out in my own brief study of six final year students at St Francis Theological College. The interviews reflected changing conceptions about learning itself but also about the learning of theology in higher education. This was a pleasant surprise for many of them as most had come to the study of academic theology believing it to be abstract and difficult, and thought of it as primarily a matter of gaining information or skill at best, and at times marginal to the real world. Their conception of learning was weighted towards a surface approach for various reasons: either because of a particular conception of 'academic' learning as abstract and informational, but also because of previous learning experience and, for several, because of the pressure of study alongside work and family responsibilities.

Notably, as these students spoke about the learning through the course of their theology degree their comments reflected an increasing change both in their conception of theology and of the task of learning. The deployment of deep approaches and a corresponding valuing of the academic or cognitive aspect of learning, as well as the already valued and known conative (doing) and affective (feeling), was increasingly a matter of comment. Attitudes to scholarly theology therefore changed as they saw it as part of a whole that connected with their own world while opening windows from a larger frame, and so it became an experience of transcendence. The following is a snippet of what they had to say.

This academic stuff is absolutely vitally important... 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.

Narrative gives ... meaning to thoughts and feelings, the possibility of dialogue and reframing ... [15] connects things together ... being attentive to the wisdom when it comes from other people.

It has often been noted in research studies such as this that these conceptual changes do not occur as a result of the transference of concepts from teacher to student. Rather, change occurs as students actively work on and interact with their old ways of thinking in order to face and respond to what is new. Student engagement in the learning process was vital here, but it is the role of teacher as 'midwife' that is important here. At various levels, this process began as groundwork with the help of teachers and peers. For example, essay writing and research skills were taught but it was important, as students reported, that there was a very strong and clear sense that courses were well designed—that is they could be seen to be 'designs for learning' (a clear sense of constructive alignment of intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment).

My own research suggested, however, that changed conceptions toward deep approaches to learning were influenced most readily by the teaching environment in terms of an encouragement toward openness, dialogue and discussion with peers and teachers. Students reported that they increasingly became personally involved, and found pleasure and fulfiment in their approach to learning within a positive teaching climate as suggested. This is also supported by wider studies that also suggest that student perceptions of a good teaching environment especially influence students toward deep approaches. The learning environment is, for example, more important than prior academic learning or success.[16]

Learning is not an additive, incremental process. Rather, learning has more to do with qualitative conceptual change about reality and this takes time: 'time for contemplation, reflection, working things out, and discussion with others learning the same subject is thus not a luxury, but a necessity'[17] For deep approaches to learning to occur, the truth is that less is usually more. Learning requires more than content (the 'what') it entails a concern for the process by which learning happens (the 'how'). In other words, the outcomes of student learning are related to the approaches that they use. 'What students learn is associated with how they go about learning it'.
Clearly learning has many relational aspects to it. According to the final year students I interviewed, this relational learning climate was a key issue for deep approaches to the learning theology. They said:

... most of the lectures here would start or end with a meal at my place ... I have really learnt more over the dinner table in the last three years ...

I find that I learn it better face to face teaching, ... where you can ask questions, and talk through ideas ...

And my big learning in the last few years is the value of group work ... the possibility of dialogue and re-framing.

It’s being part of a thinking community not confined to the class room but these naturally overspill.

A key conclusion from my own study was that the tradition of the learning community—or a constructive relational teaching environment—is critical for the deployment of deep approaches to learning of theology. This is a key feature of this relational view of learning in which the relations between students, course requirements and the role of teachers as part of a whole teaching and learning environment are central to deep approaches to learning. But how does this perspective sit theologically? My own view is that deploying deep approaches to learning not only makes good theological sense, it is crucial for our Christian and ministry training. This observation deserves closer attention.

