

# Theological Education

Volume 43, Number 1  
2007

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*William R. Myers*



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## *Continuing the Conversation*

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# Editor's Introduction

William R. Myers

There is a common sensibility as to whom we are as a faculty,  
but I think curriculum review will test that assumption.

Participant, MDiv Revision Consultation  
March 2007

On paper it seems clear: faculty are hired and given authority for the design and maintenance of the curriculum so that a school has in place an educational process that will effectively deliver its unique educational mission. In all ATS schools, this is the most direct responsibility assigned to faculty. It is clearly noted within the Commission on Accrediting Standards: this is the faculty's primary role, its primary responsibility—do it. But, it's never that simple.

A faculty member at the school I once served noted that we “should never underestimate self-interest” when faculty are battling over core (and therefore mandatory) curricular course assignments. He was also a keen observer as to how “PhD formation allegiance,” as he put it, “does not readily translate into the concerns of a [good] MDiv curriculum.” Self-interest (“I can't afford to lose *my* core course”) and PhD arrogance (“*My* academic way of study is the preferred model for MDiv students”) are emotional variables that can turn curricular discussions into a battlefield. Nevertheless, “the faculty who teach in a program on a continuing basis shall exercise responsibility for the planning, design, and oversight of its curriculum” (Standard 6, faculty section 6.1.4).

Given this high priority, with the support of Lilly Endowment Inc., the Association recently held two events that were focused on curriculum “re-visioning.” An initial event resulted in a *Master of Divinity Curriculum Revision Folio* (ATS, 2006). The folio includes essays, plenary presentations, cases, and interviews. These materials were offered to schools for use as provocative springboards for faculty discussion on retreats, workdays, or for use in committees charged with the responsibility for curricular revision. A second event took place in 2007 and was used to encourage a number of participants to write short essays on curricular issues.

The papers in this volume of *Theological Education* were occasioned by that 2007 event. Robert T. O'Gorman (Loyola University Chicago) admirably sets the event context and how the four ATS content areas of the MDiv degree program could be understood as interacting with plenary speakers and participants. In his essay, he reaches two tentative conclusions: that schools still have difficulty thinking of curriculum as “four grand areas” and that the emerging acceptance of student learning outcomes has increasingly become the “starting point for curricular revision.”

Shawn Oliver (Ashland Theological Seminary), likens the process of curriculum revisioning to the act of “setting sail” into “deep water.” She helpfully couples nautical issues (“leaving the marina; catching the wind; staying the course; and navigating through storms”) to the curriculum revisioning pro-

cess. Her comments on these issues carry with them the sense of one who has not only “been there” but of one who also has been able to take a step away and be reflective about this process. She reminds us that work on a seminary curriculum is godly work, and because it is important work, it is also close-to-the-heart for those who “set sail.”

While schools or individuals might disagree with this position, it is becoming increasingly clear that program and student outcomes will be emphasized by accreditation processes, including regional agencies as well as ATS. Dorcas Gordon (Knox College) begins her essay with a nod toward Lee Shulman (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching), the first evening's after-dinner speaker. Shulman's talk illustrated how “signature pedagogies” communicate the goals of a program. Using Shulman's retelling of a biblical story as her essay's entry point, Gordon suggests that the consequences of an inadequately defined curriculum should worry faculty, and that when faculty begin to name those “habits of the heart” that they hope animate curriculum, the basics essential to curriculum re-visioning are in place. Gordon's essay alerts us to the driving force of a faculty's coming to agreement regarding “program/student learning outcomes.”

Michael Jinkins (Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary) unpacks how particular school representatives at the event understood their school's mission as it connected with their curriculum. He suggests that any serious consideration of mission involves a redefining of curriculum and that, once engaged, also raises the issue of adequacy of the school's missional statement for today's circumstances. This dialectic, Jinkins's interviewees suggest, is “an ongoing dance.”

In his essay, Richard Benson (St. John's Seminary, Camarillo) suggests that curriculum, assessment, and stewardship necessarily are intertwined in the design, implementation, and maintenance of an adequate curriculum for MDiv theological education. He affirms that the common vocation of a faculty is to imagine, put into place, and, over time, revise a curriculum so that a school's mission is met, given a school's changing context, faculty, and student body.

Jack Seymour (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary) shares insights gained from his research project with twenty ATS schools that recently completed curricular revisioning processes. He reports that schools so engaged are more optimistic and even pleased at what occurred. He names helpful starting points for schools, lists provocative concerns that deserve faculty attention, and suggests a useful process that offers elements common to the revisioning process experienced by the twenty institutions.

David Hester (Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary) is academic dean at one of the schools in Jack Seymour's study. David provides an insightful, educational narrative of not only how his school's curriculum revisioning occurred but also how the faculty's conversation plenary about what mattered developed over time. This “common” conversation helped “diminish discipline area distinctions” and “free imaginations for building a new curriculum.” This careful approach makes his essay a useful case for those contemplating their own curricular revisioning process.

This issue also contains an article by Hans Madueme (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) and Linda Cannell (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary). They ask: What might happen were the disciplines of theological education marshaled in support of a problem-posing educational curricular process? While their essay was occasioned as a proposal for a curriculum conversation at one of their schools and not, therefore, connected to the 2007 consultation, their work is useful as something that stretches the imagination, primarily because it suggests an alternative perspective on the theological educational process.

Finally, a summary of a conversation among the leaders of fourteen consortia of ATS schools highlights the value of consortial arrangements, issues of their leadership and governance, and the importance of a clear and agreed upon mission.

This edition of *Theological Education* was drawn together as a resource for schools contemplating MDiv curriculum revision. As such, it can be photocopied in whole or in part for faculty conversations without fear of copyright infringement. As editor, on behalf of the Association, I want to thank the authors whose wisdom permeates these articles.

Participant evaluations for the second MDiv Consultation in 2007 were extraordinarily affirming regarding that event. In part, it was because of a thoughtful process and competent speakers who were insiders regarding the issues of curriculum revision. I believe, however, the larger part of the event's positive evaluation occurred because the participants in the room were already strongly and helpfully engaged in the issues raised at this event.

I would hope that this journal finds its way into similar faculty discussions.





## *Continuing the Conversation*

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### **Further Ways to Teach Theology Using Film: A Response to Linda Mercadante's "Using Film to Teach Theology"**

Linda Mercadante provided an interesting review of her motivations, techniques, and twenty years of experience using film to teach theology to ministerial students.<sup>1</sup> Her dedication is to be applauded. What better way to serve the pedagogic needs of the proverbial children-of-the-media than through the deft deployment of popular films, their twentieth (and now twenty-first) century *lingua franca*, especially during this second century of the age of Hollywood and undeniable reign of moving image culture. Regrettably, the profession, overall, has been slow in utilizing this inexpensive and easily accessible extra-ecclesiastical resource. According to Peta Goldberg, it needs "to teach students about interpreting the arts and visual images with the same seriousness with which they teach them to read books."<sup>2</sup> Employing popular film in the classroom is not just diversionary entertainment, student pacification, or for visual aide duties, but rather, is a legitimate modern mode of understanding the religious quest.

Moreover, according to Jeffrey L. Staley, "Students are usually much more adept at picking up on . . . abstract issues in film than they are in seeing them in the New Testament itself"<sup>3</sup> because as Conrad Ostwalt says, they "relate more readily, more enthusiastically, more intuitively, and more meaningfully to films than to books."<sup>4</sup> For example, Carleen Mandolfo noted that "students throw themselves into theological and exegeti-

cal reflection more eagerly with film than with any other medium,"<sup>5</sup> as did Janine Langan and her Christian imagination classes: "When teaching film, I have found that students are intensely excited when introduced to this method as a mode of interpretation."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, many "young people appreciate opportunities to discuss popular culture with knowledgeable and sensitive adults,"<sup>7</sup> thus making it a fun-filled task that is to be enjoyed more often than endured. A brief survey of the critical literature reveals five ways of using commercial feature films that matches, supports, or complements Mercadante's pedagogic efforts.

### **Five ways of fusing film, faith, and fun**

#### *Creating and discussing cinematic montages*

This approach involves the creation and/or discussion of a cinematic montage (i.e., a rapid succession of screen images) extracted from multiple movies and creatively compiled to explore a theological issue of interest. For example, focusing upon the physical representation of Jesus Christ broken down into analytical subcategories such as short vs. tall, beard vs. no beard, short hair vs. long hair, effeminate vs. masculine, weak vs. strong, Jewish appearance vs. non-Jewish, sexual vs. non-sexual, etc. Alternatively, exploring Jesus's mode of crucifixion, for example, did He die upon a cross, a pole, or a trestle; did the nails go through His palms or His wrists; were rope supports and footholds used; was Jesus naked or dressed at death; was His cross higher, lower, or equal to the

thieves alongside Him? One could also focus upon the depiction of His miracles such as His healing ministry, turning water into wine, or demon control,<sup>8</sup> particularly his temptations by Satan.<sup>9</sup> Each filmmaking choice has a theological consequence or reflects a decision about the nature of Jesus-cum-interpretation of Scripture. One could similarly explore representations of the Apostles (e.g., Judas, Peter, Paul), biblical women (e.g., Virgin Mary, Delilah, Mary Magdalene), biblical men (e.g., Samson, Moses, David), God (e.g., bearded old man, hippy, female) etc.<sup>10</sup> Discussing these points of difference can provide theological insights unappreciated beforehand and enhance admiration of the difficult art of biblical filmmaking.

### ***Writing a movie script and/or pitching it***

Michael R. Cosby asked students to write a brief movie script about the life of a biblical figure like King David (1-2 Samuel) to highlight what they included, ignored, emphasized, or de-emphasized in their retelling.<sup>11</sup> This activity demonstrated how selective one must be in choosing information to write about people and events. For some students, just “realizing that biblical authors wrote with particular perspectives is a major hurdle. Using a movie approach to David puts the issue into more familiar form and helps them deal with the matter more objectively.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, William S. Campbell asked his students to write the synopsis of a Gospel screenplay in their own words as if pitching it to a prospective producer, thus gaining a deeper understanding of the Gospels as they condensed and translated the biblical story into contemporary idioms that had greater personal meaning and relevancy.<sup>13</sup> Both tasks engaged the students’ religious imaginations, released their pent up creativity, and provided deeper insights into the subjective processes of both biblical filmmaking and Scripture composition.

### ***Documenting errors***

Mary K. Ivancic asked her students to submit projects that entailed: “Viewing a full-length feature film based on Scripture (e.g., *The Ten Commandments* (1956) or *The Passion [of the Christ]* (2004)) and comparing and contrasting the filmmaker’s depiction of events with the actual biblical text.” She considered documenting the cinematic sins of omission and commission to be a “fine example” of the creative fusion of arts and Scripture study that benefited “Catholic education and the field of practical theology.”<sup>14</sup>

### ***Comparing storytelling***

William S. Campbell asked his students to watch the classic American angel movie *It’s A Wonderful Life* (1946) and compare it to Mark’s Gospel (read as a screenplay).<sup>15</sup> This strategy brings the past into the present and demonstrates that modern narrative strategies may actually be premodern and yet still be very valuable for today, in addition to the fruitful insights that narrative theology can provide.

