Practical Theology Online: Issues in Pedagogy and Formation

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Overview:
• Theology, Theory and Pedagogy
• Persistent Challenges
• Practical Theology and Online Pedagogy

Let’s look first at Three Foundational Components: Theology, Theory, and Pedagogy, and, the contexts of (1) theological education and (2) the particular contexts of particular schools. There are the various contexts in which Practical Theology get played out, which overlap, but to what extent we influence is up for discussion.

I think these intersections is where the essential and most relevant conversations reside. However, most of the issues folks talk about related to online learning is “technical” and rather uninteresting.

The integrity question about the theological or biblical basis for practice is an important one. But it must be appropriately applied at its emergent level. [Chart on theo/philo to methods and techniques].

There are NO arguments to be made against learning via online learning from classic educational philosophical foundations. By classic educational philosophies I mean those considered as foundational in educational systems: Idealism, Realism, Neo-Thomism, Pragmatism, Existentialism.

Ill.: Me: “So, Tim, what are you teaching this term?”
Tim: “The biblical basis for age-graded ministry.”
Me: “But Tim, there is no biblical basis for age-graded ministry.”
Tim: “Yeah, I know, but they make us teach that.”
Reframing Educational Categories

As a medium for learning, online learning, and emerging educational technologies, does shape fundamental pedagogical categories:

1. The teacher
   Changes the role of the teacher (change is hard). From “sage on the stage” to facilitator of learning process and assessor of learning.

2. The learner and learning
   The learner is the agent of learning, not the teacher. The understanding of the nature and function of knowledge: knowledge is to be used, not received.
   The method
   Student-focused, teacher directed
   Dialogical and experiential

The Context
   Residential to contextual.

This is not a claim that it’s either-or. Those elements on the right hand side can very well be applied to the classroom context. But it cannot be denied that the instructional schooling model tends to foster a particular pedagogy by its very context.

1. Risky educational assumptions….

   Human qualities like affect and empathy are things the teacher or educational model must create. The reality is that these are indeed, human qualities, and therefore students bring these to the learning experience regardless of medium or teacher.

Student comments from the “closure” forum of a course

As I let go of our time together in community, I am grateful for the chance to participate and journey along with all of you in this course.

“I’m also thinking that I will "hold on" to this experience of growing together in faith and spiritual practice. My experience in seminary was not much like this at all—it was more rigorously academic, and I did not find many places to wrestle with big issues of theology and spirituality in community with others.
I must confess that I missed being in the room with all of you. The cyber-room felt a bit disconnected for me. And yet, reading back over your words yesterday, I was struck by the connection that I felt with each of you. There is such power in sharing our stories. It links us on this journey through life.

Thanks to each of you for your candor and spirit of sharing during this class. I'm leaving this class grateful for time spent in communion with each of you. As I reviewed the discussion forums, I'm amazed by the wisdom, the richness, and the movement of the Spirit through the conversations. There is something about writing that allows for a bit more vulnerability of our inner selves (one of the things I've loved about this class).

The willingness to offer what has been shared among "strangers" is, to me, remarkable. Does the "anonymity" of being online make that easier for some folks?

This course has opened me in ways I could not have imagined or predicted four weeks ago. …the rich discussions, the excellent reading material, and the support of all of you have made my life better in important ways.

As I am always rather emotional when I leave my "in person" spiritual formation experiences with CTS, so I am today - relieved in one sense and dismal in another, but mostly I feel exhilarated and glad. All is well!"

1. Risky Educational Assumptions

The teacher is the agent of learning; in fact, the learner is the agent of learning.

Learning happens within the internal processes of the student when information, concepts, ideas are received, processed, manipulated, comprehended, applied, adapted.
1. Risky Educational Assumptions

The classroom learning environment and model is superior to others and uniquely suited to ministerial formation.

<<... For many in Christian higher education, relationally modeling Christ-likeness in the classroom is considered a primary means and evidence of integrating faith and learning (Hughes 2005). The classroom offers a more immediate setting for such commitment; nonverbal student cues, the opportunity for students to learn from one another, the faculty member’s ability to deal with apparently threatening questions while continuing to model a mature faith stance....[Naidoo, p. 4]>>

It actually lends itself too easily to “teaching by telling,” evidenced by the amount of time professors spend lecturing (at least 70% of instructional time).

