

**ATS Innovation Grant Final Report**  
**School: McMaster Divinity College**  
**Project Title: Cultivating Practice-Led Research for Theological Education**

**Abstract:**

This Innovation Grant funding was used for the development of a pioneering approach to doctoral level theological education of practice-led research. *Practice-led research* is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice. This innovation moves beyond the theory-to-practice approach and mines into the significant paradigm shifts occurring in contemporary approaches to research in other fields such as nursing, business and the arts. The aim of this initiative was to identify ways that practice-led research can inform and transform theological education. The aims of the grant period included three major goals. First, to deepen the theoretical understanding and technical application of practice-led research among the McMaster Divinity College (MDC) faculty. Second, to expand the capacity for implementation of practice-led research using enhanced technology. Third to engage national denominational and other leaders within the wider constituency of MDC. The aim of the project has been to contribute new ways of approaching doctoral level research that will bring about lasting change in advanced theological education.

**Primary Goals and the Attainment of These Goals**

As indicated in the abstract there were three major goals identified in the innovation grant project. A brief comment on each of these with an assessment of outcomes related to these goals:

**1. To deepen the theoretical understanding and technical application of practice-led research among the McMaster Divinity College (MDC) faculty.**

This was a very important objective that has been achieved. We were able to bring two world-leading experts in Practical Theology and professional doctoral education in the persons of Dr. Stephen Pattison (University of Birmingham) and Dr. John Swinton (Aberdeen University). These scholars were able to lead the faculty in a deep discussion about the aims and goals of practice-led research in practical theology. While our faculty have established themselves as leading scholars in their own fields, the necessity of orienting themselves to the rigors of practice-led doctoral research was an invaluable aspect of our project. Through our deliberations with these experts our faculty have developed a framework for the evaluation of practice-led research dissertation projects and have identified ways to resource the Doctor of Practical Theology degree program from their own fields of expertise. We have developed a working paradigm for professional doctoral training in Practical Theology.

In the final phase of the grant funding includes consultation with experts in professional doctoral education with regards to program outcomes and final examination procedures, training, and implementation. The development of practice-led research doctorates in the UK serve as a resource to the emerging innovation in the North American context. MDC, in its desire to be a learning organization, has taken an interest in the outcomes and processes of these degrees and is seeking to understand the application of the emerging information for the best practices of the DPT initiative.

## **2. To expand the capacity for implementation of practice-led research using enhanced technology.**

It was deemed essential, for the success of our Doctor of Practical Theology hybrid program that a sustainable educational technological infrastructure be developed. The aim of the grant funding was to assist in the expansion of faculty capacity to design high quality doctoral level hybrid courses.

In terms of building an infrastructure to support our hybrid operation, we have consulted with the *MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Excellence in Teaching* at McMaster University. The educational technologies team at the Institute provides excellent support and has enabled us rethink and improve our hybrid framework.

The innovation grant funding has enabled us to expand resources and facilitate training for faculty.

a. Our first aim was to create a high quality digital media profile for asynchronous online delivery model. As a result, we have decided to invest in specific educational technology software applications and necessary hardware to create high quality instructional material that will enhance the hybrid/online learning experience. We invested in a screen recording and video editing software package called Camtasia (by TechSmith) and provided training (online and short demonstrations) to all faculty over the year.

b. Our second aim was to enhance faculty capacity to teach online.

We used the innovation grant funding to invite two experts in online/hybrid learning for a day-long seminar. In October 2017, we invited Dr. Axel Schoeber, a consultant in online course design to give an all-day training session on *integrative instructional design*. Our concern was to enhance the capacity for advanced professional doctoral training. The sessions focused on pedagogical strategy and best practices for the hybrid model. In the Spring of 2018, we invited our faculty to identify the most urgent needs in their experience of designing and teaching hybrid courses. Dr. Craig Price from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary was invited to come to share from his extensive experience of hybrid/online teaching. The focus of this seminar was on student assessment in the blended learning framework. The seminar concluded with a focus on analytical tools to measure student progress/performance and a demonstration of software applications to create online instructional materials.