### ***Teasing out the implicit***

Because films must make *explicit* what may only be *implicit* within the Bible, they provide unique opportunities for students to imaginatively explore other religious trajectories.<sup>16</sup> For example, students might map out the synoptic parallels and examine the interpretative character of the Gospels from a review of Jesus film clips, thereby, highlighting how much the reader actually supplies to make the Bible come to life,<sup>17</sup> as well as provide new answers to age old theological disputes.<sup>18</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Hopefully, like the Bible and Film students of Mary E. Shields, seminary students may never watch films the same way again, see religious themes they thought unrelated or nonexistent in films, and participate in transformative conversations about them long after the class

has ended.<sup>19</sup> Such an outcome is sheer joy for any passionate pedagogue alongside Mercadante, and which also helps high school religious education forever escape its tag of being drab, dull, and boring relieved only by drawing the maps of Jesus and the Apostle's journeys.

*Anton Karl Kozlovic is a PhD candidate in Screen Studies, School of Humanities, Flinders University (Adelaide, Australia).*

#### ENDNOTES

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16. Anton K. Kozlovic, "Nourishing Faith through Film: Using Popular Biblical Epics as a Religious Education Resource," *Journal of Christian Education* 44, no. 2 (Australia: Australian Christian Forum on Education, 2001): 45–53.
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## Reflections on Online Education from a Smaller Institution

Ridley College has just completed its first semester of dipping a toe in the waters of online education. It was a pleasant surprise, then, to find the initial issue of our subscription to *Theological Education* (42, no. 2 [2007]) starting with the fascicle of field reports addressing technology use in education. We were greatly encouraged in our own venture by hearing of the progress of those who are further advanced in the process.

Yet Ridley is a smaller seminary than the ATS institutions surveyed. It seems fruitful for me to record a number of observations as part of the ongoing conversation. The aim of these comments is not to record our own journey; ours is a particular context, literally half a world away from the North American member schools. Rather, these observations are intended for those smaller institutions, either members of ATS or readers of its journal, who have an interest in developing online education and a need to discern which aspects of their better-endowed peers they might emulate. By way of comparison, Ridley has roughly seven FTE faculty and ninety FTE students.

First, I was struck by the observations of Sebastian Mahfood (Kenrick-Glennon Seminary) and others that there is only so much planning an institution can do. To be sure, it is wise to identify the distance students who can be served and how best to meet their educational and formational needs. It is good business, if not also good stewardship, to consider the fiscal, temporal, and social costs incurred to do so. But reporters like Mahfood are right to suggest that seeking “a perfectly delineated plan”—in a field of so many variables—can be an unattainable ideal.

Ridley’s experience reflects that of larger institutions. After eighteen to twenty-four months of investigation and planning, we decided to throw ourselves in. Advanced planning was

certainly helpful, but a certain amount of experience can only be gained “on the ground.” Indeed, as a smaller institution, we have probably enjoyed fewer institutional hurdles laid down by our accrediting body, denominational hierarchy, and governing board. So we would encourage other smaller schools to avoid being too perfectionist in their preparatory research and development.

Second, we would affirm the many comments and examples concerning the relationship between teaching and technology. With those like Lester Ruth (Asbury Theological Seminary), we have found that the preparation of courses for online consumption has substantially challenged the goals and means employed in our classrooms. This can be daunting for a smaller faculty but also quite invigorating. Smaller schools would do well to consider what flow-on effects might be helpful or unhelpful for their existing classroom programs.

Third, there are good grounds to consider carefully the technology one employs. Larger seminaries, and especially theological schools embedded within a wider university, often have budgets and IT support that can cater to the grander learning management systems. It was telling to note the number of ATS reports that mentioned Blackboard (the standard promoted by the Wabash Center) or its former rival, WebCT. There was only one passing mention of the Moodle platform ([www.moodle.org](http://www.moodle.org)), which is admirably suited to the online aspirations of the smaller school. Moodle is attractive because it offers comparable appearance and functionality of the major systems; because it can be installed, administered, and operated with limited technical support; and because it is free. Our Moodle server runs off an old staff PC, overseen by our two online teaching staff and a casual technical officer. An affiliated college has only a single faculty member running Moodle, hosted remotely at a U.S. site for \$50 a year. This is precisely the sort of scale a smaller institution might dare to tackle.

Online education is not for all students, nor is it for all teachers or seminaries. But there are, increasingly, ways and means by which even the smaller players can make themselves heard in the worldwide market for theological education.

*Andrew S. Malone is Coordinator of Online Learning at Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia.*



# Reflections of an “Investigative Journalist” on the Four Content Areas of the MDiv

*Robert T. O’Gorman*

*The Institute of Pastoral Studies, Loyola University Chicago*

*ABSTRACT: At the 2007 ATS Master of Divinity curriculum revision consultation, O’Gorman was asked to listen to the consultation with these questions in mind: At your school, is there an understanding among faculty of the four content areas of the MDiv degree program, and does the faculty have a clear and common vision of their importance as they approach curriculum revisioning? He concluded that the consultation was effective in establishing the four content areas of Religious Heritage, Cultural Context, Personal and Spiritual Formation, and Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership as the frame for curriculum revision and suggested that after ten years, the new standards are beginning to become part of the culture of ATS schools.*

ATS, with benefit of a Lilly Endowment grant, invited approximately eighty ATS schools in various stages of MDiv curriculum revision to come together for three days of discussion. This was the second such consultation (the first being in October 2003). Key outside input focused on two subjects—the recently completed work, *Educating Clergy*,<sup>1</sup> and a survey/interview with deans who had completed curriculum revision in the past few years. As a frame for this consultation, ATS provided in advance the *Master of Divinity Curriculum Revision Folio*, which captured the wisdom of the October 2003 consultation in the form of participant interviews, key issues, five essays, and ten case studies.

I was asked to listen to the 2007 consultation with these questions in mind: At your school, is there an understanding among faculty as to the four content areas of the MDiv degree program, and does the faculty have a clear and common vision of the MDiv goals as they approach curriculum revisioning? My report is drawn from five sources: (1) the folio content, (2) the presentations focusing on *Educating Clergy*, (3) the other consultation presentations, (4) the group discussions, and (5) selected interviews of participants.

## **MDiv degree program standard**

In June 1996 the Association adopted the present standard for the MDiv degree program:

**A.3.1.1 Religious Heritage:** The program shall provide structured opportunity to develop a comprehensive and discriminating understanding of the religious heritage.

**A.3.1.2 Cultural Context:** The program shall provide opportunity to develop an understanding of the cultural realities and structures within which the church lives and carries out its mission.



**A.3.1.3 Personal and Spiritual Formation:** The program shall provide opportunities through which the student may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness. Ministerial preparation includes concern with the development of capacities—intellectual and affective, individual and corporate, ecclesial and public—that are requisite to a life of pastoral leadership.

**A.3.1.4 Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership:** The program shall provide theological reflection on and education for the practice of ministry. These activities should cultivate the capacity for leadership in both ecclesial and public contexts.

For decades, ATS had operated under its former MDiv degree program standard and so the work of this decade (1996–2006) was to instill this new standard into the culture of the Association’s schools. Part of the motivation in assigning this reporter his task, I suspect, was to see if the new standard was really becoming part of MDiv culture, its native language.

## Folio content

The *Master of Divinity Curriculum Revision Folio* in its first twelve pages takes the participant through an interview with 2003 consultation participants as to their understanding of each of the four content areas of the MDiv degree program. In comments on *Religious Heritage*, a respondent notes the disconnect between how he/she gained knowledge of the heritage (as a research scholar at a research institution) and what this teacher wanted to do at the seminary—to meet a wide range of academic competencies and interests in the classroom. This person went on to show that Religious Heritage content tended to be interpreted as needing to add new courses to the already large curriculum as new areas of the heritage studies developed, making the curriculum increasingly unwieldy and demanding even more of the students. The conclusion people were coming to in 2003 was to turn to the “new” standards and see if perhaps other categories of the curriculum might cause them to reshape what is being sought in a seminary education.

Comments on *Cultural Context* indicated that pressure to revise the curriculum came from the churches and communities in which students would serve. If the Religious Heritage content prepares students to read and interpret the sacred texts, this content area makes it explicit that the students need the skills to read and interpret the context in which they will work—both inside and outside the church’s walls. Here the task is that of acquiring a *prophetic imagination*; the cultural realities and structures of the congregations need to be an intentional part of the curriculum; the pedagogy has to be that of *praxis*. This content calls into question our starting an ecclesiology class, for example, with a universal concept of *the church* and moving to application—a model of church that may well be foreign to the reality of many of the students in the class.



*Personal and Spiritual Formation:* The formidable responsibility for the character of our students along with the more lofty aim of developing a “theological habitus” has caused seminaries in the midst of curriculum review to ask just how do we “provide opportunities through which the student may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness?” Perhaps this is the area where the curriculum designers need the most imagination. Is spirituality, character, maturity “taught or caught”? Is this a “textual” exercise? And most elusive—how is assessment done in this area? There are more questions here than declarations.

The notes on *Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership* seemed to indicate that this content had really found a home in the curriculum. The word *leader* has become an accepted analogue for *pastor, minister, priest*. The 2003 consultation seemed to unpack *leadership* and specify its skills as the ability to listen, the ability to be understood by different people, the ability to lead a public discussion, and the ability to preach and teach. It was with this content that schools seemed to rein in the overextended curriculum driven by the hegemony of the Religious Heritage content.

### **Presentations focusing on *Educating Clergy***

Charles Foster, lead author of the monumental Carnegie Foundation study—*Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination*—made two presentations at the consultation: “The Impact of Pedagogy on Curriculum Revision” and “Pedagogies as Sites of Integration.” Foster’s extensive survey and visitation of a variety of North American seminaries suggest a concept called *signature pedagogies*. Lee S. Shulman, president of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching that sponsored Foster’s study, introduced this concept.

Shulman claims if one wants to understand why professions develop as they do, one should study their forms of professional preparation. It is here one will detect the characteristic forms of teaching and learning—signature pedagogies. These types of teaching organize the fundamental ways in which practitioners are educated for their professions and instructed in critical aspects of the three fundamental dimensions of professional work—to think, to perform, and to act with integrity. For example, Shulman points out that the first year of law school is dominated by the case dialogue method of teaching. In medicine, he says, one immediately thinks of the phenomenon of bedside teaching. Such pedagogical signatures can teach a lot about the personalities, dispositions, and cultures of their fields. Shulman says we have become cognizant of the many tensions that surround professional preparation, from the competing demands of academy and profession to the essential contradictions inherent in the multiple roles and expectations for professional practitioners themselves.

A signature pedagogy has three dimensions. First, it has a surface structure, which consists of concrete, operational acts of teaching and learning, of showing and demonstrating, of questioning and answering, of interacting and withholding, and of approaching and withdrawing. Any signature pedagogy

also has a deep structure, a set of assumptions about how best to impart a certain body of knowledge and know-how. And it has an implicit structure, a moral dimension that comprises a set of beliefs about professional attitudes, values, and dispositions.

In his first presentation, Foster laid out what he terms a signature pedagogical framework of interpretation, formation, contextualization, and performance distinctive to MDiv education.

1. Pedagogies of interpretation focus students as critical analysts with some text, relationship, or situation to deepen, expand, or transform understandings and meanings from their faith communities.
2. Pedagogies of formation deal with the dispositions, habits, knowledge, and skills that form the student’s professional identity, practice, habits, and integrity.
3. Pedagogies of contextualization help students understand the context of a text, historical event, or religious practice and explore strategies for social change. Core to these teaching practices are the dynamics of mutual correlation between the texts of the tradition and the present religious experience in the context.
4. Pedagogies of performance emphasize the interaction of academic and religious expectations for effective public leadership. This is a teaching that mediates the cognitive, practical, and professional identities of students.