Teaching by telling does not work because it does other people’s thinking for them.

If we choose to complain about our student’s inability to think for themselves, we must own much of the blame as we’ve convinced them over the years that learning consists of passively listening and engaging in “banking” educational experiences.

But in the classroom context roles are scripted and bounded—professors are always professors (and hold positional power), and students are always students, and that will never change as long as either is there. It is worth remembering that the fruition of Jesus’ rabbinical educational process was the statement, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

Unfortunately, this schooling model has been the formative experience for most faculty. It has shaped their assumptions about teaching, learning, epistemology, and methodology. And because all experiences are formative, the schooling model is often a great liability for ministers. Witness the tragic consequence of how most freshly minted ministerial graduates enter their congregations and mimic their seminary experience in their approach to Christian education in the church. The result is that the person primarily responsible for the faith formation of the church members tries to “school them in faith,” which does not work.
## 1. Risky Educational Assumptions

### That embodiment is a sine qua non for learning and knowledge attainment.

That in an enterprise whose economy is that of the mind and of ideas, embodiment is a sine qua non for learning and knowledge. We have always learned in non-embodied, non-face-to-face means, ironically, the reading of books and texts being one. Regardless, we know too that learning is always social, and no isolated form of learning remains so for long. But, the fact is also that learning in the online environment is not an isolating experience. It is a medium that brings people together and expands the scope of one’s propinquity. We do not know people only by embodiment. In fact, we know that often getting past the obstacles of embodiment is necessary for knowing the other.

### That an online course is, or needs to be equivalent in all ways, to a classroom experience.

That an online course is, or needs to be equivalent in all ways, to a classroom experience. An online course is more of a “course of study,” and not a class in the sense most are accustomed to. This is one of the first stumbling blocks for teachers beginning online teaching. They desire to duplicate the classroom experience and discover that they do not understand sufficiently course design and pedagogy to develop an effective “course of study” that is less dependent on teacher expertise and more on student learning and participation.

### The online medium poses unique impediments to students’ learning.

The online medium poses unique impediments to students’ learning. My observation over the years is that the students who do best in the online environment tend to be the same who do best in the classroom environment—and the same goes for underperformers. The students who perform well in my online courses are the same who perform well in the traditional online course: they are self-motivated, self-directed, can manage their time well, and take responsibility or their own learning. The ones who tend to do poorly in my online classes are the same underperformers in the classroom: they are less engaged, less invested, overly-dependent on externals for direction. Sadly, I also perceive that these are persons who have been “formed” by years of classroom-learning that has made them into passive learners, highly dependent on external direction and prompts for learning. When I observe this class of students I always wonder...
how they will make it in ministry.

1. Risky Educational Assumptions

That persons learn certain things in only certain ways.

Not everything is for everybody at the same time in the same way. There seems to be an underlying assumption that the (formative) seminary experience is supposed to be the same for everyone, or, that every curricular component needs to meet every global program goal—that’s just not the nature of curricula. Not every facet of a seminary education is academic, and while every experience is “formative” to some extent or another, not every curricular experience needs to take that on to the same extent as every other. While I think that aspects of “formation” can happen via online distance learning, it is unfair and unrealistic to hold that one medium responsible for its totality, or to think that instances of that experience undoes the formative impact of the seminary experience as a whole. If we will demand of distance online courses a heavy requirement for demonstrating “formation” we should do so of every course, including each classroom experience instance.

This is similar to the misinterpretation and misapplication of the concept of “learning styles,” which assumes they are liabilities to be accommodated. The better perspective is the more nuanced theory of multiple intelligences and the fact that we all have them all and that each is an asset. The mind is more plastic, and persons more resilient when it comes to learning than we seem able to appreciate. The truth, I fear, is that in giving persons throughout their formative years a one-dimensional experience of learning, the didactic classroom experience, we have convinced students that learning consists of passive dependence on others for the acquisition of knowledge, expertise, and values. As McGarreh Sharp & Morris have indicated, online learning opens up venues and ways of learning not possible in the traditional classroom model that is dominant in most theological schools.
2. Still learning after all these years

Kris Velheer. Poor practices we still see. It seems many are still “tinkering” after all these years.

