

Continuing education for faculty: 5 strategies that won't break the bank

Continuing education for seminary faculty used to be based on keeping up with your primary area of study: reading, publication, guild conferences, and the like. Unfortunately, that is no longer enough. Today, faculty must not only be masters of their subject; they must also master instructional design, educational technology, and accreditation standards. Keeping up with the newest trends in social learning, contextual education, or MOOC madness may lead many faculty to wonder what happened to good old-fashioned classroom lectures—or to classrooms at all! While recent MDiv graduates serving their first congregations are saying, “They never taught me about this in seminary,” I’m hearing more and more of my colleagues saying, “I never learned about this in my doctoral program.”



Sound familiar? Does it feel like you need an EdD to go along with your PhD? Do you have the IT department’s phone number on speed dial? Does thinking about the “flipped classroom” make you want to flip out? Expectations—from your institution’s administration, from denominational governing boards, from accrediting agencies like the ATS Commission, and even from prospective students—are higher than ever. The world is changing. Vocational ministry is changing. Teaching practice is changing. Your continuing education budget, however, probably hasn’t changed in the past decade. What’s a well-intentioned seminary professor to do? Below, I’ll suggest a few practical ways theological educators can extend their continuing education efforts without overextending themselves.

1 Get out of your ivory tower.

Theological disciplines often specialize themselves into a corner or a silo. And while there’s nothing wrong with being specific, sometimes you need a generalist—or someone completely outside your discipline—to help you see the forest for the trees. You may be an expert in your field, but what about pedagogy experts, or technology experts? Ask an education professor at a local college for help designing your course objectives. Get to know the IT support person assigned to your building *before* something goes wrong. Take a local adult education minister or the “teacher of the year” award recipient at your institution out for lunch. Reflect on what you learn from these conversations,

and ask them to recommend other resources they find helpful. They may in turn ask you for help in your area of expertise. Collaboration, after all, is a two-way street.

2 Stay right where you are.

Who says you have to attend a conference to find quality continuing education? The number of Internet-based resources for pedagogy, educational technology, and tracking trends in higher education is growing by the day. Several listservs will even simplify things for you, providing summaries of recent news with external links to items you may want to know more about. Many companies offer high-quality webinars you can attend from the comfort of your office computer. Beyond web resources, some of your best sources for continuing education may be holding office hours just down the hall from you. Don't underestimate the power of your colleagues' collective knowledge. They live and work and teach in the same context you do, so they're uniquely positioned to understand the challenges you face together. I know several schools that host colloquia for faculty to share their academic work. Why not include a session or two devoted to practical items like designing student-focused assessments or making the most of the technology resources your school provides? Local faculty development can be the most immediately applicable continuing education opportunities, and it's usually free.

3 Divide and conquer.

When you do attend a conference, make the most of it. Choose conferences that appeal to a broad range of interests. Specialized tracks can help you focus, but it may be more useful to pick and choose a variety of sessions across multiple disciplines rather than staying within your comfort zone. If you're attending the conference with a group—or if you can identify a common interest group once you get there—agree to attend separate sessions and compare notes with everyone at dinner. Don't forget to share what you learned when you get home with colleagues who weren't able to attend. Conferences

that offer an online-attendance option or follow-up proceedings or recordings can save travel costs when compared to attending in person. Those of you with Twitter accounts may want to crowdsource a conference by reading live tweets from conference participants or searching a hashtag for a conference you weren't able to attend. You may be only one person with one small continuing education budget, but together, we accomplish more.

4 Free doesn't cost much.

In addition to many web-based resources mentioned above, theological education is beginning to offer more open source materials. Take advantage of them, and contribute your own expertise by allowing others to use resources you publish with a creative commons license. One "old school" continuing education source is your library. Why spend your limited budget on books or journals that can be found in the library or sent to you via interlibrary loan? Another low-cost or no-cost resource is advertised webinars or white papers produced by companies wanting to get the word out about the services they provide. These companies often have excellent research to accompany their sales pitches, which can be worth the shameless plugs they include in the webinars. At the same time, though, sometimes you really do get what you pay for. Make sure that the sources you're using for continuing education have a proven record of quality and are able to back up their material with solid research. Sometimes the biggest expense in continuing education is your own time and effort.



5 Spread the good news!

Once you've found a great continuing education resource, don't keep it to yourself. Tell others about it, whether that's colleagues within your institution or those working in the same discipline at other schools. Don't be afraid to ask others to help you find what you're looking for. And if it really doesn't exist or the resources you do find aren't very helpful, create your own knowledge base through a listerv conversation, Facebook group, or Google community. Start an online journal, or begin more modestly with a blog. Host web meetings with others in your discipline. Schedule lunch once a month with colleagues to talk about current

issues. Thankfully, you don't have to be an expert in every aspect of theological education. That's probably an unattainable goal, anyway. But with a little digging—and a lot of help from others—you can stretch yourself and your continuing education budget to never stop learning.



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