Clearly these signature pedagogies of clergy education congruently track the four MDiv content areas. As increasing numbers of seminary professors read and heed *Educating Clergy*, these four content areas will become the intrinsic teaching and learning style marking the MDiv degree.

Foster’s second presentation added two more dimensions to these content areas: vertical and horizontal integration. Vertical integration addresses the learning sequence in each of the four respective areas and sub areas (e.g., the ideal learning sequence of the Scripture courses). Horizontal integration addresses the ways in which the heritage, formational, contextual, and leadership courses come into focus for requisite student learnings (e.g., the students’ ability to prophetically preach with integrity on a major social issue). This matter of integration brought discussion of types of MDiv curricula—theory to practice, practice directed, content concentrated, character focused, contextually centered.

### **Other consultation presentations**

Daniel Aleshire, ATS executive director, suggested we consider who the major voices in curriculum determination are. While it was agreed that the ATS Commission standards place the decision about curriculum in the hands of the faculty, Aleshire brought the awareness that different factors might influence this faculty. He suggested that ATS conversations with various constituencies have revealed an emphasis on the missional (contextual, if you like) more than on the professional.

Jack Seymour’s survey of deans who had recently completed curriculum revision suggested four “images” of the MDiv curriculum: denominational formation, congregational leadership, theological reflection, and mission. As you compare these images to the four MDiv content areas, you will notice spiritual formation is not one of the four; instead of being a distinct model, it was seen as integrative in any model. It is denominational formation that is not one of the four content areas. The other three align as follows: heritage (theological reflection), context (mission), and leadership (congregational leadership).

### **Group discussions**

Two items stood out for me in group discussions that related to the four MDiv content areas. The first was that when not being held to a consciousness of the four areas by some part of the presentation or through an exercise, more often than not when discussing curriculum revision the conversation took curriculum to mean the Religious Heritage courses. So it would seem there is still some cultural conversion that needs to take place.

The second issue was that this consultation seemed to have been effective in terms of how the participants talked about the teaching pedagogy as central to curriculum revision. More often than not discussion about curriculum change had folks asking “just how will we teach if that change is made.”

### **Selected interviews of participants**

- “The four content areas is not the frame we have used for our curriculum; but on reflection it is a good frame. We have employed it for student evaluation this year for the first time.”
- “Quite honestly we were not conscious of this as a frame for our curriculum as we began our work.”
- “What the four content areas did was to make us examine our pedagogies. With the use of Foster’s book, we had the faculty sort their pedagogies into these four categories.”
- “I have to say these four content areas were in the background but were not the starting point of our reconsideration of curriculum.”
- “The four content areas show up in each course we offer in the MDiv and this can be documented by examining our syllabi.”

The above five comments from participants certainly do not represent an exhaustive nor necessarily representative sample, but they do illustrate the following three points:

1. It does not seem that when the term *curriculum* is used that ATS school personnel automatically think in four grand divisions. Perhaps curriculum and heritage are still synonymous.
2. It seems that the emphasis on outcomes is where this four-fold framework may have its greatest incorporation into the curriculum. And it may be that outcomes increasingly will become the starting point for curriculum revision.
3. As the *Educating Clergy* book influences MDiv curriculum revision, it is probable that the four ATS content areas will influence the understanding of the curriculum.

## **Conclusion**

The Association and the Commission seem to have done all they could to focus the four content areas of Religious Heritage, Cultural Context, Personal and Spiritual Formation, and Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership as the frame for MDiv curriculum revision in this consultation. And these are signs that after ten years the standards are beginning to become part of the culture of ATS schools.

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## ENDNOTE

1. Charles R. Foster, Lisa E. Dahill, Lawrence A. Golemon, and Barbara Wang Tolentino, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

# Curriculum Revision: Ongoing or Sporadic

*Shawn L. Oliver*

*Ashland Theological Seminary*

*ABSTRACT: This essay integrates the author's viewpoint with those of attendees and presenters at the MDiv Curriculum Consultation in May 2007 on the topic of curriculum review as a sporadic or ongoing process. The author uses the metaphor of a sailboat to discuss the voyage of a curriculum review process, including the appropriate crew and equipment needed to engage in ongoing curriculum revision. The essay emphasizes the importance of mission, vision, leadership, relationships, risk taking, and trust when engaging in organizational change.*

## Smooth sailing or stormy waters

Engaging in curriculum review can be likened to a voyage on a sailboat. Some theological seminary sailboats (curriculum review processes) may be in the marina (stagnant) or leaving the dock (sporadic or infrequent curricular review but making progress). A few are catching the wind (ongoing curriculum review). Along this voyage, seminaries may face stormy waters (resistance to change; unhealthy conflict). Regardless of the dangers, theological seminaries must embark on this voyage (curriculum review and revision process); it's worth the risk to engage in God's work.

Seminary faculty and administrators most frequently use the terms *ongoing* or *sporadic* when describing curriculum review at their institutions. Seminaries that have engaged in this process, have shared their stories. In addition, other leaders in the field of theological education speak to the topic of curriculum review. Take a tour of these stories with me and maybe you will hear whispers of your own seagoing story into the ocean of curriculum review. These accounts provide words of encouragement and insight into the proper crew and equipment needed to leave the marina, weather the storm at sea, and catch the wind.

## Places along the way

### *Still in the marina*

Seminary personnel share their thoughts about why the curriculum review process is having trouble getting started.

"Our seminary's faculty are primarily focused in the classical disciplines and, for the most part, display no interest in practical ministry preparation. Our biggest challenge with curriculum [revision] is finding a place to actually begin the conversation with faculty. They are just not interested."

“Some faculty are resistant to change; many are resistant to an outcomes-based approach to education.”

*What is needed in order to leave the marina? (jump-start the curriculum review process)*

- A vision of the task (God’s leading and direction)
- A route (journey, process)
- A captain (Spirit of God leading the way; a leader listening to God in prayer and with a vision for what *can be*)
- Crew members willing to give time and energy to jump-start the sailboat (committed team of faculty and administrators dissatisfied with the status quo and with doing things the way they have always been done; catalysts in the change effort)
- Appropriate gear or equipment (resources dedicated to the curriculum review process)

*Out at sea*

Seminary personnel share challenges they faced as they engaged in the process of curriculum review.

“During the two years of conversation, the faculty faced the temptation of wanting to take refuge in discipline areas and simply adjust the old curriculum.”

“Curriculum review at my seminary is considered a scary process that is met with great faculty resistance. Departments may conduct their own curriculum review, but it rarely happens across the disciplines.”

“Some faculty are more stewards of a discipline rather than the degree as a whole.”

“Are we preparing people for the church that is emerging? Are students being prepared to engage in catalytic change or preparing only for the dying church?”

“What is the legitimate role of the ecclesial community in determining the content of the curriculum? How do the funders and ecclesial leaders influence the curriculum? The theological seminaries must engage these groups in dialogue on curricular issues. These groups must not be overlooked as schools engage in curricular revision.”

*What is needed to find one's way out at sea? (engage in the process of curriculum review)*

Equipment

- A compass, a navigational instrument (a common mission guiding the way) for finding direction
- A plan for the voyage (stated curricular goals or outcomes/expectations for what lies ahead)

Readiness for the journey

- An understanding that this is a journey, not a destination; there are always new places to visit (curriculum review as a process without end; process as important or more so than the product)
- Readiness for an adventure (attitude of expectancy and commitment; open to change; willingness to embrace what *can be*)

Captain

- Listening carefully to what the crew members are saying; staying at the helm (leading through listening; welcoming input; staying steady as the leader)

Crew

- Seeking the proper direction (team listening to God in prayer; leading the community)
- Contributing to the voyage (fulfilling roles needed to engage the process; engaging all disciplines in the dialogue; hearing all voices)
- Willing to step out of their personal harbor or safe haven (allowing the Lord to be the sanctuary, shelter, place of safety; finding trust and rest in Him; allowing the Lord to build the curriculum)
- Willing to work together to support the captain's leadership (laying personal agendas aside; focusing on the students' preparation for ministry)
- Trusting the captain's leadership (allowing the Spirit of God to guide; faculty working alongside the leadership)

Stewards of the voyage

- Crew members working *with* the wind, working together (Spirit of God leading; passion for one's discipline; stewards of the degree as a whole)
- All parts of the crew working together (faculty working together to develop the whole curriculum)
- Crew members and a captain with self-awareness (understanding that curriculum review touches people at some of the most sensitive areas of identity, inclusion, purpose)

Supporters of the voyage

- Sound of the wind (paying attention to constituencies such as denominations, board members; engaging the ecclesial community in curricular discussion)

*What should be done when the storms (challenges of curriculum review) come, because they WILL come?*

- Be experienced in a multitude of wind and sea conditions (recognize the complexity of curriculum review; make sure someone sees the bigger picture and keeps the community focused and moving forward in the process)
- Realize the turbulent waters are just part of the voyage (recognize there are no guarantees that the process will be easy and without its challenges; don't be surprised when challenges come; be prepared to address them by staying focused on the mission)
- Look to Jesus to calm the storm (pray when challenges and troubles come; trust that Jesus is bigger than any process; have courage to press through the difficulties)
- Pay attention to the change in wind (understand that curriculum review is not a linear process; accept that the process will need to be flexible; realize that day-to-day operations of the seminary and responsibilities of faculty are not put on hold for the curriculum review process; adjust the process based on the needs of the seminary community at any particular time)
- Be sensitive to the speed of the sailboat (be aware that some faculty will be ready to move forward sooner than others; engage early adopters in bringing along others in the change effort)
- Repair any damaged or broken parts of the sailboat that occur while on the voyage (revise what is not working; mend relationships that may be strained; seek peace)

### *Catching the wind*

Seminary personnel share what it's like to have curriculum review well under way.

"Thirty years ago curriculum revision was episodic. However, after a recent curriculum revision, the seminary has embraced curriculum review as more of an ongoing process."

"Our curriculum review is ongoing because we now have a structure in place. The curriculum committee reviews the curriculum each year."

"The ecclesial community must be engaged in the curriculum discussion. If the church doesn't want theological education, then there is no future for theological education."

"Ongoing curriculum revision also requires collegiality, which is built partly through patience and perseverance across the disciplines."

"One way to encourage ongoing curriculum revision is to engage in ongoing dialogue on issues of integration."



“Engaging faculty in discussions on pedagogy is another way to keep the discussion going regarding curriculum since curriculum and pedagogy cannot or should not be separated.”

*How does one stay the course? (maintain ongoing curriculum review)*

Leading of the Spirit

- Continually turn toward the wind (follow the Spirit of God; Jesus said that he does what he sees the Father doing.)
- Catch sight of the proper route (recognize that curriculum review is not a destination; it’s a journey; stay focused on the mission)

Structural adjustments

- Maintain the condition of the sailboat (make sure the appropriate structure for ongoing curriculum review is in place; build it into the life of the seminary; empower faculty to engage in review and revision)
- Make structural adjustments to the sailboat as needed (assess student learning; make curricular and/or pedagogical adjustments; keep moving forward)

Supporters of the voyage

- Pay attention to the passengers on the voyage and those supporting the voyage (engage in ongoing dialogue with constituencies—students, faculty, the church, accrediting bodies, counseling agencies, parachurch organizations, and more).
- Continuously check the movement of the wind (keep listening to the Lord and to constituencies; stay attuned to the church).
- Adjust to changes in wind or direction (pay attention to the nature of the changing church; prepare people for the church that *is*).