In the winter term of 2018, three members of the educational technology planning team for MDC, the Academic Dean (Dr. Phil Zylla), the Director of the Doctor of Practical Theology program (DPT) (Dr. Lee Beach), and the educational technology specialist (Dr. Francis Pang), attended the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI) annual meeting in New Orleans, January 28-30, 2018. This conference provides a platform for higher education institutions and organizations to exchange ideas and to advance learning through educational technology innovation. The theme of this meeting was "Achieving Student Success through New Models of Learning." During our time at New Orleans, we also visited New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBT), a school with a thriving online program, and had meetings with the staff and faculty responsible for setting up and running the online/blended courses. The meeting with their CIV (compressed interactive video) division was particularly helpful to the development of our hybrid format for the DPT program.

The final phase of this included a technology seminar for faculty that is focused on *pedagogical strategies* for the Doctor of Practical Theology Hybrid program. An expert in hybrid

educational design for doctoral theological education has been secured to provide instruction and guidance for ongoing efforts to strengthen the delivery model and the pedagogical strategies tied to this. The seminar is scheduled for March 28, 2019. In addition, the Director of Educational Technology and the VP Academic will deepen their long-term strategic initiatives by participating in an international conference (*Online Learning 2019*, Toronto) on the future of educational technology in Toronto, Fall 2019. These initiatives continue to shape and deepen the capacity of MDC to deliver high level, doctoral theological education in the hybrid format.

### **3. The third aim for the grant funding was to engage national denominational and other leaders within the wider constituency of MDC on the themes of professional doctoral education in their spheres of influence.**

This was a major initiative within the grant funding that would not have been possible without the ATS Innovation Grant. We intentionally built a list of potential consultants from across the nation – identifying over 80 potential participants. This consultation was crucial to the advancement of our innovation project. Theological education, like other educational enterprises, can often be isolated from other key constituencies on which it depends. The recognition that leaders in Christian organizations continue to have educational needs that are related to their professional situation led to the impulse to invite them to a *National Consultation on Christian Leadership*. Dr. Stephen Pattison, a world-renowned practical theologian was the keynote speaker for a two-day conference sponsored by MDC and the ATS Innovation Grant funding. This allowed leaders from various sectors of Christian leadership and from across the nation to bring insight into the development of the educational mission of the College. The broad range of interests and concerns that emerged from this consultation was staggering: victims of crime/violence; organization of relief for refugees; global poverty; identified issues within the Canadian context; indigenous peoples and theology; urbanization; ecumenical efforts in Christian mission; justice; chaplaincy and healthcare; apologetics; gender issues and the church; care for the elderly; issues of church and culture; denominational leadership and theology.

Having identified champions for many of these issues, MDC has strengthened its capacity to engage the wider spectrum of ecclesial concerns across the nations. Representatives from many provinces were in attendance and identified ways that the collaboration begun in this consultation could be deepened and expanded in the coming years. In many ways, this outcome exceeded our expectations. While our primary interest was to fine tune our conceptual understanding of the educational needs of Christian professionals, through the process of the event we established a working network of concerned leaders who are willing to work with us. This has three long-term implications for MDC:

- a. First, it allowed us to have a meaningful conversation with leaders in various sectors of our national constituency: denominational executives, leaders of non-profit organizations, key pastors across the country, journalists, mission agency specialists; hospital chaplaincy; inner city mission agencies; and others. These key influencers will help to shape the curricular lense of the Doctor of Practical Theology degree program in order to facilitate educational congruence and to establish credibility in the larger national framework of leadership in the church.
- b. Second, the consultation affirmed our decision to broadly focus on practice-led research and allow the professional context and issues to shape the focus of dissertation projects that will

result. The aim of the consultation was largely to ‘test’ the market for practice-led research in practical theology. It was a dynamic consultation and the overall feedback reinforced our perception that this approach would appeal to a wide swath of leaders in various sectors of Christian ministry and leadership. Until now the professional doctoral programs in theological schools have largely been Doctor of Ministry degrees. This limited access to professional aims and contexts that are more broad-based. It was our impulse that practice-led research could expand the research potential to a much wider audience as has been done in other professional doctoral programs (ie. Nursing, Business, Social Work, etc.). As participants came and learned more about practical theology and practice-led research they could see how the framework offered could fit into their particular area of concern and interest. The DPT program has now grown to 42 students in the third year. This is an outcome that would not have been possible without this paradigm shift to a broader professional target audience. We continue to learn and adapt to the incoming stream of professional doctoral students.

c. Third, it demonstrates a pathway for future development of theological education itself in the Canadian context. While traditionally seminaries have provided instruction and educational programs designed for ministry personnel, there is clearly a larger market that would benefit from theological education that is broadly linked to the missional objectives of other Christian organizations. It is clear from our initial consultation that learning organizations desire to have leaders who are well-trained and oriented to the complex challenges of contemporary culture. The desire to have a theologically informed and relevant education seems to parallel our interest in expanding the parameters of professional doctoral education in theological contexts. Our explorations have revealed a wide variation of institutional interests that may match with our own mission and purpose as a leading educational center in Canada.

