

# Toward a Learning Century for Theological Education

by Linda Cannell

## Abstract

Discussion of implications of the gradual, shifting focus in theological schooling from instruction to learning. The role of the teacher is being recast as that of shaping tasks to compel a search for knowledge, developing capacities such as judgment and evaluation, and encouraging skills of lifelong learning. A mere presentation of information does not equal learning and is insufficient for today's learners who need to grasp the meaning and application of knowledge. The use of disciplines as the sole organizing principle for the curriculum is being questioned, and assessment for learning is slowly replacing conventional and sometimes unjust methods of testing. Similarly, the tendency to equate particular methods with good teaching is giving way to efforts to foster a learning culture.<sup>1</sup>

## Learning—A Holistic Process of Development

For some years, the literature on educational renewal has described a still gradual shift from instruction to learning. The fears that this shift will undermine the importance of the teacher are abating in recognition of the fact that the role of the teacher becomes even more critical in fostering learning communities.<sup>2</sup> In an era where the flood of information threatens to overwhelm us all, teachers have particular responsibility to discern when a careful structure of ideas and argument is needed to guide a community of learners responsibly through a body of knowledge or a problem. As an experienced learner, the teacher models the art of questioning and interactive dialogue, articulates values and behaviors that sustain the learning community, and guides students in the use of group resources. Teachers help students gain practice in identifying and defining problems, making judgments about their importance, and conveying their judgments with clarity. Teachers help students to present arguments and ideas with a sense of style, helping them to communicate with grace, confidence, and humility. Teachers encourage tolerance of the complex and ambiguous, the validity of seemingly contradictory positions on the same issue, and humility before the reality that we cannot know most things with certainty. Teachers champion diversity. Teachers discourage the tendency to reduce the world and ideas to simple categories; they challenge simplistic responses and seek to awaken a critical and discerning outlook. Teachers introduce students to the aesthetic dimensions of knowing, stimulating a sense of wonder. Teachers encourage personal reflection and reflection on the example of others, contemporary and historical, who demonstrate what is most valued.

### *Learning as a Multidimensional Process*

David Kolb<sup>3</sup> suggested that learning consists of two major processes: (1) the various ways learners receive information and store it and (2) the various ways adult learners process knowledge and make it available for use. These two processes require teachers who have well-developed questioning technique,<sup>4</sup> proficiency in guiding dialogue, capacity to discern the relationship of present experience

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<sup>1</sup> Updated and used with permission: Linda M. Cannell. Toward a Learning Century for Theological Education. *Common Ground Journal*. v11 n2 (Spring 2014): 34-44. [www.commongroundjournal.org](http://www.commongroundjournal.org)

<sup>2</sup> For example, a recent stress in the literature on online learning is that the presence (and engagement) of the teacher/facilitator/scholar is essential in online interactions.

<sup>3</sup> David Kolb. *Experiential Learning*. (New York, NY: Prentice-Hall, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> The importance of the question in shaping thoughts, attitudes, and behavior is often unrecognized by teachers who are preoccupied with their content and delivery. Predictable, thoughtless questions create an “answering pedagogy;”

to previous knowledge, the ability to fashion a conceptual framework to guide thought, and the wisdom needed to help learners examine their values and presuppositions. Once theological educators overcome the debilitating stereotypes of “education is just about methods” and that experiential and problem-based learning are simply the “sharing of ignorance,” the real work in theological *education* (or theological learning) can begin.

### *Developing a Wider View of Cognition*

Many of the instructional practices of conventional theological education are predicated on the assumption that learning is purely a mental activity. Reason is exalted, affect is suspect, and skills and application belong to something less than real school.

Most seminary faculty want their students to develop the capacity to think, to deal with concepts, to communicate ideas and beliefs to others. They are concerned that students demonstrate a vibrant spirituality, a humane regard of others, and godly leadership. However, to manage the academic structures we have created, we have presumed these capacities to be separable and assigned them to different departments for treatment and/or development. In the academy the capacities tend to be ranked, consciously or unconsciously, in order of importance or status. The rituals of the academy demonstrate this ranking and reinforce it. Further, even though most seminary faculty would admit that life and ministry are not predictable or easily managed by rules and formulas, school culture and expectations generally support the quest for certainty. Unfortunately, these assumptions and practices do not transfer well to life and ministry.