Collaboration among the captain and the crew

- Watch out for the safety of one another while serving as crew members on the journey (bring out the best in one another; draw on one another’s strengths)
- Be aware of the potential danger of what lies beneath the seas (recognize that the change process may bring to the surface hidden, unresolved conflict, wounds, hurts, buried emotions)
- Be equipped to bring people to safety (provide safe places for people to share, to be accepted, to be heard; don’t expect the curriculum review process to bear the weight of the challenges facing the faculty, administrators, and seminary; make other resources available)

A diverse crew

- Keep the sailboat staffed with crew members with various skills and knowledge (welcome diversity of opinion; engage faculty in dialogue on integration; provide opportunities for integration of teaching and learning; model integration for the students)

Safety training

- Retool and provide ongoing training for the crew (address faculty turnover—connect new faculty with the curriculum; engage in faculty development; enhance teaching and learning practices)

- Keep safeguards in place so that the sailboat does not wreck or get damaged (recognize that accrediting agencies want to improve the quality of education; although a school may not agree with the requirements, all schools can benefit from action, reflection, and planning)

### **A few reminders for the trip**

1. The sailboat can only carry a certain amount of weight. If the boat is carrying too much weight, it has the potential to sink. (The curriculum can only hold so much; faculty must ask, What are the essentials in the curriculum? and then make informed decisions, sometimes requiring difficult choices.)
2. Remember to stay focused so that the journey will guide you. Use your compass. Press on with the plan. (Know the desired outcomes and continue to assess to make sure you are reaching those outcomes.)
3. No matter how wonderful the sailboat, the crew members are more important. (Remember that people are more important than the process; seek to live together in harmony.)
4. Celebrate along the way! (Remember to celebrate what the Lord is doing in your midst; celebrate with one another as a community.)

Just as a sailboat must leave the marina in order to launch a voyage, seminaries must choose to leave the safety of what is familiar to engage in ongoing curriculum revision. Realize that storms will come in the change process. Embrace curriculum review as an ongoing process, and stay the course. ALL ABOARD for a remarkable voyage!

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# For Such a Time as This: Why We Use an Outcomes-Based Model

*J. Dorcas Gordon*  
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*ABSTRACT: This article attempts to demystify the process of MDiv curriculum review and to encourage schools to persevere in it. It affirms that while outcomes development is difficult work, it is a best practice in theological education. The author concludes that if her small school can accomplish this task and see the benefits to every stakeholder in the institution, then it is within the reach of all schools in the Association.*

On the first evening of the MDiv Curriculum Revision Workshop, Lee Shulman, president of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, began his presentation on professional formation with an apology. He told us that he would be returning home immediately after he spoke in order to celebrate the feast of Purim with his grandchildren. He then proceeded to delight us with a description of the nature of this feast and its scriptural background in the book of Esther. For me this story became a touchstone for the nature of professional formation and for our consultation on what we as ATS schools are seeking to do in our work in curriculum revision. Why?

To be fair, the book of Esther is the story of two women—Esther and Vashti—who made difficult decisions in a particularly complex cultural reality. For one woman, her decision led to dishonour and removal from her place of privilege. For the other woman, her decision led to an affirmation of blessing.

Vashti and Esther were women of great privilege who were bound and restricted by social expectation, by systems and structures of power and control. Both women exercised their call by challenging, in very different ways, those structures of oppression. Both women, reading their cultural context, determined to act in a way that was both dangerous and life-giving.

Vashti and Esther may initially seem far removed from conversations in 2007 about curriculum review and professional ministerial formation, but increasingly in my mind, these two became intricately related. As I listened to the various presentations and spoke to colleagues about their progress in curriculum review (or lack thereof), the story of Vashti and Esther became a point of reference for me as to what the essence of our work in ministerial formation actually is, and more importantly, its urgency. In other words, my reflection on the habits of heart, mind, and action demonstrated by these two women led me to a comparison of their story with what we seek to accomplish in our work of ministerial formation.

As the weekend unfolded, the question that kept gnawing away in the background asked: What habits of heart, mind, and action would enable our students to make equally difficult decisions in our time? How will what we teach enable them to understand “our time”? How will it develop the habits needed for such a ministry? How do we go about creating such a curriculum?

As I spoke with other participants and listened to the questions of those gathered, I sensed a great deal of angst about the process of a curriculum revision that was based on an outcomes model. At the same time, I did not sense a great deal of resistance to the need for such a curriculum, rather the issue was one of process. Many admitted either that they had not yet begun or were in the very early stages. This was worrisome for many, in that, all realized that a positive ATS reaccreditation was riding on the successful completion of the process. Questions abounded: What does an outcome look like? How many should we have? Where do we start? I'm scared to death that our faculty will balk. How do I persuade them to engage in what seems like a very involved and difficult process? I am afraid they will resent the amount of time it takes.

Let me say a few words about what we did at Knox College, not because it is an ideal process or because we have found a perfect outcomes curriculum. I do so because I think, given my perception of what happened at the ATS consultation, schools need as many examples as possible that show that this work of curriculum review is possible, that it is not overwhelming (surely if a small school like mine can do it, anyone's can!). But of even greater importance, schools need to hear that all—students, faculty, school, and church—benefit greatly from the work undertaken.

I teach biblical interpretation and I best understand this work of curriculum revision as a hermeneutical exercise. I view it as asking us to distance ourselves from what is most familiar and inviting us to use a less familiar model to enter into assessment (i.e., an outcomes-based model). As an interpretive exercise, it invites us to view our work through a different lens asking a different set of questions. It does not invalidate the old lens, but instead asks us to see our work from a different perspective and to be open to new connections.

In my first year as an undergraduate, a psychology professor showed us a picture in which there are two women. While I have long since forgotten what his lesson was about, in my teaching career, this picture has been worth at least a thousand words. It is a picture with which people across many cultures are familiar. When you first look at it you see an old woman with a long nose and kerchief tied over her head *or* you see a stylish young woman with an attractive hat and necklace. Generally on first glance the viewer sees one or the other, but not both. Only when the second is pointed out to us are our eyes able to go back and forth easily between the two. This picture helps my students understand what my outcomes for New Testament interpretation are. I think it is equally helpful in situating an outcomes-based MDiv curriculum.

As theological educators, we have had a long history of assessing academic learning and what constitutes successful learning. All of us as educators come with a preunderstanding of what makes for good professional theological education. We are generally very good at it. Daniel Aleshire has said it best: why is it that when one student crosses the platform at graduation, all members of the faculty beam; yet, when another student crosses the platform, all members of the faculty immediately look at their feet. Faculty members know what readiness for ministry looks like. What an outcomes-based curriculum challenges us to do is to make that knowledge public and measurable.

Knox College started down this road a number of years ago. We have just graduated our first class using this model of assessment and are excited about its possibilities for our work of preparing ordained ministers for the church. It was not always thus! The decision to undertake a curriculum revision did create a lot of angst. We started at the wrong place—with actual courses in the curriculum, and how many in each discipline were necessary. This quickly led to the faculty feeling defensive and moving into a protective posture.

We knew nothing about outcomes but, on the advice of a consultant, moved to this as a way out of our impasse. It helped that we had just been through the difficult experience of asking a student to leave in light of grave concerns about the student's fitness for ministry. The decision of faculty was appealed to Toronto School of Theology, and, as a result, our process for assessing fitness for ministry was closely screened by our peers. A number of us came away from this experience determined to be much more precise about the process of assessment. Although painful, we now had our starting place: What behaviours, actions, and habits were essential for ministry? How would we know whether they were present or lacking?

The result, after a lot of hard work, was a one-page document that set out what habits of heart, mind, and action we expected our students to demonstrate before they could be approved for graduation. Of course this led to other critical aspects—and more work. The faculty members worked out a series of outcomes for their particular discipline based on the Commission on Accrediting degree program standards' content areas.<sup>1</sup> Then the syllabi for every course were revised and the goals of the course set out in terms of these areas, built incrementally across the whole curriculum. Insofar as possible each course was to include elements of all four content areas. We recognized that as a faculty we needed to spend more time in corporate assessment—and have built set times into our regular meeting schedule. Presently we continue to work on identifying the types of exercises that will best indicate an outcome has been successfully demonstrated. We also recognize that more time is needed for faculty conversation—not planning or decision-making—just conversation.

As I reread what I have written, I am sure many of you will say, "It sounds like just too much work. Are the benefits great enough?" I cannot emphasize enough that they are not only great enough, but they have breathed renewed energy into our work. Throughout the process, faculty members gained a new respect for one another as they talked about their commitment to teaching and their strategies for learning. I do not think it is too much to say that these conversations have greatly strengthened our sense of shared vocation. Gordon Smith describes it so well in an article on the collective vocation. He states,

An essential element of effective communication is good conversation. . . . This is not the conversation of complaint. Rather, it is the honest conversation about the joys and sorrows of our work, the dreams and aspirations we have for our work, and the shared wisdom of learning to live with grace in the midst of it all.<sup>2</sup>

As a school, we are much clearer about what an adequate preparation for ministry requires the student to be able to know, be, and do. These requirements are made public in a student handbook that is distributed in the first few weeks of class to every new student and on the college Web site. Faculty as a whole and individually are able to speak with greater clarity to the denominations that send students to us for ministerial preparation. We can point out why a student is successful and pinpoint specific areas where a student is not ready.

To our surprise, this process of curriculum review has also assisted us in other areas such as rewriting policies concerning the awarding of scholarships and bursaries, the assignment of teaching assistants, the review of faculty and sessional lecturers, and student evaluations of courses to mention but a few. Most of all, I believe it has given us a new confidence in our calling. One of the presenters in March left us with two questions that the process of curriculum review raised for him: Are we thinking big enough? Are we being courageous enough? I think our experience of curriculum review has made us much less fearful in asking such questions.

At the beginning, I spoke at length about the Vashti and Esther story and would like to end in the same place. In my ongoing reflection on the next steps in our curriculum revision as a faculty at Knox College, I cannot help but compare the critical judgment of Vashti and Esther with what our students will need in order to analyze structures of oppression that exist in our day. When I identify the cultural realities within which these women lived and the cultural realities within which the church is called to carry out its ministry today, I am in awe of the vocation that is given to us who are theological educators. I am equally aware of the urgency of the work that we are doing in preparing women and men for such a time at this.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. The four content areas identified in the Commission standard for the MDiv degree program (Standard A) are: Religious Heritage (Section 3.1.1), Cultural Context (Section 3.1.2), Personal and Spiritual Formation (Section 3.1.3) and Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership (Section 3.1.4).
2. Gordon T. Smith, "Attending to the Collective Vocation" in *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, eds. L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 240–261.

# Mission Possible: Making Use of the School's Mission Statement in Curriculum Review

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*ABSTRACT: This article draws on the experience of academic deans to explore the relationship between a school's mission statement and its curriculum. The process of developing mission statements is widely recognized as helping schools to clarify their purpose and goals so they can plan for the future. The mission statements themselves can also provide an indispensable focus of a school's purpose that can help its leadership avoid "mission creep." And the periodic review, revision, and reform of a school's curriculum allow its faculty to take stock of the school's educational vision and to ask tough questions about whether and how well the school is preparing graduates for the practices of ministry and leadership in communities of faith. Such a process of curriculum review and revision, according to deans interviewed for this article, benefit from careful reflection on the school's mission statement and can contribute to further clarification and amendment of an institution's mission statement in light of changing circumstances.*

## **Dilbert and the theological arts**

One would be hard pressed to find a phrase that elicits more cynicism among some theological educators than either *mission statement* or *curriculum review*. Imagine, if you will, the potential skepticism you might unleash by combining these phrases in a single sentence, such as in the question raised recently with a group of academic deans and faculty members: At your school, what influence does your institution's mission statement have on curriculum revisioning?

