A REPORT ON PEDAGOGY AND CURRICULUM IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

for Reimagining Theological Education, an initiative of Convergence Network, 2016

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The Reimagining Theological Education initiative formed four working groups, each to address a particular question. The *Pedagogy Working Group* was charged with the following question:

What are the best practices in teaching and learning that can be applied to theological education?

This question is driven by the reality that the instructional methods and curriculum models of our traditional theological education systems were set up to meet the needs of a ministry context of a different time. The ministry field is experiencing a rapid change, magnified due to the shifting landscape of religion in America and the evolution of technology. In order to stay relevant, theological educators must not only reassess what is taught but also reconsider how they are teaching it.

The traditional model of pastoral training requires students to take a series of classes in history, tradition, and pastoral skills. The primary mode of teaching in these classes is often auditory lecture, the primary mode of learning is listening and reading,

and the primary mode of assessment is writing papers. Near the completion of these classes, students are deemed "prepared" to advance to a placement in "field education" or "contextual studies" where they supposedly put all this good classroom learning to use. This traditional model, however, isn't consistent with current best practices in education.

Additionally, too often the competencies expected for successful program completion are generated from a professional class of seminary professors who—for the most part—teach as though their students will be joining their own professional class rather than another. This creates a divide between what is expected from learners when they are students and what is required of them when they actually enter the ministry field. For example, seminary students write lengthy papers for the classroom but have to write and create multimedia components, short blogposts, or even shorter tweets, for their work in the field. In the best-practice scenario, it is the ministry setting which shapes the competencies needed to develop insightful, creative, and innovative ministry leaders into the future. The needs of the field should be central and form the students' program.

But there is hope! If one looks at theological education outside and at the margins of the traditional seminary system, one can find innovative education happening. Because the ministry field is shifting dramatically and because the current seminary system is not changing rapidly enough, the demands of the field are inspiring innovators across the country to create programs outside the seminary system which meet the needs of the field. Whether these new programs are using the best practices in pedagogy is arguable. Some are, but most are "making it up as they go." Regardless,

relevancy is the key distinctions between the innovative programs developed to meet the needs of a field and the existing seminary system, and this relevancy can guide best pedagogical practices. Supporting these new programs and allowing for sharing of best pedagogical practices can increase the strength of these programs and help them grow and become sustainable.

Purpose Statement: Given that existing systems for theological education need updated models of teaching and learning and given that innovative programs outside and at the margins of the seminary system can be supported by sharing best practices, our work group developed a list of values and components that are important to any new system that intends to deliver theological education. These values and components can be applied across new innovative programs.

Methodology for Generating Our Recommendations

We employed several techniques for generating the list of pedagogical values and components we deemed important to new systems of delivering theological education. This section reviews our research sources.

1. **Team member discussions**. The team members of the work group participated in four video conferences bringing their diverse knowledge the question.

2. **Consultant meetings**. The team invited two consultants into additional discussions: Christian Scharen from Auburn addressed issues around contextual education, and Christine Wenderoth from Lutheran School of Theology and McCormick addressed information literacy.

3. **One-on-one interviews**. Kelly Lamon, team convener, conducted individual interviews: Christian Scharen furthered detailed the professional formation of pastoral imagination. Additionally, Kelly has had ongoing conversations with Steve Newcom from the Kaleo Center at United of the Twin Cities, through a consultative relationship to discuss public ministry as a pastoral skill and evaluation of skills.

4. **Pedagogy white paper**. Education—as an academic discipline—researches, publishes, and teaches best pedagogical approaches. Yet the education field is often ignored by theological education, even though it is rich with guidance when one takes a cross-disciplinary approach. Kelly had previously outlined the best ideas from the education field and how they apply to theological education at the RTE white paper presentations in March of 2015. This white paper acted as a reference for this working group.

5. **Additional Research.** We researched the following documents and organizations.

   a. Competency-based education

   CAEL Forum and News, 2013

   Lumina Connecting Credentials

   b. Contextual Education

   Learning Pastoral Imagination, Auburn Study, 2015

   Cultivating Professional Practices: Field Education, a chapter from

   Educating Clergy, 2005.

   c. Assessment

[UCC Marks of Assessment](#)

UW-Stout SPSY Program Field Experience Assessments

Outcomes and Conclusions

The pedagogy work group developed a list of values and components that are important to any new system that intends to deliver theological education. These values and components can be applied across traditional programs and new innovative programs.