In the 1960s, curriculum reform presumed that each discipline had a unique conceptual structure. In order to understand the discipline, one had to understand the structure. Since the structures were unique, it followed that each discipline was described in their respective sections in the school catalogue and presented in independent, non-integrated courses. In recent years, concern about integration of students’ study and vocational experience has led to the notion that knowledge and practice would be enriched, and transferability of principles and practices strengthened, if students could see relationships among the disciplines.

### *Rethinking the Structure of the Disciplines*

Increasingly, the concept of curriculum design as a linear, scientific process is giving way to more fluid and integrative concepts of curriculum development. Similarly, the conventional organization of disciplines whose subject matter is dispensed in independent classes structured by time and architecture is no longer the only acceptable approach to curriculum design and educational strategy.

In the conventional theological curriculum it is presumed that the disciplines are at the heart of the curriculum. The common definition of a discipline is that it has its own literature, its own questions, and a particular subject matter. However, in reality, most disciplines are shaped by other disciplines and are in their very DNA interdisciplinary. A specialist or scholar is one who is conversant with a particular discipline or specialty. However, we respect scholars who are able to make connections across several fields of study because their insights inform issues and practice in significant ways.

Given that disciplines are naturally interconnected, why do we persist in isolating them from one

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skillful questioning motivates investigation. Good questions stimulate learners to find connections and to probe their assumptions. A teacher skilled in questioning technique will nurture communities of discourse. Skillful questioning is hard work!

another in schools? In 1998, Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence argued that “permanent departmental structures need to give way to learning teams of scholars, brought together by common interests and working with students as partners and aides.”<sup>5</sup> Since their assertion, efforts to change conventional departmentalization in the academy have increased. In one sense, the structuring of separate disciplines could be seen as a beneficial development that served to strengthen scholarship and understanding. But it is not necessary to use the disciplines as the structure for departments and faculty classifications. For example, why should specialization in a discipline automatically translate into a corresponding department, a category in the theological curriculum, and a way of teaching? Imagine an alternative construction where faculty with hard-won specialized knowledge could bring their individual *and collective* insight to bear on persisting problems, seminal ideas, conflicting perspectives, and urgent tasks. *Imagine an administrative organization that expedites (and provides funding for) the gathering of faculty with particular specializations for scholarly dialogue and professional enrichment; and that accommodates interdisciplinary interaction and planning in order to serve their obligations to promote learning.*

In reality, disciplinary boundaries make sense only to schools. Silos, or separated disciplines and departments, promote a form of introspection that does not serve church and society well.<sup>6</sup>

What the field areas have become, recent authors have pointed out, are loose political confederacies among scholars who share a training in the same professional academic disciplines . . . and share loyalties to the same professional academic guilds. The writing and discussion in this decade has raised forceful questions about whether these academic disciplines and guilds should continue to determine the structure of theological education.<sup>7</sup>

The real challenge is to enable *holistic learning toward informed wisdom*. Such learning is accomplished only in conversation among knowledge areas and in the commitment to virtue and service. Is combining or integrating disciplines the way forward in the renewal of the theological curriculum? Certainly the proximity of disciplines—or of faculty from different disciplines—is no guarantee that integration is occurring. Still, since no one discipline has a monopoly on truth, some form of interdependence among fields of knowledge is desirable.

Clearly, the fragmentation of disciplines is problematic. Those who advocate integration, or interdisciplinary education, often assume that integration is accomplished simply through some form of team teaching. Though the idea of team teaching is valid and in some cases is practiced effectively, the customary classroom patterns of the disciplines persists—even though the problems that affect humankind do not easily fit these patterns. It may be necessary to ground interdisciplinary experiences in something other than the subject matter of the disciplines as we know them. In other words, the way forward may not be to attempt to integrate fields of knowledge or to have faculty members from different divisions in the same classroom speaking about their respective subject matter. It may be necessary to establish the curriculum on a different footing altogether. For example, if the curriculum were organized around congregational practices,<sup>8</sup> or societal challenges,

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel James Rowley, Herman D. Lujan, and Michael G. Dolence. 1998. *Strategic Choices for the Academy: How Demand for Lifelong Learning Will Re-create Higher Education*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 181

<sup>6</sup> Calvin Chong. 2003. From Archaeology to Architecture: Exploring Systemic Structure Reforms for Theological Institutions Situated in Re-made, Post-conservative Singapore. Manuscript, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> David Kelsey and Barbara Wheeler. The ATS Basic Issues Research Project: Thinking about Theological Education. (*Theological Education* 30, no. 2: 71–80), p. 79.