Scott Adams, the cartoonist of corporate America, gives voice to cynicism toward the former when he defines a mission statement as "a long awkward sentence that demonstrates management's inability to think clearly." Adams illustrates his definition in a Dilbert comic strip in which the pointy-haired boss takes it upon himself to write the firm's mission statement: "We enhance stockholder value through strategic business initiatives by empowered employees working in new team paradigms." Dilbert remarks, "Do you ever just marvel at the fact we get paid to do this?" And the boss replies, "Did anybody bring donuts?"<sup>1</sup>

If anything, mission statements tend to be held in even lower esteem by some theological educators than among the more jaded business professionals. There are at least three reasons for this: (1) The worst mission statements are loaded with clichés and faddish jargon (e.g., empowerment, strategic, teams, and paradigms); (2) they are sometimes the products of silo-thinking among



executive leadership (i.e., not the products of appropriately representative and deliberative groups); and (3) the whole idea for mission statements was imported from the corporate environment (always suspicious and often the “kiss of death” among academics).

Curriculum reviews provoke their own share of skepticism on the part of some administrators and theological faculty. One retired dean says that the influence of curriculum reforms are almost always limited to the hallways of a school, stopping short of changing things behind the doors of classrooms and faculty offices. He observes that few people on curriculum review committees understand just how crucial implementation of the curriculum plan is until it is too late. Too little attention is given, early on, to the building of consensus, the appropriate exercise of influence, and the growing of a faculty into new shared understandings of vision and pedagogical commitments that, in the end, will determine whether or how well a new curriculum will achieve its ideals.

Another former dean observes that no curriculum review will outlive the faculty that performed the review, and few reviews fundamentally change the actual learning of students. In my experience, the most beneficial aspect of curriculum review may be the formative power a good review process exerts over the faculty itself, encouraging the faculty to think explicitly about their pedagogy and their educational vision. In other words, curriculum review may best be understood in terms of faculty development of a particularly salient variety because the educative process of review drives inexorably toward decisions that will affect the core of what faculty do as teachers. In fact, I would argue that no curriculum we write is ever as significant as the curriculum we hire in the person of gifted, knowledgeable, energetic, and passionate professors. In some sense, the curricula we write establishes in policy the vision of the curricula we hire and influences future searches for new faculty who will share this vision.

Schools involve their boards, administrations, faculties, student bodies, and sometimes various elements of their larger constituencies in the development of their mission statements. And these same constituencies are polled and surveyed and interviewed as faculties review and revise their curricula. In the face of skepticism and outright cynicism, why do we continue to do so? Because hope springs eternal even in the groves of academe. Often justifiably so. Despite the cynicism of some, the process of developing mission statements frequently does help our schools to clarify their purpose and their goals so they can plan for the future. The mission statements themselves (the final products of these processes) can provide an indispensable focus of a school's purpose that can help its leadership avoid “mission creep,” the perennial temptation to abandon the essential for the sake of the important. Despite the skepticism of others, the periodic review, revision, and reform of a school's curriculum allows its faculty to take stock of the school's educational vision and to ask tough questions about whether and how well the school is preparing its graduates for the practices of ministry and leadership in communities of faith.



Recently, in conversations with colleagues in leadership positions at several theological schools, it has emerged that many schools are finding that their mission statements provide a (if not *the*) crucial point of orientation when faculties enter into curriculum review. As faculty members attempt to navigate a wide range of interests, perspectives, needs, hopes, and anxieties among the various constituencies and groups within and beyond their schools, they often find that their institution's mission statement grounds and provides boundaries for their curriculum review. As Lacey Warner, associate dean for academic formation at Duke University Divinity School, explains, "The mission statement both reflects and shapes the school's commitments, ideally in a continuous process of accountability and revisioning."

### **Of missions and mission statements**

"When we did our curriculum review and revision four years ago," wrote J. Paul Rajashekar, dean of Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia (LTSP), "we spent a lot of time reflecting on curricular goals and objectives of our MDiv program in relation to our mission statement." His email went on to say, "Most mission statements of theological schools that I have seen tend to be very generic (i.e., broad statements about training, educating or preparing lay or pastoral leaders for ministry in the church and the world)." In the case of LTSP, this generic mission statement is denominationally specific: "a school of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America . . . committed to preparing ordained and lay ministers of the Word as leaders for the mission of the Church in the world."

In order to connect the review of their curriculum with this generic mission statement, Rajashekar says the faculty developed "an extensive commentary" on the mission statement. This commentary served as a kind of "vision document that lays out more specific theological, pastoral, and public commitments of the institution." He explains, "It is this vision document that helped our curriculum review process, especially in articulating the goals and objectives of MDiv and MAR programs."

Now that their revised curriculum has been in place for a few years, the faculty and administration of LTSP are rethinking the original vision document "in light of changing contexts of ministry." In other words, their continuing assessment of the effectiveness of their new curriculum is leading them to reevaluate their more fundamental assumptions about their school's mission. "So there is a dialectical relationship between the curriculum and the mission/vision statements, which needs to be critically reexamined frequently," says Rajashekar. "While the generic mission statement remains the same, the commentary on that statement could be easily revised and nuanced without an elaborate self-study process."

Dale Stoffer, academic dean of Ashland Theological Seminary, sees a similar creative tension between a school's mission statement and curriculum review. "Four years ago we began a comprehensive curriculum review that is just now coming to completion. We began the process with the understanding that the new curriculum would be in line with our mission statement." While

the mission statement provided the faculty with “a starting point for doing curriculum review,” and while it “set the boundaries for the process as well,” Stoffer notes that the curriculum review process has generated interest “in taking a new look at the mission statement.” He says that while the school’s mission statement probably “will not change all that much,” they now see a review of the mission statement as “integral to the upcoming strategic planning process.”

**“Dance, then, wherever you may be”**

Stoffer’s experience parallels that of other deans, like Junias Venugopal, dean of the seminary at Columbia International University, Columbia, South Carolina, who describes the relationship between his school’s mission statement and curriculum review as “a dance—a step forward, one to the side and a couple backward.” This is what Lacey Warner, of Duke University Divinity School, describes as the “continual process of accountability and re-visioning.” She continues: “The mission statement, having emerged from the school’s commitments and strengths, reflects those commitments embodied in the curriculum. Then, by describing our shared purpose, the mission statement provides focus and direction for ongoing curricular and programmatic assessment.”

The ongoing process is anything but linear, as most deans and faculties are well aware. It is a complex process of multidirectional reflection and anticipation: (1) reviewing pedagogies in light of student performance and studying the concerns and hopes of various constituencies in light of changes in the contemporary culture, (2) moderating negotiations among various stakeholders in the life of the seminary while allowing the goals previously set by faculty, administration, and board to be brought into conversation with current practices and future possibilities, and (3) rethinking the mission of the school and setting new goals in light of new insights.

One school leader made the observation that she believes her school is doing the last big “Curriculum Review” (in the sense of a periodic, multiyear event) it is likely ever to do. She says that from now on they will probably think of curriculum review as a continuous process of assessment and planning. Another dean nuanced this idea slightly by saying that he thinks his institution is now moving into the mode of continuous review of the curriculum, but this review will be punctuated by periodic revisions as new insights are gathered, processed, and put into place at regular intervals. Minor adjustments to the curriculum might be made on an annual basis, he observed, while larger adjustments would take place every three years or so. In other words, some schools are seeing curriculum review now as a dance that never ends, the timing and the tempo of which are just as important as the steps.

Randy MacFarland, vice president and dean of Denver Seminary, demonstrates how complex this dance can be when he observes that while a school’s “mission statement should be connected with any discussions involving curriculum revisioning,” there are other things that must be taken into account and which can lead a school to reevaluate its vision. MacFarland says, “We are

focused right now on assessment of learning outcomes and curricular support for the accomplishment of those outcomes,” thus they are explicitly tracing the relationship between their school’s mission statement and the Commission MDiv Degree Program Standard for content (Standard A, section A.3.1).

Documents prepared for Denver Seminary’s Educational Policies Committee graphically demonstrate the relationship between the school’s fairly generic mission statement (“Denver Seminary seeks to glorify God by equipping leaders to think biblically, live faithfully and lead wisely for a lifetime”) and the Commission MDiv degree program content (Religious Heritage, Cultural Context, Personal and Spiritual Formation, and Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership). Denver uses the Commission content expectations to align the seminary’s mission statement with its student learning outcomes and the core courses required in its MDiv program.

This alignment is crucial from the perspective of the teaching enterprise, if theological education aspires to be coherent, integrated, something more than merely an arbitrary assemblage of various courses from a range of more or less related disciplines. A school’s mission statement can serve as a living reminder to the faculty that they are contributing to the preparation of persons who must, if they are to be effective as pastors and church leaders, be able to think, believe, and act with integrity.

A school’s alignment of its mission statement and its curriculum is no less significant from an institutional perspective, as a retired seminary president recently observed. The curriculum does not simply belong to a faculty or to students, but to the whole school, including the board of trustees. Everyone who is invested in a theological school has a stake in making sure that the curriculum reflects the core mission of the school and in being committed to take a fresh look, from time to time, to determine whether the school’s educational mission has either been eroded by extraneous activities and perspectives or how that mission might appropriately be enlarged to respond better to changes in the context.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Scott Adams, *The Dilbert Principle: A Cubicle’s-Eye View of Bosses, Meetings, Management Fads & Other Workplace Afflictions* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1996), 36–37.



# Curriculum Revision and Assessment: Do Your Degree Requirements Still Make Sense the Day after Graduation?

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*ABSTRACT: This article discusses the integral relationship between MDiv curriculum revision and assessment. Assessment is identified as the starting point for authentic curriculum revision. The importance of developing both learning and degree outcomes prior to the work of revision is emphasized as is the necessity of embedding assessment into the new curriculum. The article discusses the role of the faculty, board, alumni and congregations that will be served in the assessment process.*

"We don't want assessment concerns to get in the way of our efforts to revise our curriculum."

"We want to think about assessment right from the start of our curricular review. We hope that we can develop new assessment tools right along with our new curriculum."

"The curriculum review is too important to be hijacked by the bureaucracy of assessment."

"Quite frankly, we've been talking a lot about the curriculum review, but no one as far as I know has even mentioned the 'assessment' word."

"You can't do assessment until you have a curriculum, so I don't think we should be distracted right at the beginning of our revision work."

Comments such as these are not uncommon when faculty members talk about efforts to begin a curricular revision and have even been expressed by some committee members as their schools have begun their curriculum redesign.

## **Owning the curriculum**

Perhaps the best advice given at the ATS conference on MDiv curriculum revision in March 2007 was that the curriculum needs to be owned by the faculty in such a way that its revision is "their common vocation." The ownership of the project is indeed paramount if it is to result in anything valuable. The quest for ownership by the faculty begins with dialogue, and the dialogue

begins with a simple question. I believe that the most important question that can be raised by a theological school contemplating curriculum revision is *why*. Before embarking on such a task, the administration, board, faculty and indeed all the school's stakeholders are encouraged to enter into a dialogue around that question and continue the conversation in earnest until they echo similar and cogent responses. The challenge of every good theological school is to maintain a curriculum that is "mission driven." The only reason to revise a curriculum is because the school has evidence that it is to some degree "missing the mark." In other words, when credible evidence exists that the school's mission is not being effectively accomplished, then and only then should the task of revising the curriculum be undertaken. This is a task best undertaken when accurate assessment has already produced data and when the institution can engage in it with hope rather than resignation. The answer to the question *why* must be admitted by all the school's stakeholders: "Because we can do a better job than we are doing now, that's why."