1. Value: Theological education should be **formative or developmental in nature**, assuming that professional formation is a personal **process**. Students will come to a program with varied skills and knowledge, looking different from each other. And because students will be seeking varied experiences and knowledge, they will leave looking differently from each other *and* from what they looked like when they came in. Going from where one starts to where one ends takes time and practice. The following components enhance the formative nature of a program.

   a. **The learner and a mentor/advisor should have ongoing relationship**. In the best scenario, mentors have training, are diverse, and represent students' social contexts.

   b. **Pre-assessment process** (similar to Prior Learning Assessment from Competency-Based Ed) **and Learning Plan** (similar to Individual Learning Plan—ILP) are completed between a mentor/advisor and learner upon entrance to program. If the student is in a ministry setting/context, a

representative from the setting also can be involved. Two Purposes: 1) To assess prior skills, knowledge, strengths of learner. 2) to develop a Learning Plan that determines areas of focus, competencies, and "stackables." The learning plans should be personalized based on students' vocational goals and needs of ministry setting.

c. The learner, mentor, and possible site representative convene for incremental reviews to assess the learning plan and development of competencies. Christian Scharen refers to assessment reviews as **accountability moments**. If a cohort exists, cohort members can also play a role by acting as a sounding board for these moments.

d. **Evaluation** should be developmental in nature. Students who are still acquiring basic skills should not be evaluated by the same measures as students who are expanding practiced skills. Examples: 1) skill acquisition, skill improvement, skill maintenance, skill expansion. 2) Observer, novice, practitioner, expert. In competency-based education, valid assessment of behavioral skills/traits becomes paramount—that is what the degree/credential/certificate is based on. Measures that can provide evidence of professional growth/formation would be developed. For example, currently Steve Newcom (Kaleo Center) is developing rubrics which measure skill competencies for public ministry.

Analogy: The traditional model was the factory model. Students come in and jump on a conveyer belt. They are shaped by the curriculum and essential come out looking pretty similar in knowledge and skills.

The approach we suggest is more like working with playdough. On the front end, the mentor and learner examine the learner's current skill set and determine what playdough tools are best to get the learner the skills he/she wishes to possess. The students each come out looking different from each other in knowledge and skills because they have self-selected different tools.

2. Value: The relational elements of a **community/peer cohort** exponentially increase learning and learner satisfaction. Innovative programs harness the power of relationship for learning.

   a. **Cohorts take many forms**. Sometimes they are attached to classes, or sometimes they are formed at the start of a program and stay consistent to completion. In a model where individual learning plans are used, the cohort won't necessarily be attached to classes or run for a designated amount of time. They might operate like a revolving door, but they still exist to provide support, spiritual nurturing, and a sounding board for accountability moments and theological reflection. In the best practice scenario, peer learning is an embedded instructional method. Peers know each other best and can act as challenging teachers by pointing out any hypocrisy or futility in what is being learned. Peers can sniff out the compromises and contradictions (intellectual and practical) being made and also may see opportunities being missed.

b. Cohorts should have **guidance on relational expectations and norms**. They might get this guidance from a teacher mentor who participates in the cohort.

3. Value: A **classroom-lab model of teaching and learning** should be assumed. The most productive learning happens when field education and the classroom experience (whether online or face-to-face) exist together as complementary partners. Because all learning is contextual learning, a classroom-lab connection gives opportunity for what Barbara Blodgett refers to as "sticky moments"— moments where learning sets in because of crisis or clarity when something is acted and reflected upon. In the field of education, this is called experiential learning—a cycle of thinking and doing that exist together.

   a. The **field setting should act as a lab** for professional formation, innovation, and experimentation. Students learn content and skills, practice them immediately, reflect on their effectiveness, and adjust as necessary. This requires lab/application components to be embedded into each "class," so that knowledge and action exist together in everything. Barbara describes this as going beyond "contextual studies tourism."

   b. The **field setting is also a knowledge generator**. For example, a theology professor might think that a prison ministry necessarily teaches the theological concepts of forgiveness and redemption, but a prison chaplain and prisoners themselves will tell you that the theological concepts being dealt with in a prison are suffering, discrimination, marginalization, abuse and

trauma, etc. The prisoners hold the wisdom. The prison is a laboratory where ideas are tested *and* is also trusted as an active site of knowledge production (in this example, teaching what crime and incarceration are really all about).

c. Some students will enter programs with an existing **site/job** which can act as the lab/incubator; others will need support in finding the labs/incubators. All students should be in a practical site in this model.

Analogy: The interaction of thinking (learning content) and doing (practicing skills) is like swing dance. The two partners—theory and action—twist and turn around each other, over and over. One dancer doesn't sit out watching his partner dance while he patiently waits his turn for the next song.


Field/contextual education should not sit on the sideline while content/classroom learning is dancing, and content/classroom learning shouldn't sit out while field education is dancing. Instead, the two dancers must move together. Thinking and doing exist in the same space; if they are to form the dance, a way of being, they must complement each other. This is the foundation of experiential learning.