<sup>8</sup> Craig Dykstra has offered his judgment about the more significant practices of congregations or communities of faith. He stresses the importance of involvement in these practices and growing in understanding of what they mean,

or multi-layered knowledge areas, the faculty who inquire into particular specializations would together become resources for learners who are working intensively with issues, problems, and well-considered tasks that constitute the curriculum. Oon-Seng Tan, among others, asserts that the challenge of the twenty-first century is to develop a curriculum design conversant with real-world problems and structured to foster creativity and lifelong learning.<sup>9</sup>

However, the integration of disciplines is difficult to manage—especially in theological schools where one’s structure of belief may elevate one’s discipline to the status of Truth. Integrative models may be undone by the strong tendency of each department to establish a singular identity in relation to other departments; and the powerful individualism of faculty and subtle competitiveness among departments can politicize the effort to such an extent that integration at any level will require an almost superhuman effort.

Faculty tend to think that their material must be organized, packaged, and delivered in ways consistent with their own schooling. When faculty reflect on their own learning processes *since* their last degree, however, they often realize that their own growing mastery of the subject is due to richer and far more diverse learning experiences than those that were required in their degree programs. Perhaps new groupings of scholars in newly constituted disciplinary structures are needed—oriented not around some notion of integrating disciplines but around enabling disciplines to work together in relation to the larger responsibilities of theology and ministry.

### **Reconceiving Practice to Put Theory in Proper Perspective**

Someone once said that we define ourselves not by how much we know but by our commitments—our responsible service. If the Hebraic notion of knowledge as embodying responsible action is accepted, the notion of knowledge as power or control is indefensible and any faith in pure rationalism must be challenged. If we accept that cognition is more than the functions of a disembodied mind that operates by reason alone, and if we accept that responsible service is not optional, the next task is to deal with the theory-practice dichotomy in the theological curriculum. Though the notion of service within learning has an ancient pedigree and was grounded for most of history in knowledge, many theological educators tend to equate service with functions or skills. The present dichotomy derives from the assumptions that theories and practices are separable, that they can be assigned to different departments (which are often in isolation from one another), that theory relates to real scholarship, and that practices are simply skills.

Almost every major book or article on the topic of renewal in theological education mentions the problem of a theory-practice dichotomy. In most cases, theory and practice are assumed to be two different things existing in linear relationship: theory is ordered knowledge, practices are skills or activities. Theory can remain aloof from practice. Practice is informed by theory, if not controlled by it. Practice does not inform theory much less control it. The assumption that the theoretical disciplines can stand alone without some interaction with the applied disciplines has gone largely unquestioned.

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and he says that growth in faith (belief and the nature of one’s spiritual journey) is fostered as participation in the practices becomes more complex and varied. See below, “Congregational Practices and Theological Education.”

<sup>9</sup> Oon-Seng Tan. *Problem-Based Learning Innovation: Using Problems to Power Learning in the Twenty-first Century*. (Singapore: Thomson Learning, 2003).

Admittedly, most seminary faculty want their subject matter to be relevant, and most do what they can to help students apply knowledge to life and ministry. However, the structures and reward systems of higher education, focused as they are on research and presentation rather than on learning and service, tend to reinforce unhelpful assumptions about the nature of knowledge, who owns it, how it is communicated and structured, what is assessed, and the relation of knowledge to practice. And the power of the educational *system* being what it is, productive innovation in teaching, learning, and the creation of appropriate partnerships focused on the development of leaders is almost impossible. Too often, faculty and administrators responsible for academic development gradually quit trying and conform to the demands of the system—after all one has to eat.

### ***Perspectives on the Theory and Practice Relation***

The now extensive literature critiquing theological education includes much attention to the matter of practices. Efforts to reconceive the theory-practice relation almost always include a prior effort to redefine the meaning of practices. The effort is problematic because no matter how strong the stress that practices are not synonymous with functions or skills, and in spite of efforts to break down longstanding separations between practical and theoretical departments, faculty will hear the word *practices* and think “practical” or “functional.”