When a school's curriculum is no longer effectively mission driven, the degrees and the learning goals have little chance of being met. What are signs that a curriculum is no longer mission driven? When faculty members begin to talk about "my" course in a voice and tone that is proprietary—and maybe even predatory. Faculty members who identify with "their" courses rather than with the school's mission are in danger of derailing even the best designed curriculum by creating "microobjectives" within their own academic world that are more personality driven than mission driven.

### **Integration of curriculum revision and assessment**

At the March 2007 conference on curriculum revision in Pittsburgh, Charles Foster began with comments that I would suggest emphasize the essential connection between curriculum revision and assessment. He asked the question, "Why revise any curriculum?" His answer was, "So that we can do what we want to do better." Of course, what every good theological school wants to do is be effective in its mission. Outcomes assessment for both degree and learning goals that is embedded into the academic program is indispensable to curriculum revision. Why? Because assessment identifies precisely those learning areas that need attention. Foster commented, "Doing curriculum revision by an end run is never efficient or effective." In other words, curriculum revision will never be effective if it is not focused on learning goals. A further challenge is to articulate and identify learning outcomes beyond the classroom; that is, all faculty members desire that every one of their graduates reaches a mature level of spirituality; acquires a desire for lifelong learning; and integrates the learnings from their courses, pastoral experiences, and personal interior journeys so as to be happy, holy, and effective ministers. And while every faculty at one time or another struggles with the challenge to assess the "unassessable," the reality is that unless desired outcomes are identified, curriculum revision will be reduced to ad hoc guesswork and assessment will be a "shot in the dark" with little hope of identifying anything that might help the school improve. What many schools have found is that when the hard

work of identifying realistic outcomes has been done, what were previously seen as unassessable goals become assessable.

William Myers summarizes the importance of integrating assessment into the MDiv curriculum.

In whatever way learning goals become integrated across the curriculum, such progress becomes a map for students as well as for faculty. Describing the three to five years of an MDiv course of study suggests how each course and the overall sequence contributes to the expected learning outcomes of a curriculum. Program assessment naturally follows, but deans must be aware that it follows only after having carefully paid attention to such domains of competence. Only then does a school fully understand what kind of curriculum is needed to create leaders for ministry.<sup>1</sup>

It becomes clear that one of the most important marks of a good school's outcomes is their consistency. Institutional outcomes support the learning environment and the learning outcomes. Learning outcomes support the degree outcomes and ultimately degree outcomes support the school's mission. This consistency is the test of a healthy curricular revision.

The mark of a healthy assessment program is that it is not "done for the accreditation visit." The only valuable assessment is one that is embedded into the institution and is part of the regular life cycle of the institution. The only way this can happen is for the institution to integrate an assessment rhythm into itself. When assessment is "owned" by the institution as a valuable and worthwhile expenditure of time and when it is carried out on a regular cycle, there is real hope that growth can occur across and throughout the theological school and that authentic improvement in degree programs and student learning can happen. Assessment to a healthy institution is like breathing in that it must both be constant and yet so inconspicuous that it is hardly noticed.

Assessment, the dean will suggest, is much more than accreditation. Unless the school is in the accreditation "doghouse," the accreditation visitors will only visit the school once every ten years. Assessment, the dean will argue, is an everyday process that when appropriately done will result in a school that knows itself better and can provide to the church graduates who effectively embody the school's mission. This high claim by the dean can only be supported by the dean and faculty if the claim "works."<sup>2</sup>

This all begins with the identification of degree and learning goals, which is the starting point of any good curricular revision. At the March 2007 conference on curriculum revision, Daniel Aleshire, ATS executive director, spoke about the constituencies and the part they need to play in curricular revision.

Some of the specific concerns of the constituencies directly deal with the issue of assessment. Does the curriculum attend to the needs and concerns of the ecclesial community that will be served by the school's graduates? If the intended profession of Master of Divinity students is congregational ministry, only assessment will help a school know the extent to which it is accomplishing its goal. While professors and academic departments may be concerned most immediately with learning outcomes for individual courses, stakeholders are often most interested in degree outcomes. The concerns of stakeholders are focused on the praxis of the graduates. Of course the praxis of congregational ministry depends to a large extent on learning outcomes of individual courses and academic departments, but only the degree outcomes articulate the result of the mature integration of classroom and pastoral education. Asking stakeholders to describe the skills and virtues they expect in their congregational minister is often the most productive starting point for a curricular revision and for designing an assessment model that gets at the kind of information essential to evaluating a particular school's vision of a successful graduate.

Aleshire's presentation ended with a provocative challenge that stewardship and assessment are essentially related. The insight here is that stewardship taken in its widest possible meaning demands accountability to the school's mission. Only when the school holds itself accountable to its mission can it justify the use of its limited resources and capacities and also ask with integrity for donors to add to those resources.

## **Conclusion**

The good theological school recognizes that the assessment task is consistent with the mission, embedded into the culture of the school, has an annual rhythm of life, and is ongoing, not periodic. Without a working assessment program, no curriculum revision will get off the ground, and a curriculum revision that does not integrate an authentic assessment vision will probably not be effective in helping the school accomplish its mission.

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## ENDNOTES

1. The Association of Theological Schools, *Master of Divinity Curriculum Revision Folio* (Pittsburgh: ATS, 2006), 37.
2. The Association of Theological Schools, *Master of Divinity Curriculum Revision Folio*, 33.



# Best Practices in Master of Divinity Curriculum Revision: A Research Report

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*ABSTRACT: This qualitative study of ATS seminaries that have recently completed curriculum revision argues that curriculum revision is the collegial, common task of the faculty rooted in their vocation and vision for the school and of their lives and work. It is a faculty development process—a faculty theological education process. The article describes the starting points that initiated revision, the common concerns that motivated revision, and ends with a detailed, eight-step process of curriculum revision.*

“As a result of our curriculum work, we better fulfill our seminary’s mission.”

“Faculty members are now on the same page. We are better using their gifts in teaching.”

“We are closer to our denomination and better able to provide leadership for mission.”

These three comments from leaders at seminaries accredited by The Association of Theological Schools summarize their success at Master of Divinity (MDiv) curriculum revision.

In the last few years, several ATS schools have completed curriculum revision. They are encouraged by their efforts, believing they are more responsive to their churches and more faithful to their missions. While the schools took differing starting points (teaching practices, mission agenda, or academic disciplines) and achieved differing results, their work reflects common concerns and identifiable best practices.

I describe, in the first section, the occasions that motivated the work of these schools. In the second section, I list the ten curricular issues, and the optional responses, they identified. As a result, we see how common the issues are across theological education. In the third section, I identify the best practices used in these schools, summarizing them into an eight-step process of curriculum revision as a guide for other seminaries that are embarking on a revision.

Without a doubt, the key learning (and thesis of this article) is that curriculum revision is best defined as a faculty development process about the mission of the seminary. Yet, while curriculum is a collegial theological work of the faculty, leading a curriculum revision is a balancing act connecting the seminary’s constituencies.

This research describes and interprets the experiences of approximately twenty schools that have engaged in MDiv curriculum revision. I appreciate the openness, honesty, and sharing of their leaders. Speaking with them was a privilege. Each was energizing and evidenced the integrity of theological educators.<sup>1</sup> The research began with a brief written survey distributed to chief academic officers at their 2006 seminar. This survey allowed schools to identify their work, share some of their experiences, and provide contact persons. Following the survey, I summarized the issues and processes shared, discussed the insights with William Myers of ATS, and selected half of the schools for follow-up interviews.

An important change has occurred in the last five years since I completed research on MDiv curricula. At that time, many of those I interviewed expressed fear as they looked toward impending curriculum revisions. They relived previous difficult experiences that had been divisive and hurtful.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, optimism has prevailed in the recent interviews. School leaders gave evidence about constructive faculty sharing that connected curriculum and mission. While all those interviewed shared anxieties about the complexity of the task, they also gave advice on managing the process and avoiding exhaustion and conflict.

### **Starting points for curriculum revision**

A consistent theme of the deans and seminary leaders I interviewed was that curriculum revision was a means of living out the mission of the seminary. Through curriculum revision, they directly faced issues that other seminaries will be addressing:

- Clarifying the work of the faculty
- Responding to the concerns of churches
- Engaging more adequately the mission of the church<sup>3</sup>

They saw curriculum revision and the ongoing processes of institutional assessment, for which they are now better prepared, as opportunities to refine the seminary's mission.

For example, major retirements are occurring among faculties. As seminaries seek to build consensus among newly recruited faculty members, questions of faithfulness and mission will be central. In addition, the tasks expected of faculty members will need to be clarified. Over the last several years, incrementally they have changed and enlarged. Mentoring, formation, continuing and lay education, and distance education have been added to classroom teaching and advising. Furthermore, expanding research agendas in theology and ministry have made faculty work more complex. A dean described the mood of his faculty as "internal psychic chaos." Not only were there more tasks, for which some colleagues had little preparation, but the financial realities of the school and expanding options for curriculum delivery complicated their work. Curriculum revision, though, was a response to this situation. Through the revision, faculty members were able to name concerns,

clarify directions, and build a shared agenda. Faculty respect was built as was shared work across disciplines.

Moreover, another dean mentioned, that curriculum revision was an occasion to address the concerns of church leaders (concerns also shared by many of the faculty members themselves) about ministry. None of us in theological education will be surprised with the concerns that she and others shared:

- Students need more preparation connecting theology and the practice of ministry, specifically reflected in administration, addressing conflict, negotiating among constituencies, budgeting, and leadership.
- The curriculum needs to attend more to student issues of character and vocation.

Curriculum revision is a concrete way for the seminary and churches together to shape leadership for the mission of the church.

Curriculum is thus a concrete expression of the “vocation and identity of the seminary.”<sup>4</sup> It embodies hopes and expectations of what students are doing in and for the world. As seminaries struggle with the profound issues of the gospel and the pressing needs of pastoral integrity, evangelism, diversity, global interconnection, consumerism, and racism, curriculum is the place that mission is embodied.

### **Common concerns**

Rarely was a curricular concern expressed that was unique to one seminary. Ten issues were shared among the schools.

#### **1. *Benchmarks for entering students***

What can we expect of all students when they enter seminary? Roman Catholic schools require students to have two years of philosophy training. If they have not had philosophy in undergraduate or graduate work, they need to complete it before entering an MDiv program. Most Protestant schools do not have parallel requirements, but having students with no religious studies background in classes with those who majored in philosophy or religious studies is difficult.

What common expectations can a school have for entering students? Some schools are experimenting with strategies to address this question. Some provide bibliographies for students to prepare for matriculation. Others offer summer institutes in language or theology or provide summer ministry placements for students. Others provide writing and learning laboratories or seminars in theological research to assist students.

#### **2. *Needs for denominational formation and catechetical instruction***

Representatives of the schools mentioned that many students do not have sufficient denominational formation. Others noted that many, being new Christians, have little experience in church. Therefore, as faculty members considered curriculum, they had to be concerned about providing adequate

“basic” background in the Christian tradition so students could engage graduate-level, critical reflection. Moreover, when a large percentage of students do not share the patterns and practices of the denomination, additional efforts needed to be expended in the curriculum itself on denominational understandings. As above, these concerns raise the question: How much can a seminary be expected to address in a three- or four-year MDiv curriculum?