4. Value: **Course delivery should offer flexibility and meet the needs of varied students**, not just those who can commit to a residential, 2-semester, full-time student lifestyle. Examples of frameworks for delivery are below:

a. Online, hybrid, F2F

b. Asynchronous and synchronous

c. Self-paced

d. Menus and self-selection

e. Learning on Demand and Just in Time Learning

5. Value: **Content/curriculum** is managed through the individual programs and **meets the professional goals** of the specific students at those sites. Standardization of ministry content isn't necessary, because the context drives the curriculum. With that said, credentialing systems by nature require a certain amount of standardization. So if this actually moves into a credentialing system, quality control standards will be inherent. **The curriculum standardization, however, should be developed out of the organizations/programs that are opting into the network and focused on the values they deem important.**

6. Value: **Theological reflection is embedded** into the curriculum and contextual study, instead of standing alone as its own discipline.

   a. **Practical theology** offers a theological approach that is applied within a contextual ministry settings. Laurie Green, in his book *Let's Do Theology,* describes the "Doing Theology Spiral." He emphasizes that theology is more than thinking; it's doing.
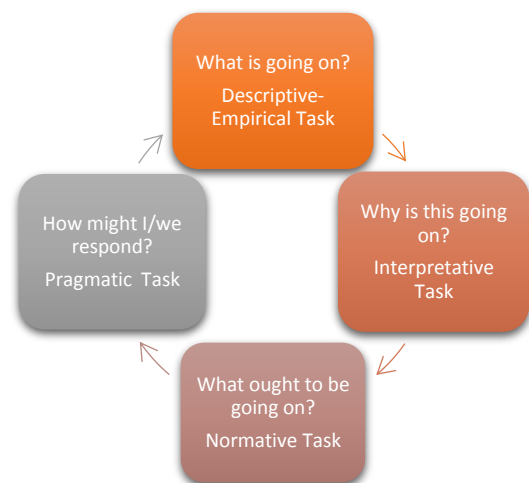
[Richard Osmer](#) describes the "core tasks of practical theological interpretation" as a cycle (to the right).

b. Theological reflection is both **descriptive and interpretive**. Brian Bantum suggests the work requires answering and asking questions: How does this experience inform my perception of God? Myself? My relation to the world? Brian also suggest**s naming formation as theological reflection** by examining, understanding, and naming all that impacts one's formation. How do I understand myself in the world? How do I identify and assert my belonging? How do I understand my call? What cultural and societal elements impact how I understand myself?

c. **Biblical studies, heritage, and history should be theological reflection tools for active ministry, not academic disciples.** When it comes to tradition and history, Christian Scharen asserts students can be taught how to "learn what they need to know when they need to know it" instead of teaching "what they need to know." In this model, the learning method is the emphasis instead of the content. Kelly has called this "imprinting the learning process into the student's practice."

Future Direction

When our working group started analyzing our question—*what are the best practices in teaching and learning that can be applied to theological education?*—we operated from a constructive framework. We simply didn't want to research what other programs were doing, but instead we assumed we could create our own program and incorporate the pedagogical elements we deemed best practice. As the process

progressed, the program-creation model evolved into the model of a network of innovative theological education programs (versus a standalone program). In this network model, the pedagogy work became more consultative in nature. We found ourselves asking two questions: What pedagogical elements would be required for a program to enter the new credentialing network? And what consulting services would the network need in the area of pedagogy? Most recently though, as the model has evolved again into a "trade association" model, the pedagogical work becomes about resourcing.

One function of a trade association is to share best practices in the network in order to strengthen the individual participants (in this case, TE programs). Instead of a top down approach, the organizers of the network can facilitate the sharing of curriculum and instructional strategies that are working. Our working group is advocating for consulting services in pedagogy, and within this trade association model, pedagogy consulting services might have a role, as the association offers support to its members. Additionally, the association can also highlight strong pedagogical practices from the members through conferences and other communication avenues (articles, social media, etc.).

If the network/association launches and moves towards creating a credentialing system, quality standards will have to be negotiated. If the network deems it necessary, one type of standardization could revolve around a commitment to certain pedagogical elements. Choosing these standards would be a dialogical process between members to ensure that relevancy for the whole network.

Finally, because the working groups are now advocating a trade association network, strong listening and facilitation skills will be needed to guide the formation of the organization. Participants will need to determine what shared values are necessary and what practical needs can be filled by commitment to a network. In a sense, this facilitation is largely a pedagogical effort—supporting a group of participants as they move from point A to point B, generating trust between them, and creating the conditions for openness. This effort will require many of the gifts of good pedagogy, as identified and explored by this Pedagogy and Curriculum Working Group.