Theological Learning
Theology as a discipline has its creative tensions. On the one hand we encourage the learning of theology as a descriptive and normative activity that draws from the biblical narratives and from the tradition of the church. The challenge today is to ground students of theology in the biblical narrative, the tradition and the history of the church, given that such knowledge, understanding and formation is often missing. As the Yale theologian David Kelsey argues, theological education has an overarching purpose that is ‘to understand God more truly’. It entails learning to think about faith and what it means in a coherent, if not entirely complete way. However, the very nature of the subject matter of theology, God, is not yet fully revealed; theology is provisional in nature which suggests furthermore, that all people of faith are importantly part of this learning process. As Kelsey has written, ‘to understand’ is to engage as persons in community in God’s world, and in this way ‘to come to have certain conceptual capacities, habits, that is, dispositions and competencies to act, that enable us to apprehend God and refer all things including ourselves to God’. This aspect of theological learning is therefore something akin to ‘culturing’ or paideia, an educational process that enables the development of dispositions or habits within a community of faith that could trust enough to disagree, to have conflict.

On the other hand theology is learned through scholarly communities that develop capacities for critical distance in scholarship and teaching and that enter into conversation in and with the wider contexts or cultures where God is also to be found, though never fully so. Trinitarian faith is ever a reminder to us about God’s largeness, of God as the source and sustenance of all. This scholarly engagement with the wider context and culture, and so with other academic disciplines, is an important even critical aspect of theological learning because it engages us in real ways with God in the world. As noted with the students interviewed, scholarly engagement in its holistic sense was for them personally transforming.

Theological educators often balance a commitment to both these approaches. Pedagogical emphasis varies depending on the concerns and interests of those learning theology. As Kelsey and others suggest, theological education more generally entails a relation between the cultivation of dispositions and competencies on the one hand and academic disciplines such as research, on the other. Thus the learning of theology, as with all interpretations of the learner and learning ‘must be continuously grounded in and tightly tethered to the actual reality of human functioning’ As has often been argued, society, academy and church are important and critical partners. Theological learning has therefore been equated with wisdom ‘seeking wisdom in relation to questions, such as those of meaning, truth, beauty and practice,’ while also engaging with a range of academic disciplines.

While there is no privileged position for learners of theology, the learning of theology has a breadth of vision and commitment that has a theological shape. In this theological teaching and learning environment
The student becomes a certain kind of thinking, feeling, and acting being whose character is being formed in the 'image of God.' And as many of the New Testament parables tell us this image is characteristically an abundance that overflows the bounds of what has hitherto been customary in relationships, such learning is indeed transformational. The English theologian David Ford has argued that the willingness to think thoroughly, imaginatively and practically of God requires communities of learning and teaching, a process of openness to transformation by both teacher and student of theology as a 'self-involving' process. This self-involving process is one common to other disciplines in that it entails activities of attending, questioning, understanding, judging and making decisions that all move the student toward personal transformation.

The self-involving process in theological learning has a faithful and communal context. Within the theological education process, theologian and student enter a 'self-involving' journey of learning that has a trinitarian ring as I have already suggested above. Kierkegaard once suggested that 'in respect to God, the how is the what. He who does not involve himself with God in the mode of absolute devotion does not become involved with God.' This was an important aspect of learning that was recognised by the theological students I interviewed. It was named as part of their effort to engage in wider meaning, whether through pastoral relationship, peer discussions or in class, and it was for them personally transformative. This is because, as the Princeton theologian Ellen Chary has commented, theological learning is an encounter with a love that 'fuses us into the beauty, wisdom, and goodness of God.' Furthermore, by engaging us personally and socially theology can open the way for us to gain insight into love of self and neighbour, 'not with a twisted love, but a love shaped by a love of God in which we are made new and fresh and happy after being old and warn and miserable!' or so St Augustine says.

I am also aware that, as the American feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson reminds us, we can be altogether too sanguine about parallels between our description of God and human flourishing. An intelligent theology will therefore always seek to free our language and symbols of God from a literalness that will lead toward what Ford (drawing from Coleridge) calls a 'downward spiral of self-preoccupation.' Perhaps Karl Barth is correct at this point in his mistrust of any systematic impulse toward a dogmatic system that 'loses contact with the event'; the work and activity of God.