The vital consideration is that Scripture reveals practices that are mandated by God for Christian development and service. If the life and behavior of the people of God are to be marked by these practices, habits of reflection and growth in understanding (wisdom) are necessary. Christians have long believed that the knowledge of God is mediated by the Holy Spirit and nurtured by a lifetime of spiritual discipline. Most Christians also believe that knowledge derived from human thought and research is valid. However, when human knowledge became a thing in itself and was relegated to school curricula, and when spiritual knowledge was either rejected as suspect or subordinated to propositional knowledge, the holism of spiritual knowledge, reflective human thought, and responsible service was undone.

Craig Dykstra suggests that if practices are understood as cooperative human activities socially established over time, then theological study can be the study of how practices have been created and how they permeate theology and church life. Some disciplines study the history of practices; others examine their inner rationality and truth; others encourage and evaluate students’ participation in practices.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and revisiting Aristotle’s view of the interconnectedness of understanding and practice, Donald Browning adds: “Rather than application to practice being an act that follows understanding, concern with practice, in subtle ways we often overlook, guides the hermeneutic process from the beginning.”<sup>11</sup> Is practice, then, preeminent? This question is not helpful because it exacerbates an already problematic polarization. A more helpful direction is to envision a holistic view of theory and practice—a view that blurs their distinctions to the point that they cannot be separated without mutual damage.

### ***Toward a Reconceptualization of Theory and Practice***

Proposing that processes of vision and discernment should replace the theory-practice dichotomy,

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<sup>10</sup> See Craig Dykstra. *Reconceiving Practice*. In *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education*, ed. Barbara Wheeler and Edward Farley. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Donald Browning. *Toward a Fundamental and Strategic Practical Theology*. In *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education*, ed. Barbara Wheeler and Edward Farley. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), p. 299.

Charles Wood maintains that the goal of theological education is theological judgment, which is in turn the product of theological inquiry.<sup>12</sup> When Wood’s and David Kelsey’s views are compared, a subtle distinction emerges that is no doubt representative of broader perspectives in the field. Kelsey asserts that theology is important for practice but that it is also necessary to see how the practice of Christian communities informs theology.<sup>13</sup> Dykstra, too, is committed to the importance of the community in shaping theology, where the perspectives necessary for this task are derived from history and tradition. In his view, the theory-practice relation is inadequate for this task, because “theology and theological education are burdened by a picture of practice that is harmfully individualistic, technological, ahistorical, and abstract.”<sup>14</sup> Theological education tends to define practice as the work of an individual doing something to others or for the sake of others. Dykstra’s corrective is not to deny that practice can be done by an individual but rather that “one person’s action becomes practice only insofar as it is participation in the larger practice of a community and a tradition.”<sup>15</sup> He describes practice as cooperative: it involves people doing things *with* each other. Practice is “participation in a cooperatively formed pattern of activity that emerges out of a complex tradition of interactions among many people over a long period of time.”<sup>16</sup> Practices are learned in the context of a community conscious of tradition, history, and identity. And it is at this point that a more productive understanding of practice begins to emerge.

Arguing that the “Berlin” model develops “not the person as an agent in a shared public world” but forms reason through the acquisition of information from the disciplines (i.e., courses of study), Kelsey counters that the purpose of a theological school is to understand God truly. This understanding is “to come to have certain conceptual capacities . . . that is, dispositions and competencies to *act*, that enable us to apprehend God and refer all things including ourselves to God.”<sup>17</sup> He identifies three senses of understanding God—contemplative understanding, discursive understanding, and affective judgment—and allows for a fourth: understanding in and through action.<sup>18</sup> “To grow in understanding something is to grow in a set of abilities in relation to what is being understood. *The growth comes through our engagement over a period of time in certain relevant practices.*”<sup>19</sup> Reasoning that practices are understood most clearly in relation to congregations, he takes the final step and asserts that because God cannot be understood directly, understanding of God “is accomplished from the vantage point of questions about congregations.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***Congregational Practices and Theological Education***

Practices are inherent in beliefs and vice versa, they are inherent in one’s spiritual journey toward knowing God, and they are congregational practices. It would seem that the congregational context—the communal nature of practices—is most significant. What are these congregational practices that are linked to belief and spirituality? Dykstra has offered his judgment about the more significant practices of the community of faith:

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Wood. *Vision and Discernment*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 34

<sup>13</sup> David Kelsey. *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 202-220.