Much of this is attempting to duplicate how we teach in the classroom context and its pedagogy.

2. Still learning after all these years

Video taping a lecture and posting it somewhere does not constitute online learning. Some pedagogical values: to create an affective connection at the start of a course (and/or at closure); to demonstrate a skill, action, or simulation; to model a practice; to explicate a complex concept. Unless a lecture capture component serves a specific pedagogical FUNCTION it tends to be a learning distraction (most people can’t watch a talking head lecture for more than 5 minutes)

There is some value if used well, but overall it is a waste of bandwidth.

2. Still learning after all these years

From an actual conversation:

Prof.- “So I put a bunch of Youtube videos on my Moodle class for my students to watch”

Kris V.- “What are they about?”

Prof.- “Oh, they’re related to my class”

Kris V.- “How are they related? Did you tie them to an objective?”

Prof.- “Well it’s the topic we are covering and I thought it would give my students something to do.”

Media overload is equivalent to the classroom liability of “information overload”: It confuses the learner and inhibits learning.

Students don’t need more to do, so giving them a lot of videos to watch without tying them to course learning objectives is a waste of time.

If we use Media of any type, it needs to have a purpose and be tied to course objectives which are assessable. It is the notion of Watching vs. Doing.
2. Still learning after all these years

1. INEFFECTIVE-The Prof. who posts a Word doc of the discussion questions for the students to print off and bring to class but there isn’t a discussion forum on the online course site (In my opinion, a waste of the online course site except as a repository for the class readings.)

2. SLIGHTLY BETTER- What is eschatology? How is it related to creation? Is there an overarching biblical story, running from the beginning to the end of the Bible? (These questions ask students to define something without relating it to their own narratives. The questions lack an integrative element.)

3. EVEN BETTER: Each week there will be a Wiki for posting your discussion prompts—the way that we build a discussion agenda for each class based upon the required readings for that week. Discussion prompts can include questions that the readings brought to mind for you, current news stories/events, short video clips, art work, poems—anything that can be shared with the group to enhance our discussion of the readings. Why have feminist and womanist movement? What’s at stake, and for whom? (Here the students are being asked to curate the content for the discussions. The two discussion questions don’t ask for a definition, but rather for an opinion with the follow up question measuring student integration of course material.)

2. Still learning after all these years

Teaching online SHOULD NOT be a solitary adventure. There are multiple ways to make students work together and form new social networks. Collaborative learning can happen online—your students are already using technology for social interactions and collaboration at work!

EXAMPLES of how to do this online?

2. Still learning after all these years

2. Still learning after all these years

(I.G.) There seems to be an underlying assumption that the (formative) seminary experience is supposed to be the same for everyone.

I WANT TO RECAP HERE YOUR STATEMENTS FROM THE RISKY EDUCATIONAL ASSUMPTIONS SLIDE THAT PERSONS LEARN CERTAIN THINGS IN ONLY CERTAIN WAYS.

(K.V.) We are all Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants at the same time. We are Adaptable creatures who will adapt to the environment.

“I.E.”
2. Still learning after all these years

Another Liability and Challenge:

Faculty don’t have a rigorous theory of learning. Rather, they know how they teach (and they tend to teach how they were taught).

2. Still learning after all these years

“My question is: Are we really making an impact?”

Using the Reporting Features in Your LMS to generate data such as:

**CONFIGURABLE REPORTS**
- Course Visibility
- Key Course Components
- Course site Usage Report
- Rubrics in use site-wide
- Student Last Access
- Student Participation Report
- Teacher Last Access
- Users Unenrolled from Course

- Assessing not only Student Learning, but Faculty Development in their usage of the LMS
- Doing Formative and Summative Assessment

2. Still learning after all these years

**INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN**

Applying sound instructional design and pedagogies of learning. Reframing educational categories to focus on student learning. Helping faculty understand the principles of End Design: crafting learning objectives that work.