In terms of Christian theology it is arguable that a trinitarian and incarnational faith will not allow theology to be undertaken apart from the mesh of cultural, intellectual, and social ideas, practices and movements that make up the broader human picture of the search for meaning and truth. This points us toward that aspect of theology's creative tension into which we must walk with our students and which is perhaps most particularly the point at which transformative learning occurs. Theology is also 'world involving' precisely because it is 'God involving.' Thus we have Ford's suggestion also that it is God who does theology so that the most important question for the theologian—teacher and student—is 'how God's self-attestation is mediated, discerned and responded to.'

There is then a broader canvas suggested by the very nature of the generous and fecund Triune God. There is as 'simply no way of conducting theology above the grid of life itself,' as the theologian Ed Farley, formerly of Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, has suggested. Theology touches every aspect of Christian belief, attitudes and expression of life, and approaches to the learning of theology must therefore open the student to these new possibilities. This highlights the need for teachers of theology to deploy deep approaches to learning among our students as a lifelong comprehensive activity, approaches that seek to find meaning and understanding, that critically evaluate and relate learning to earlier experiences and to the world in which they live, and approaches that open windows in order to see the real world more clearly through relationships of mutuality and dialogue. Learning is an invitation to an intellectual, affective and practical or ethical engagement with the triune God. Theology invites all people of faith as students of theology to engage with the questions of meaning and the issues and concerns of women and men in their personal and social situations.

If learning theology is self, world and God involving, then perhaps the most important skill or practice or virtue we can impart to students to help them in the deployment of deep approaches to the learning of theology is attentiveness, that is, learning to be attentive to the Other. The French philosopher Simone Weil suggested that in the studying of languages what matters is not that we arrive at the right translation but that 'through making ourselves wholly available to something outside ourselves, we
honed our facility of attention, without which we can neither pray nor be present to those who suffer. This invites us toward an exploration of the virtue of humility both in relation to our very willingness to study theology and in the way we go about it. Learning theology, together with research and formation for Christian ministry and spirituality, cannot be an act of mastery but an engagement and imaginative encounter with grace, known and found in Christ and the Spirit, and so with our wider encounters with other disciplines and peoples. Perhaps this is what the American Trappist monk Thomas Merton had in mind when he wrote that:

Reading ought to be an act of homage to the God of all truth. We open our hearts to words that reflect the reality [God] has created or the greater reality which [God] is. It is also an act of humility and reverence towards other[s] who are the instruments by which God communicated ... truth to us.41

Prayerfulness as 'the beginning, accompaniment and end of theology' is for this reason important within the pedagogical process.42 This is perhaps especially so because, as Augustine reminds us, God is not always easily comprehended and human language is mostly inadequate for speaking about the mystery of God. It may be better at times for the theologian and student to remain respectfully silent.

Possible Implications for Theological Education

What questions might this whole discussion raise about theological education and what dispositions might we encourage in our teaching environments? Research into student-centred learning in higher education, and the tradition of theology itself, makes it apparent that there are very clear parallels with the ancient church’s practice of paideia, an educative practice that was ‘maitetetic’ (coming from the Greek word for midwifery) in shape and intent rather than dogmatic. In this way the ancient church sought to develop and foster among its membership an understanding and approach to life that was transformational and character forming: it brought to birth the 'image of God' in people.43 This is also the task of theological education today, and it is supported by contemporary learning theory and research.

More specifically, the findings about student learning suggest that attention to this teaching environment is crucial for theological education, as indeed, therefore, is the validation of the educational qualification of our teachers that we often lack. These are key components for our pedagogical practice as we seek to give birth to theological and life-long learners. But, as research into and theory about student approaches to learning in higher education tells us, this kind of learning community is also important for scholarly reasons. The loss of residential training colleges, the growing propensity for part-time study and the demands of work and home life are not favourable for the deployment of deep approaches to the learning of theology. Indeed they may be counterproductive for a future viable church.