### ***3. The relationship of core or foundational requirements to areas of specialization***

How much of a curriculum is *required* and how many *electives* are allowed? As seminary faculties address issues of denominational understanding or basic catechesis in the Christian faith, less time is available for a student to develop a particular specialty whether in an academic discipline or in a ministry area.

Also the sequencing of courses becomes an issue. Some seminaries, for example, require theology courses to be taken in the first year to provide a common language and set of perspectives for students; others require basic Bible and church history courses to be completed before entering theology courses. Seeking to address the needs of commuter students, other seminaries find it difficult to require any sequence at all. Still other schools want students to engage the practice of ministry early as the context for raising issues of faith, theology, ethics, and ministry.

All schools need to clarify how many courses are required and whether they expect a sequencing of courses. All schools need to clarify how students can develop specialties whether through majors or additional degree programs.

### ***4. Ways of teaching ministry competencies***

How does one learn ministry? What practices must be learned in seminary and which are best learned in ministry itself? We have excellent ministry disciplines. Each teaches particular aspects of ministerial thought and practice. Clearly specialists in an area of ministry need significant specialized study and practice in that discipline considering its theological dimensions and the social science research that contributes to it, but what about MDiv students? Some schools allow students to elect ministry courses; others integrate ministerial preparation into one large course. Some connect each ministry course to a field education experience while others require a particular sequence of ministry courses.

### ***5. The role of field education in the overall curriculum***

Seminaries use field education differently. Some see it as the place to teach ministry skills; therefore, ministry classes and field education assignments and tasks are coordinated. Others see field education as the place where the core purpose of the seminary’s curriculum is expressed. If leadership is at the center of the seminary’s curriculum, the focus of the field education is leadership. The same is true if mission is the focus of the curriculum: through field education, students discover, engage, and learn the passion and skills for mission. In

still other schools, field education is the site of integration where the student is guided through a set of assignments to organize, connect, and focus the academic and ministerial work she or he has learned in other classes. Again, differing perspectives about field education may be chosen in seminaries, but a seminary needs to be clear about how field education functions within its curriculum.

### **6. *Character and spiritual formation***

Seminaries accept their responsibility for character and spiritual formation, but they engage these in very different ways. For example, some have developed a “character statement” for students and test it through a formal program of mentoring. Others require seminars on critical issues related to character formation throughout a student’s program. Still others weave issues of character into integrative seminars throughout the curriculum.

The practices of spiritual formation are also handled differently across seminaries. Some have “spiritual formation faculty” in addition to “academic faculty.” Some consider spiritual formation a core, required course in the curriculum; others offer options from which students can choose. Nevertheless, the ways chosen to engage character and spiritual formation are curricular decisions.

### **7. *Appropriate processes of faculty evaluation of students***

How many evaluations does a seminary faculty conduct with each student? How often? What is at stake in each? How does a student demonstrate proficiency or fail? Moreover, what role does the faculty have in determining ministerial readiness? ATS provides significant resources to assist seminaries with this task, but how evaluation is included in the curriculum often depends on a seminary’s relationship with a denomination. Some seminaries tend to focus primarily on the academic and professional development of students, offering only advice to church bodies that evaluate ministerial call and effectiveness. In other seminaries, a sequenced and cooperative process is developed with church bodies with faculty conducting evaluations for ministry. Seminaries need to be clear about their partnership with churches. Seminaries need to develop policies to protect the privacy of students and, at the same time, clarify ways to communicate crucial information about competency for ministry to appropriate church bodies. A further issue: When students are seeking preparation for an interdenominational or independent ministry, which are growing today, with whom does the seminary faculty share its evaluation?

### **8. *Capstone courses or experiences of integration***

How does a curriculum guide integration, or is integration the sole responsibility of the student? Are portfolios of learning and experiences a useful means of moving the student to integrate the various courses and experiences of ministerial education? Does a school need a capstone course in which students demonstrate the interrelationship of previous learnings? There are again many options chosen by seminaries to guide integration—a set of integrative courses throughout the curriculum, the sequenced field education require-

ments, a guided process of mentoring and evaluation, or capstone courses. Schools will choose what is appropriate for them and required in their curriculum.

### **9. *Preparing students for ongoing learning and continuing education***

With ministerial tasks as complex as they are today, we are all clear that only a portion of the learning needed for ministry can be learned in seminary. How do we teach students to be lifelong learners? Some schools develop elaborate programs of continuing education; others work closely with denominational mentoring programs. One seminary, for example, has declared that the MDiv degree does not end with the completion of requirements and graduation. They provide a guided process of evaluating students in ministry and cooperate to provide the further education needed.

### **10. *The relationship of classes to cocurricular issues of worship, community life, and mission***

The word curriculum comes from a Latin root word meaning “to run.” A curriculum is the course a person “runs,” yet how much does a seminary gather in its course. Learning occurs within a community. The experiences a student has while in school shape and inform the learning. Some schools, for example, see classes and evaluative processes as the curriculum; others are more comprehensive requiring cocurricular tasks (e.g., requiring a pattern of attendance at seminary worship, expecting involvement in a mission project, requiring a cross-cultural experience outside the seminary, or requiring formal spiritual direction). Each seminary must decide how comprehensive the “course” is that a student will run.

## **Best practices: curriculum revision as theological work of the faculty**

Curriculum revision is the *collegial, common task of the faculty rooted in their vocation and vision for the school and of their lives and work*. In fact, those schools that were successful at curriculum revision understood it as a faculty development process—a faculty theological education process. Through the curriculum, faculty members define and embody the mission of the seminary. Therefore, these schools expanded the understanding of curriculum revision, moving beyond a “political process” among academic disciplines, to a teaching and learning process.

As one chair of a seminary curriculum revision committee noted, “We focused on being, developing, and learning as a faculty—making decisions about who we are and what our mission is as agents of God’s ministry in the world.” Moving curriculum out of an administrative process to a theological process engaging what faculties regularly do is a powerful shift in perspective. Its activities parallel research, class planning, assignments, writing, and evaluation.<sup>5</sup>

Seeing curriculum revision as a faculty development process taps the deep, vocational commitments of faculty colleagues for the church, their disciplines, their ministries, and their mission. It draws these commitments together. Fac-

ulty members ask how their particular tasks connect with the whole of the curriculum to embody the mission of the seminary.

Such an understanding puts the leader of the process into a teaching role. The dean or chair of a curriculum committee is working with others to define a process of research and reflection—defining the ways the curriculum and its expectations are organized to fulfill the seminary’s mission with students. As any teaching activity, the teacher engages in a balancing act of considering the participants’ contexts, opportunities, and limitations. In particular, this teaching will need to connect with a wide set of resources and stakeholders. Again, it is a balancing act of providing sufficient interconnections and research so the final outcome is fulsome and, at the same time, limiting the process so that faculty members are not exhausted.

As schools engaged this process, clear steps (best practices) emerged. To assist schools embarking on a curriculum review, let me offer this eight-step guide to planning:

***1. Make an “official decision” with key stakeholders about engaging in curriculum review and/or revision for the purposes of the seminary’s mission.***

Because curriculum revision is a demanding process that will focus the efforts of a seminary for a time, the process needs to be intentional. Schools recommended an official action of the appropriate decision-making body, usually the faculty. However, in different seminaries, an additional group, board of trustees, church supervisory body, or administration, will need to concur with the decision and provide resources for it. The hope expressed by one seminary dean, for whom board action was needed, was to empower the interaction of the faculty with these stakeholders. She said, “We will be working to build a community through this process rather than hold onto the distrust and distance that has been our history.”

***2. Establish a curriculum task force/steering committee to “animate” the faculty’s theological and ministerial reflection (e.g., to lead the review).***

Repeatedly in my interviews, I heard that curriculum review is a time-consuming process and that faculty members are extraordinarily busy (with teaching, student reviews, institutional tasks, ministries, and research).

A primary task of the curriculum review committee is to monitor the teaching/reflection/faculty development process so that it is mutual and moves forward. It needs to be chaired by a “mobilizer” and dedicated to the educational work of the review. The committee also needs to be willing to deal with resistance as learning moments.

While the committee monitors the learning, review, and decision-making processes, the dean, in turn, carries the support role for the committee. She or he also must see that the administration “invests” to make the review productive (e.g., providing resources for research, providing course revisions or reductions for the chair, and monitoring the workload for the committee and faculty).



**3. *The curriculum review committee begins the review as a theological learning process—collecting and considering information from stakeholders.***

In fact, there was amazing consistency throughout my interviews. Seminary leaders told me that study was a mutual learning process with stakeholders.<sup>6</sup>

The primary task during this part of the review is examining the public and/or missional context of the seminary and its graduates. Specific components include:

- reviewing the seminary mission statement, expectations for graduates, and findings from student learning assessments;
- reading appropriate literature—theological, denominational, cultural, and missional;
- attending to the cultural and public issues affecting the seminary and church;
- conducting qualitative research on some of the following groups: alumnae/i, students, pastors in key denominations, missional churches, church leaders, and trustees.

Furthermore, faculty members need to share with each other their teaching, vocational, and disciplinary commitments. (Sometimes we faculty do not adequately recognize that we are a key source for information about the mission of the church, the realities facing religious life, theological commitments, and denominational understandings.)

**4. *With the faculty and other appropriate stakeholders, develop a set of curriculum principles/commitments focused on mission and theological education.***

A crucial task of the committee is to summarize the key criteria that will be embodied in the curriculum. This keeps the focus on the whole and avoids moving too fast to decisions about requirements.

Some examples of curriculum principles include the following:

- “In our faculty, pedagogy is shared and valued.”
- “We expect our students to
  - read and interpret at least two cultures.”
  - think theologically about ministry.”
  - interpret Scriptures.”
  - be effective congregational leaders rooted with a growing spirituality.”
- “We agree that we will develop a greater flexibility in meeting requirements, with multiple options for some requirements and offer them at a variety of times.”
- “The curriculum reflects our shared values and commitments. Therefore, our goals include grounding in texts, traditions, and theologies of our faith community; addressing issues facing public life in an increasingly diverse world; and developing informed ministerial leadership.”



These are just a few brief examples. The principles chosen will be different depending on the seminary. Some seminaries had one-page statements; others went to as many as eight pages. Some or all of the following were included:

- Processes of teaching
- Assumptions about student learning
- Convictions about preparing church leaders
- Understandings of the vocation of the faculty

Again, depending on the seminary and its governance structures, this statement may need to be reviewed and determined with several stakeholders. However, even if this is not required, a conversation with key stakeholders about the document will enhance its use.

This task of listing principles may not be easy. As one curriculum chair mentioned, “It is asking: what holds us together; and therefore, what pulls us apart.” Yet, another affirmed the value of the process, “Through it we moved from our disciplines and our competition, to our teaching, and then to what we expected our students and ourselves to be learning and doing—about content and the world.”

#### ***5. Keep stakeholders informed, and often. Keep focused on mission.***

One interviewee revealed that once the stakeholders had completed the curriculum principles they relaxed, thinking they had basically finished their task. Yet, slipping from theological reflection into political decision making, the goodwill and openness built deteriorated. In fact, in one case, the lack of communication with trustees meant that a final report was received with skepticism. An increased emphasis in the curriculum on enhancing student’s awareness of cultural differences was confusing for trustees. They therefore failed to serve as advocates for the faculty.

At other schools, the chair of the committee wrote regular updates to the trustees and key church officials soliciting comments. At another, regular “hearings” were scheduled with faculty and administrators. One seminary learned the hard way about not keeping administrators informed as the concerns of an admissions officer and dean of students were ignored. Once questions were raised, the process had to backtrack.