2. Still learning after all these years

**The Power of Context and Community**

Online and Hybrid learning allows for the full context and community of the student to come to class with them.
### 3. Academy, Community, Formation

There is, I think, an under appreciation of the formative power of context.

In a presentation, McGarrah Sharp and Morris make a dramatic assertion in their presentation: 

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In the context of seminary education, first order change can easily take the form of adding a new delivery method to our traditional tried-and-true in-person classroom pedagogies. In this image, the content and delivery are the same; what differs is merely the delivery vehicle. This fails to recognize the important contextual differences between in-person classes, online classes, and our proposed third way of teaching and learning in hybrid spaces. …>
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Then, they assert:

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we assert online learning offers opportunities and benefits that a face-to-face classroom environment cannot precisely replicate; providing authentic connections and a depth of empathic experience previously not thought possible in virtual space….>> [McGarrah Sharp & Morris, p. 5];
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They go on to state: 

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At our best, we participate in this intentionally as formation to help students become self-aware, resourceful practitioners equipped to translate their seminary experience into a meaningful vocation. At our least thoughtful, we hamper students’ differentiation that they will need to translate their seminary experience in their life’s work outside the seminary’s walls….>>
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McGarrah Sharp and Morris, p. 5

*I think it goes deeper than not being sufficiently thoughtful. The matter is that seminaries, in the predominant schooling academy model, simply cannot form clergy as much as they would desire.*

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• "... the dissonance between educational philosophy and theological understanding of the person and of formation would not seem to suggest that universities are an ideal partner in learning for ministry (Overend 2007). While higher education develops individuals within a market context of competition, the Church seeks to form individuals to inhabit theological understandings, involving an understanding of personhood in community (Overend 2007)...."
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Overend: <<... the dissonance between educational philosophy and theological understanding of the person and of formation would not seem to suggest that universities are an ideal partner in learning for ministry (Overend 2007). While higher education develops individuals within a market context of competition, the Church seeks to form individuals to inhabit theological understandings, involving an understanding of personhood in community (Overend 2007)....[Naidoo, p. 7]...>>

Naidoo presents one contrast of contextualization in quoting Overend: <<... the dissonance between educational philosophy and theological understanding of the person and of formation would not seem to suggest that universities are an ideal partner in learning for ministry (Overend 2007). While higher education develops individuals within a market context of competition, the Church seeks to form individuals to inhabit theological understandings, involving an understanding of personhood in community (Overend 2007)....[Naidoo, p. 7]...>>
I state this simply as, “Seminaries are good about the formation of seminarians; only churches form clergy.”

The concept of “formation” in conversations related to the context of formal theological education seems to assume a bounded goal-specific outcome, when in fact formation continues in ministry over the course of a life in the context and practice of ministry. As it does, the influence of the contextualization of academic preparation for ministry seems to diminish. My observation is that when I attend gatherings of academics, like this, what academics talk about and fret about are fundamentally different from what clergy in ministry talk about when they gather together as a group. The language is different, the critical concerns are different, the problems they seek to address are different.

A constant point of angst with seminaries is their desire to be “community” to their students, and the failure they feel at never quite achieving that ideal. But seminaries are societies, not communities. Societies are made up of people who join together to pursue some singular purpose. Football teams, joint stock ventures, and political parties are societies, while the members of a church form a community. Sociologist Donald Livingston wrote that “The marks of a genuine community are the temple, the graveyard, and the wedding ceremony.” (Donald Livingstone, p. 23). This reality is why, I think, seminaries need to stop fretting about “being a community” for students.

In communities, people do not only share values and ideals, they share self and identity. An identity is shaped by a shared life structure and a shared corporate memory that is dynamic, ever-evolving, generative, and mutual. It is in the attainment of corporate memory shaped by shared experience, “our story” that corporate identity is created. The peripheral, incidental activities of church community life center around mutual confession of
God, and about the fragility and temporal nature of life and living, the unspoken confession that we need each other deeply in navigating this precious and harsh thing called life and living.