### **Crucial Issues and Questions Engaged**

There are many things that we are still learning and reflecting on from our innovation grant activities. We have identified three crucial issues that have emerged from our ATS Innovation Grant project and the proposed questions that were engaged in relation to these issues.

#### **1. Analysis of Deep Cultural Change**

The deep cultural changes that are affecting churches and the landscape of religious institutions in the Canadian context are complex, multivalent and challenging. While these changes require new models of theological education and engagement, such models are elusive given the relative conservatism of theological education. Most institutions were formed and aligned within a specific denominational milieu and have embedded in their purpose statements a service understanding with respect to their ecclesial family. However, the proliferation of Christian ministries and organizations coupled with the multiplication of church structures and orientations has resulted in a fragmented situation.

Several questions emerge: What are the changes that are affecting the ecclesial networks in Canadian culture? How are the diverse practices of professional leaders shaping the research agenda for the church in Canada? What can the College do to promote excellence in research and scholarship that will aid the church in navigating deep change?

## 2. Complexity of Practice-Led Research

We learned from Dr. John Swinton that “many of the aspects of the situations that our doctoral students are exploring are experienced as nothing more than background noise. It is only when problems arise through crisis or their engaging in a process of complexification that the complicated nature of the research situation emerges.” It is at these points of ‘unnatural’ self-reflection that ‘situations evoke self-conscious interpretative responses.’ (Mudge/Poling, 1987, Chapter 1). A key aspect of the practical theological task, in his view, is to evoke such ‘unnatural self-reflection’ and to raise people’s consciousness to previously hidden dimensions of everyday situations.

Doctoral level research into complex situations requires the practice of ‘redescription’ - an “**interdisciplinary** approach to practical theology that seeks, in the light of **Scripture** and **Christian tradition**, to **redescribe** objects, actions, situations, and contexts in ways that reveal hidden meanings, modes of oppression and misrepresentation, with a view to offering a fuller and more accurate description that highlights alternative understandings and previously inconceivable options for theory and practice.” (John Swinton).

This raises questions such as: Are we able to design experiences that will allow doctoral students to carry out deep, self-reflective responses to complex situations that they are engaged with? Do we have a common approach in the faculty to the ‘practice of redescription’? Are we able to facilitate profound description of complex situations that will highlight alternative understandings and previously inconceivable options for theory and practice?

## 3. Expansion of the Delivery Model and Wide-Ranging Contexts of Participants

The innovation project also reinforced the necessity of expanding our delivery model in order to connect with all of the national regions of our constituency and the wide diversity of professional practices represented. We learned that there is more than a pragmatic importance to this. There is deep value in drawing participants together from a wide scope of regional contexts and bringing them into conversation with each other. The professional doctorate requires collaboration and insight from other researchers. The wide range of professional practice, institutional experience, ecclesial affiliation and regional contexts are significant. Therefore, the program design must allow for this diversity to be acknowledged and integrated. We are asking ourselves: Can we intentionally market our program in the wide regions of Canada and draw in participants from across the nation? Do we have the capacity to serve the wide range of interests and professional needs that are emerging in the marketplace? Can we design aspects of the program that intentionally cross-fertilize experiences, professional practices and regional/ecclesial contexts to promote diversity and understanding?

### **What did you learn of benefit to your school?**

1. Practical theology is a critical three-way conversation between aspects of:
  - Theology (ies)
  - Practice(s)/experience (s)
  - Theory (ies)

This was a crucial insight in the development of our Doctor of Practical Theology degree program which allowed for an integrative paradigm to emerge for our faculty in the teaching and academic oversight of this program. Theological faculty tend to silo according to discipline.

The nature of the innovation we have developed in practice-led research requires some approach to interdisciplinary work that would fit with the profile of our collective faculty. This paradigm has been adopted both in the design of the research for coursework and for the dissertation project in the Doctor of Practical Theology program. We are actively expanding this paradigm and its application in our educational model.