As I have argued these are matters that are also important theologically. If theology is ‘God involving’ then it is also ‘world involving’ in ways that prevent not only the ‘downward spiral of self preoccupation’ but ecclesial practices that become myopic and destructively ideological. That theological education today has increasing university connections augurs well for the church in this regard. While churches may form cohesive principles, norms and mores, a trinitarian theological perspective evokes an ethic that draws us to attend to the ‘other’, that is, an ethic of solidarity and difference in order to look critically at social systems including ecclesial systems in order to contribute toward human social wellbeing and responsibility.

For the training of church leaders, including clergy, this suggests that the relational learning environment needs to include intentional learning experience beyond the borders of the church. Work-integrated learning, for example, could figure more prominently in theological education. The presence of lay who are not training for ordination within formation programs will also be important in the light of the fact that theology is a matter for the people of God as a whole and that learning is also interpretative and contextual.

In general, teachers of theology will need to attend to the underlying pedagogical principles of student-centred learning. Learning, like theology, is an inherently relational matter. Both are concerned with the process (the 'how') and with the outcome and content (the 'what'). Students (or disciples) cannot be taught as entities separate from the subject matter or teaching context or environment. Expanding our theological conceptions—our views of God—requires a certain kind of thinking process that
involves finding connections between knowledge already known and that which is new, by facing discrepancies and taking time to think and explore within an appropriate, 'maxiastic', relational teaching environment that is open and dialogical in intent.6

Knowledge about student approaches to learning is vitally important for teachers of theology, and no less so when faith is part of the equation. For students of Christian theology it will be their approach to learning that will help them take into account that which is new and has not been known. For Christian theology it is the new—the Resurrection—that is the fulfilling presence and activity of God in our midst. Being aware of student approaches to learning is therefore our vital calling as theological educators and presses us more definitely toward proper educational qualification. As the English theologian Daniel Hardy presciently noted, the way we engage in discussions and disputes about theological matters is itself theological and we are morally and theological responsible for the future of theology in what we do. The language and approaches used for the teaching and learning of theology should be redemptive and not determined by a source ‘from above’ but as an address to others from below. The language of theology is ‘the means by which [we] are met, responded to, bonded to and raised to truth.’7

Notes

1. See the Journal of Anglican Studies 6, no. 9, 2008.
2. This summary was noted by principals of theological colleges at the ANZATS Principals Conference 2004 as described by the key note speaker: Daniel Alabaster, ‘Empowering Leadership: ANZATS Principals Conference July 2004’, Brisbane, 2004.
3. Frances Young, ‘Fideitas - What Can We Learn from the First Four Centuries?’, in Essentials of Christian Community, David T. Ford and Daniel L. Stamps (eds), T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996, p. 190.
6. For the full study see my article, Don Saine, ‘How Do Students Learn Theology?’, Teaching Theology and Religion 11, no. 4, 2004.
15. Saine, ‘How Do Students Learn Theology?’
18. See also Daniel W. Hardy, God’s Ways with the World: Thinking and Practicing Christian Ethics, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996, p. 64.
Theology and the Church’s Challenges in Australia and the Pacific

Stuart Brooking

It is difficult not to be struck by the number of new books appearing in bookshops which attempt to predict the more likely political and economic trends over the next century. In this article I want to offer my predictions for the church and its mission—a task that is both pretentiously naïve and potentially inspiring. But from my position as the head of an overseas mission support agency, I can see the enormous potential of a theological, missiological and practical dialogue that attempts to anticipate the main challenges for the Christian community over ‘the next century’. Such a dialogue will encourage younger leaders to put their hand to the plough, embracing the unique tasks that God has set before them. A longer-term view will also help established leaders to clarify their objectives over the next few decades and will assist experienced leaders to inspire those who will eventually take their place.

The challenges facing the Church continue to change. Last century we discussed global warming and its potential effects of human civilisation.

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