Communities do this by centering our corporate lives around, as Livingstone reminds us, the temple, the graveyard, and the wedding ceremony: worship, death, and generativity. It is in community that we celebrate and acknowledge both birth and death—not that they happen, other institutions do that too, but what they mean. A hospital birthing ward acknowledges a birth that occurs in our families, but it cannot speak to what it means—only our community can do that. Funeral homes serve us well—but they cannot speak to what a death among us means, or to what that life meant—only the community to which we belong can do that.

In a seminary students come for a three or four year stint, moving in and out of structured classes, imposed schedules, and rigorously bounded relationships (or, as I remind seminarians, “You’re a student, I’m a professor. I know stuff, you don’t. And as long as you’re here, that will never change.”). Those who attend seminary choose to come and join for a short while an elite group of people (teachers and other students) engaged in lofty but isolating enterprises. And when they graduate, they leave, and most never call or write.

Communities are not made up of individuals all of whom “chose” to live in a place that suits their fancy, but of families who are part of a shared common life. Families, that’s key. When someone wants to argue too keenly that a seminary is a real community I ask, “Where are the children?” Communities are generative and they have the constant presence of children. I don’t know the children of my seminary colleagues, and they do not know my children. We don’t share life at that level. Their children will never learn from me, and I will never be taught lessons by their children. That’s quite different from a church—where a minister and its members will learn the names of the children. They will grow under their ministry, they will shape their faith, and in so doing, shape the faith of their children’s children.

A congregation, as church, is a real community—for that is its nature and its purpose. I think there is spiritual danger in a seminary attempting to meet the felt needs for community for those who desire it, but refuse to do the hard work of risking, trusting and commitment it takes in finding it where they actually need to find it: in the church, with REAL people—who are not all smart, not all lovely, who will not all agree with you, or even like you—but who are your community nevertheless, because the ONE thing that in the end will confirm that you are indeed part of this community is the helpless commitment to live life together with the confessions that the temple, the graveyard, and the marriage rituals provide in living mutually.
4. The Impasse

1. Systemic anxiety in an age of change and uncertainty.

- Systemic anxiety over change.
- Online learning (like many methods and approaches in the past considered “new”) threatens established, often uncritical, assumptions about educational philosophy and methodology. We have been here before, when moving from the published text to the individual professor’s lecture as authoritative in the classroom, to the introduction of the overhead projector, to supervised ministry and clinical models of education for clergy. It really is not about the technology, the change we are experiencing is at all social levels and on a global scale, and we are experiencing a growing awareness that it all impacts us in a personal way. We tend to over focus on the technological, but the rate of change and amount of impact of technology on human enterprises today is unprecedented.

- As Hess and McGarrah Sharp and Morris identified, we are dealing with Second Order change and our industry seems ill-equipped and poorly resourced to deal with it in proactive imaginative ways. We are living in exciting but anxious times.

2. Lack of educational training and pedagogical expertise for faculty from the field and practice of education.

This is not new, of course. Theological schools often seem to forget that they are situated in the field of higher education, and are not unaffected in the industry and business of that field. My uptick in consultation with theological schools about curricular assessment.

3. The messy human factor: people don’t like to change, threatened by insecurities about competence,
4. The Impasse

4. Leadership and guild professionalism issues. Here it’s a matter of a lack of imagination and courage. In our lack of imagination and uncertain we talk about the wrong things. Those we call upon for leadership still seek answers for those whose need is certitude. What is needed are vision, imagination, and courage. The anxieties I see around issues of new ways for theological education, like distance learning and online learning, are symptomatic.

Your turn….

What are your personal, or your school’s challenges related to online or non-residential theological education and practical theology studies related to:

(1) Assumptions, values, educational philosophy?
(2) Pedagogical practices (teaching and learning)?
. . . but NOT “technology”

5. Your Turn

What are your personal, or your school’s challenges related to online or non-residential theological education and practical theology studies related to:

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. . . but NOT “technology”

The end.