<sup>14</sup> Dykstra, *Reconceiving Practice*, 1991, p. 35

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43

<sup>17</sup> David Kelsey. *To Understand God Truly: What’s Theological about a Theological School?* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), p. 228, emphasis in text.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.126, emphasis added

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131

(1) telling the Christian story to one another; (2) interpreting together the meaning of that story for our life in the world; (3) worshiping God together: praising God and giving thanks for God's redemptive work in the world and for our lives together; (4) praying together; (5) listening and talking attentively to one another; (6) confessing to one another, and forgiving and reconciling with one another; (7) tolerating one another's failures and encouraging one another; (8) giving one another away, letting go of one another, freeing each other for the work each must do and the life each must live; (9) performing faithful acts of service and witness; (10) suffering for and with other people; (11) providing hospitality and care, not only to one another but also (perhaps especially) to strangers; and (12) criticizing and resisting all those powers and patterns (both within the church and in the world as a whole) which destroy human beings and corrode human community.<sup>21</sup>

Kelsey shifts the focus to the responsibility of theological education, stressing that if theological schooling is irrevocably linked to the articulation and outworking of the practices of congregations, then the disciplines that inform learning experiences will be "mandated by the sorts of interests we have in congregations."<sup>22</sup> He suggests that among these disciplines are those of the intellectual historian and textual critic ("to grasp what the congregation says it is responding *to* in its worship and why"), the cultural anthropologist, ethnographer, and philosopher ("to grasp how the congregation shapes its social space by its uses of scripture, by its uses of traditions of worship and patterns of education and mutual nurture, and by the 'logic' of its discourse"), and the sociologist and social historian ("to grasp how the congregation's location in its host society and culture helps shape concretely its distinctive construal of the Christian thing").<sup>23</sup>

Tasks appropriate to theological education, then, are to uphold the character of congregational practices, to examine them against the long history of the church, and to situate them in societies and cultures. Orienting theological education to the practices of congregations would seem more defensible than orienting it to some grand intellectual project. When we identify the practices of congregations with the theological quest to know God truly, matters of faith (theory) and practices are seen as one whole; both theology and the social sciences are mandated; inconsistency between belief and behavior is addressed in a prophetic voice; and concerns about organizational patterns and leadership style are not permitted to devolve to a pragmatic concern for what works.

### ***Toward Praxis in Theological Education***

In his day, Friedrich Schleiermacher's idea to orient the project of theology around church leadership and to orient the curriculum first around a notion of holism (expressed philosophically) and then around matters related to the development of the ministerial profession (as he understood it) was probably a good idea. However, the context of German academia could not support the development and refinement of his proposal. When the more visible and easily attainable elements of his approach made their way to North America, the potential for a praxis-based professional development dissipated into training for functional activities, and holism was lost in curricular compartmentalization.

In the early 1800s, the fourfold curriculum consisted essentially of biblical studies, theological studies, historical studies, and practical studies. More recently, theological schools are experimenting with curricular patterns that allow for integration around academic, spiritual, and ministry concerns.

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<sup>21</sup> Craig Dykstra. No Longer Strangers. *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 6, no. 3 (November 1985, 188-200): 197

<sup>22</sup> Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly*, 1992, p. 230; see also Craig Dykstra. 2005. *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*. 2nd edition. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-231, emphasis in text.

However, where the fragmentation persists, service in church and society ultimately suffers. Educational processes oriented to *praxis* obligate a matrix of intellectual, affective, and volitional factors. If this direction becomes possible in the theological curriculum it will be necessary to understand that *praxis* is not the simple application of theories. Further, learning experiences developed from a *praxis* perspective are not simply a haphazard sharing of experiences but an intentional integration of knowledge and responsible action.

### **The Community as the Proper Context for Learning**

While there are many who consider the phrase “learning community” or “learning in community” to denote soft learning or a loss of academic rigor,<sup>24</sup> it cannot be denied that *learning* is an essential quest. How it is attained, however, is beyond the skill set of some faculty. The standard encouragement to allow discussion, form small groups, and to change from straight rows to sitting in a circle may help, but if there is little understanding of the relation of knowing to learning and limited grasp of the rich diversity of learning approaches, such format changes will be merely cosmetic. Simple changes in method will not accommodate the complex nature of learning and the facilitation of learning in community. Teachers who care about learning seek to foster critical reasoning, enable reflection on practice, nurture spirituality, and strengthen the capacities of decision-making, wise discernment, and judgment. Faculty responsibilities, then, include helping learners to acquire information, engage ideas, confront attitudes and values, examine beliefs and behavior, develop skills, interact meaningfully with others, and minister in a multicultural world. What remains is for the connection to be made that all of these capacities are developed most effectively in communities of learning, scholarship/research, and responsible service. Once this connection is accepted as valid, the next step is to confront the aspects of academic life and institutional structure that hinder the development of faculty as facilitators of learning and developers of others, and that keep faculty and students from being co-participants in the learning process.