In the final phase of this funding we will provide contemporary educational resources for our faculty to continue to be on the leading edge of this educational innovation in professional doctoral education. A reading program has been designed to strengthen both the theoretical orientation to professional doctoral education and to deepen capacity to teach practice-led research in a wide variety of subject areas.

## 2. Expansion of research agenda for professional doctoral education in theology.

Our conviction in developing a professional doctoral program was that there was a market for something new and different and in various ways this perception was verified. This was particularly true for the *National Consultation on Christian Leadership*. This major event allowed us to listen to our constituency about the needs, the issues, and the research agenda related to their own spheres of influence. Seminaries are not always postured to listen to the feedback of other leaders. The way we structured the consultation allowed two faculty members to be at each conversation table taking notes. These notes gave us extensive data related to the questions, the primary interests, and the overall needs of doctoral level research in practical theology. Many of the ideas presented by participants come from years of experience in a particular sector of Christian ministry or organizational expertise. This allowed us to expand our vision and horizon for the research possibilities of the Doctor of Practical Theology degree program.

## 3. Faculty Collaboration and Practice-Led Research

One of the spin off effects of the Innovation Grant was that faculty talked to each other and identified ways to work together and collaborate in the enterprise of theological education. While our faculty are always collegial we needed a forum for a deeper conversation with each other. Both of our external experts facilitated faculty conversations that we perhaps could not have done without them. These conversations were critical to the mission of the College and the advancement of the proposal for innovation that we have been working on. In the two-day conference with Dr. John Swinton we worked out case studies that allowed this conversation to move from a theoretical perspective to situations on the ground. The conversations that ensued allowed for deeper recognition of the role of the entire faculty in the development of the kind of doctoral education relevant to a practice-led research degree. Our faculty are now publishing in practice-led research and experimenting with new innovations that would not have been possible without the grant funding.

### **What did you learn that might be of benefit for other schools in the Association?**

One of the key issues that we have learned is to promote rigor in the professional doctorate. Professional doctorates in the UK make very little distinction between the PhD and the DPT degree in terms of expectations for excellence in research. The prominent degree (Doctor of

Ministry, DMin) has a wide range of expectations with respect to academic rigor and there is much deviation in the criteria adopted for the range of different variants and quality levels in DMin programs. The introduction of practice-led research as a foundation for professional doctoral study is a pivotal dimension of the reintroduction of rigor. In their article, “Rigor and Practice-based Research” Michael Biggs and Daniela Buchler argue that, “practice-based research should not be set apart from traditional concepts of academic research . . . [but that] practice-based research is a subcategory of academic research that should attend to and observe conventional research criteria.”<sup>1</sup> They propose that academic research in professional doctorates needs to be reframed in such a way as to account for the specificities of practice without losing their original purpose. The confusion between professional competence and a research method needs to be carefully integrated into the design of professional doctorates in theology. Biggs and Buchler state, “...we would contend that, while rigorous practical competencies are important, they are not the most important aspect [of professional doctorates] to be judged. What the practitioner has to demonstrate is the validity of the particular method to deliver the research solution. Therefore, there is no difference between the need for rigor in design research, in practice-based research, or in any other kind of research: it is a necessary condition of the process that demonstrates that these other criteria have been met.” (Biggs and Bachler, 2007, 69).

#### **Final Reflections:**

Theological education is in a crucial moment of transition. This is not unique to seminaries and theological schools but the changes in higher education are happening in a wide range of professional fields. Adaptive change requires innovation while maintaining aspects of what is best in theological education. The ATS Innovation Grant at McMaster Divinity College has allowed us to deepen our response to adaptive change in our culture and to design an innovative program for ‘researching professionals’. The benefits of wide consultation, learning from other contexts (in our case particularly the UK which has had professional doctorates in theology for at least a decade), and engaging in fresh thinking for the kind of scholarship that will support, enhance and deepen our ecclesial communities and Christian organizations throughout Canada. We are deeply indebted to the Association of Theological Schools for including us in the grant recipients in the wide range of innovations that are taking place throughout the Association.

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<sup>1</sup> Biggs, Michael A. and Buchler, Daniela “Rigor and Practice-based Research.” *Design Issues*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Summer 2007), 62-69.