#### ***Communities of Faith and Learning: A Persisting Concept***

The concept of learning in community has long been important in the history and practice of education. It could be argued that the great religious traditions were historically communities of faith that embodied traditions of learning and that these traditions persist—however well or poorly expressed. When community is accepted as the proper context for learning and the social nature of learning is understood, faculty members more readily acknowledge that they are not the sole providers of knowledge. Knowing this, they are more likely to employ a range of instructional approaches that contributes to and draws upon the strength of the learning community. Information acquisition, conceptual understanding, reflective practice, and other desirable outcomes are fostered through processes such as structured and unstructured dialogue, skillful questioning, shared problem solving, carefully designed shared projects, and individual responsibility coupled with mutual accountability. In other words, each person in the community is potentially a teacher, and each person is a learner. The real task is to discern whether or not there is a particular, even unique, role fulfilled by the academy and, correspondingly, what it is that a true community of scholars offers to

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<sup>24</sup> If “rigor” is understood to connote the development of the capacities of critical thinking, responsible research, reasoned discourse, reasonable judgment, spiritual discernment, reflection on action, effective comparing and contrasting of ideas, and so on, it is unlikely that they will be achieved effectively through the conventional educational structures of theological schools!



society. If this task becomes a profitable inquiry, then the way is open for consideration of the ways in which the academy must partner with the church and other agencies in society to accomplish transformative purposes.

### *Educational Processes for Communities of Faith and Learning*

The structures and reward systems of higher education almost exclusively support the solitary, often competitive learner. Room for individual learning is appropriate, but collaborative learning fosters intellectual and personal interdependence. It requires students to make a difficult transition to trusting the community and themselves as active co-participants in discovery, questioning, inquiry, and knowledge building. When learning is seen as both individual and collaborative, teachers are no longer the sole repositories and dispensers of knowledge and become facilitators of a complex learning process. Fear that they are not being responsible in delivering the content of their discipline is generally overcome as they gain expertise in selecting and developing suitable resources and providing the necessary conceptual frame of reference for dialogue, inquiry, and mutual research. Lectures and memorization are necessary, then, only as they contribute to the processes of inquiry and reflective practice. In learning communities, students begin to see the connections across disciplines and learn that it is important to have a perspective broader than fragmented content areas, or insular contexts, can provide—including how to interact more effectively in ethnically and socioeconomically diverse communities.

In this era it is impossible to consider learning in community in relation to technology. The notion that the only valid learning environment is the campus environment and that learning activities are necessarily campus-based is rightly challenged when faculty begin to use technology *in support of learning*. Obviously, involvement in Internet-based or classroom-based education does not in itself guarantee community development or learning. Either environment can suffer from poor pedagogy and inattention to the importance of relationships and interaction in learning. The concern that educational technology will foster that which we care least about in education is certainly valid. However, due to advancements in technology that *supports learning*, the early limitation that distance learning had to be individualistic and characterized by simple transmission of information (the "cognitive dump") is no longer the case. The massively open online courses (MOOCs) have demonstrated that people will access online courses. However, MOOCs are designed to be totally self-directed by the student and need not be the only model for theological educators. Ample evidence exists that higher education institutions value interactive learning, and that technology in support of learning online can encourage higher order thinking, enable a learning community, and foster personal, spiritual, and ministry formation.

### *Curricular Issues for Communities of Faith and Learning*

Historically, the fourfold curriculum was oriented to the preparation of professional clergy (the clerical paradigm) and separated into discrete disciplines. The assumption that adult learners were being *prepared* for some future state and that their previous experience had no bearing on their present learning was not even questioned. The curriculum of theological education came to be seen in terms of two- to four-year programs culminating in a certificate or degree. Over time, more and more courses or skills were considered necessary for the preparation of leaders, who would achieve their credential in this period. Therefore, the curriculum is now hopelessly overcrowded with courses and programs.

Is it necessary for curriculum to be seen as a sequence of courses, collected in departments, offered in a specified number of years, in classes taught by a teacher in a school or church or some other

site? The course-based design was appropriate for an industrial-age, factory-based, education economy. However, in an information or knowledge age, supported by technology, adult learners will have access to knowledge sometimes beyond that of the teacher, and the learner may need to have access to particular aspects of knowledge that the faculty member has not designed into the course. Completion of a course is an artificial measure of learning. Should a fourfold model expressed in disparate courses and bounded by artificially generated credit hours be continued? How well is this way of structuring curriculum working for us?

### **The Lifelong Learner—A Spiritual Vision for Theological Education**

Lifelong theological learning is predicated on the understanding that two- to four-years of formal theological schooling is not sufficient for one to understand a field or develop competency in ministry. Yet the conventional theological curriculum is based on the premise that the years involved in earning a degree are sufficient.

#### *The Cultivation of Sustainable Habits for a Lifetime*

Habits of thoughtful reading, careful research, dialogue that is more than just talk, writing, critical thinking and analysis, reflective practice, conceptual reasoning, spiritual reflection, the ability to ground knowledge in a disciplined theory base, the ability to access and use resources, communication, social interaction, justice and reconciliation, and so on—these are the habits of a lifetime. The challenge for theological schools in the twenty-first century is to foster these habits within academic programs, to provide graduates with opportunities for continued learning that are more than conventional continuing-education courses, and to create access to multiple modes of learning for the whole people of God.

When lifelong learning is accepted as the goal, schools are only one of many educational resources. *Theological education does not equal school.* Theological education for the whole people of God is a worthy goal, and theological schools are but one way to get the job done. They are but one of the agencies in society involved with learning. Partnership among these entities is necessary in an era characterized by complexity at multiple levels. In much of the world, economic resources to support traditional schools are diminishing rapidly. One way forward is to seek productive relationships among the variety of formal, nonformal, and other compatible organizations so that individuals and communities have access to learning opportunities for all of life. In this way, the hopelessly crowded curricula of theological schools could be alleviated. It is no longer necessary for schools to teach all that is needed for a profession or an academic specialization in the brief years of a degree program. If theological schools partner with other ventures in planning for and supporting lifelong learning opportunities, they can be much more selective and intentional about what to include in their curriculum; and use faculty with greater effectiveness. (In short, they may be able to more clearly understand their particular, if not unique, role in the mix of learning providers.) Among other changes, administrators will have to be more creative in writing faculty contracts. While seemingly a small matter, the current practice in most schools, of contracting with faculty simply for a set number of credit hours or number of courses to be taught in an “academic year,” significantly hinders the sort of flexibility that will be needed in the future.

#### *Lifelong Learning and the Desire to Know God*

Embracing lifelong learning as normative for theological education, broadly understood, is consistent with the deepest values and commitments of Christian faith. The desire to know God,

which has undergirded higher education for most of its history, could be rekindled and sustained as we embrace the value of lifelong learning. Christians are pilgrims, learning is best imaged as a shared journey, and lifelong learning is compatible with the Christian mandate of a lifetime of obedience. The culture of learning communities, whether formal or nonformal, is such that each one helps the other to be more like Christ.

If Christians embraced the life of the disciple, with its attendant obligation of a life of learning, the educational enterprise would be transformed. If lifelong learning is also a theological value, then the God of grace offers hope that even if we stumble, we can get up and move on; failure does not have to be the end of the course. Theological education can no longer simply be a fragmented course of studies in a school. The future of theological education in its several modes is found in a commitment to lifelong learning for the whole people of God.

## About the Author



Linda Cannell is adjunct faculty at North Park Theological Seminary (NPTS), Chicago, Illinois. She retired as Academic Dean at NPTS in December 2011. From 2006-2008, she was Lois W. Bennett Distinguished Professor of Educational Ministries at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, and from 1990-2006 professor of Educational Ministries and director of the Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies program at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois. She has held numerous church staff and guest faculty positions internationally. In Canada, she directed EEQUIP Ministries for eight years serving as a consultant to churches, denominations, and theological schools in Canada and the United States. Until 2013 she directed the Candospirit Network, a nonprofit initiative designed to connect leaders across organizations, cultures, and countries. Until 2014 she was managing editor of the *Common Ground Journal* ([www.comongroundjournal.org](http://www.comongroundjournal.org))