#### ***6. Curriculum implementation is an intrinsic part of the review.***

The implementation of decisions reflects practical concerns and issues. One dean said, “Here is where buyer’s remorse sets in. Colleagues exclaimed, ‘We did what!’” Or another, “Resistance surfaced as we tried to implement the changes we had determined.”

Schools recommended either establishing an implementation committee with as much influence as the curriculum committee or continuing the work of the curriculum committee until the new curriculum is in place. Remember implementation takes time, reveals contradictions, and raises concrete concerns.

**7. *Seek to align curriculum decisions with student learning assessment processes.***

This may be a task for the dean. Yet, most of the schools revealed that their curriculum revision processes had assisted them with student learning assessment and with planning for the self-study. Not only had they completed considerable research for the revision, but they had reflected theologically on their mission and defined specific goals and strategies. They were then able to build student learning assessment into the curriculum plan to judge whether they were indeed achieving what they had promised.

**8. *As connecting curriculum and assessment make clear, curriculum revision is an ongoing process.***

As schools analyze what they are learning from their student learning assessments, they moved to “close the learning loop.”<sup>77</sup> They were able to reflect on their contributions to their students, their fulfillment of their stated mission, and the resources needed for their educational mission. One dean remarked, “We scheduled a review to ask what the effects of the changes were on both student learning and our life together at the school. That has now happened twice with wonderful results and with increasing truth-telling and consensus-building among the faculty.”

Considering these eight steps will help schools to move more effectively through a curriculum revision process. Yet, above all else is the basic understanding of the process: *Curriculum revision is a faculty development and theological learning project about fulfilling the mission of the seminary.*

## **Curriculum and the mission of the church in the world**

The twenty schools that participated in the research are to be commended for their integrity and honesty. Most are indeed convinced that they are more effectively fulfilling the promises they make to students, the church, and even themselves. In most places, a new energy and consensus emerged as faculty members, administrators, trustees, and church leaders learned that together they were preparing clergy for churches. Moreover, they more openly considered together the mission of the church and the role of the seminary. There are best practices for curriculum revision. They do make a difference. They connect teaching, evaluating, and planning in a theological reflection process. Nevertheless, even with these stories of revitalization, concerns were also shared about ministry and the preparation of leaders who make a difference in public life.

Some school leaders asked, Are we thinking big enough? Are we being courageous enough? The importance of the task of preparing leaders for the church, the resources needed, the claims of the gospel, and the realities of brokenness in the world unsettled even those who were happy with their work.

One dean mused, “I fear that the kind of change we need as a denominational seminary may come too slowly and be too late. In fact, the real tasks needed are much bigger than our faculty and our work.” A seminary president, formerly the chair of a curriculum revision, considered, “I am very happy with

the planning process we have completed. Yet, I have a nagging anxiety. I hope we are being courageous. Theological education is about following Jesus. Are we really doing that?" Or a faculty member who chaired a committee asked, "We need to learn to work together for the healing of the earth. We religious people have too often hurt each other. We know so little about each other. How do we teach our students to build interfaith coalitions for service, mission, and living?"

These comments reflect the genuine concerns of theological educators who know how large the task of mission is and how faulted are the human resources to address it. Frankly, asking these hard questions illustrates the importance of the process of curriculum revision and faculty development. The mission of ATS is "to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public."<sup>8</sup> Even its modest language "for the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public" raises the important issues of the role of seminaries in preparing Christian leaders for communities of faith who in turn lead those communities with vision and imagination so that they become agents of reconciliation and healing in the world.

Curriculum revision is not simply about courses and processes of education. Curriculum revision is about the ministry of the faculty to fulfill the mission of the school. Curriculum revision can be a unifying task where together faculty, with the input and advice of stakeholders, asks about its mission in the world and whether its practices are faithfully embodying that mission.

The best practice for curriculum revision is to recognize that it is faculty work together with trustees, the church, students, and communities to make a difference. Curriculum is an educational course with a vision and mission of faithfulness and integrity. May we claim our vocations as faculty members to influence the ways communities of faith are led and the wider public is served!

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#### ENDNOTES

1. In order that we could be candid, I promised anonymity about schools and informants.
2. Jack L. Seymour, "Curriculum Metaphors and Practices: Understanding the Master of Divinity Curriculum" in *Master of Divinity Curriculum Revision Folio*, (Pittsburgh: The Association of Theological Schools, 2006), 45–54.
3. Specifically the following motives for curriculum revision were mentioned by the schools I interviewed:
  - Concerns of faculty: These were mentioned more than any other reason: faculty transition ("We have a new group of people who do not have ownership

for the older curriculum and who are learning to work together.”); faculty exhaustion (“It is now time for us to ask what is really possible with the faculty we have.”); changes in disciplines (new concerns and methods); and faculty vocation (commitments to affect the world and the church and the ways they hope to live this out).

- Concerns of the church: Leadership, theological identity, character.
  - Concerns for justice: Responding to the church’s mission in the world.
  - Concerns about students: Increase in diversity (age, ethnicity, academic backgrounds and interests, adequacy of denominational formation, part-time and nonresidential, more emotional and psychological needs).
  - Assessment: The new accreditation processes focusing on student learning.
4. In previous research on curriculum, I listed the metaphors seminaries used to describe their curricula. In the present study, four of those were repeated, with a quote from the research:
- Denominational formation: “We are responsible to our church. They support and guide us. Together we prepare the leadership for the future.”
  - Congregational leadership: “Our culture needs true leaders, willing to take the risk, and shape the communities called church.”
  - Theological reflection: “We are teachers of teachers, preparing those who will teach the people of God to consider how to be faithful.”
  - Mission: “The church is called to embody God’s redemptive presence in the world. Our task is to focus students on that mission.”
5. Several schools used consultants to assist them in aspects of the theological development process—to decide on procedures and steps, to complete necessary research, to explore processes of teaching and learning, or to guide their decision making. Several, in fact, praised the work of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion mentioning that grants offered in teaching and learning or consultants secured stimulated and enhanced their work.
6. Remember different seminaries are accountable to different stakeholders.
7. William R. Myers, *Closing the Assessment “Loop”: Nurturing Healthy, On-going Self-evaluation in Theological Schools* (Chicago: Exploration Press, 2006).
8. ATS Mission, [www.ats.edu/about/overview.asp](http://www.ats.edu/about/overview.asp).

# The Common Vocation of Curriculum Building

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*ABSTRACT: The faculty at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary undertook curriculum revision as a common vocation growing out of a theological and institutional commitment to preparation of men and women for ministry in a multicultural; multiracial; and sexually, socially, and religiously diverse world. Gathering around a common commitment to becoming an antiracist, multicultural, and ecumenical community of learning and teaching, faculty worked together over a two-year period through a rhythm of retreats, faculty meetings, and small task force meetings to fashion a new curriculum. Important to the process were a number of things, among them setting aside temporarily discipline divisions and working in a context of mutual respect, trust, and collaboration among faculty.*

This is the story of one seminary's—my seminary's—process of curriculum revision. In fact, it is a process still going on. We put the new curriculum in place, officially, with the fall semester of the 2006–07 academic year, with the preceding year serving as a transitional year, with most students living by “the old catalog” and the entering class beginning to live with a new one. We are Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, an institution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), with a long history of being a “bridge builder.” We were a bridge, historically, for Northern and Southern Presbyterians, whose different perspectives often put them at odds. We were a seminary able to serve both denominations' constituencies. It is a fitting image, sitting as we do strategically between Ohio and Tennessee and right on the Ohio River. Freeways that lead to St. Louis and Indiana on one side, Cincinnati to the north, West Virginia to the east, and Nashville to the south converge at the Second Street Bridge in downtown Louisville. As a seminary, we have a strong commitment to congregational or pastoral ministry and to field education programs that bridge from the seminary to the local church. We are predominantly a residential and racially homogenous community of learners. But we have also begun an evening program and are working hard to recruit racial/ethnic minorities—more signs of our intentions to build bridges.

As we finished the daylong retreat at which the new curriculum was finally approved by the faculty, President Dean Thompson, in some amazement, asked me, “How did you all get through that without killing each other?” The “that,” of course, was the process of revising—really creating—a curriculum to replace one that had been in place for about eleven years. Curriculum revision is a necessity that comes to all of us more or less regularly, usually brought on by shifts in institutional identity that come with significant change in faculty make-up, a new administration, changing student demographics, changing

denominational needs, or a revisioning of a seminary's collective vocation that sometimes attends a new season of strategic planning. All this was true for us. We were coming to the end of a strategic plan; the curriculum had stiffened over the years, growing more and more inflexible. Because of its structure of foundational courses of four, five, even nine credits, it was not user friendly to any but full-time and, ideally, residential students. The understanding of the seminary's mission also shifted (more about this later) and significant changes in administration occurred. All this argued that curriculum revision was overdue and that now was a moment of *kairos* as well as *krisis*, a critical yet opportune moment in the life of the school.

Now the question for us was, how to do it, in a season of presidential change and, before it was done, a change in the dean's office. But it also coincided with a season of very important and constructive reflection on what Louisville Presbyterian Seminary intends to become, in no small part encouraged by the arrival of three African-American faculty, who taught with us—an all Caucasian faculty—became friends with us, and in the end, had larger dreams for us than perhaps we who had been here a while—some of us a long while. Our colleagues helped us recognize that the shape of our curriculum and the contents of our courses were distinctly and unthinkingly reflective of the dominant racial and ethnic culture in which we were at home, in which we had received our own academic training and preparation for teaching, and in whose denominational seminary we were most at home. We were, in the discerning description of one colleague, a monochromatic community.

Spurred by a colleague who received a grant during her sabbatical year to help her explore how racism affects seminary and theological school education, we began to explore with her how a multicultural approach to teaching and learning might make a difference, might prove antiracist both in the classroom and in the seminary community. At the end of her sabbatical, she inspired colleagues in her own academic area, then in the larger faculty, to write a grant proposal with her to fund two years' examination of our teaching methods, course construction, and educational assumptions that would reveal ways that our classrooms and the academic life might more genuinely reflect the cultural and racial richness of God's people catholic. The step toward revising our courses, our teaching, and ultimately our curriculum began with the entire faculty participating in a series of faculty seminars, facilitated by an expert in multicultural and antiracist teaching and learning. A significant number of faculty—across all disciplines—participated in an intensive antiracism seminar that provided opportunities for self-examination and for honest, sometimes painful, conversation with one another, including our African-American colleagues. These opportunities taught us about racism and its other side, white privilege, allowing us to examine the ways in which our institution—faculty, staff, and administration—was complicit in the practices of unintentional racism, which is racism, nonetheless. Among such painful experiences was one instance in which a colleague was confronted with overt racism in Louisville as he tried to provide housing for his African-American colleagues meeting in our city. I want to emphasize that nearly all the faculty, from Bible, theology, history, and the disciplines of practical theology, took



part in these two transforming experiences of learning to teach differently and learning to live differently together. Out of this came a collegial commitment to becoming an antiracist and multicultural seminary community, where difference is valued and fundamental in shaping how we teach and live together. It is important to know that these experiences took place in a context that for many years has valued and practiced collegial and collaborative work as a faculty and practiced shared governance with students, staff, administration, and trustees, sometimes with better success at living out these values than at other times.

The way toward curriculum building for us, then, was through a shared experience. Colleagues worked together to reshape and reform not only the curriculum but also the fundamental values and ways of thinking about things we all care about deeply—teaching and learning and the students with and for whom we labor. In other words, we examined both our habits of teaching and our habits of the heart. It was what Parker Palmer says is at the heart of good teaching and learning; namely, teachers and learners gathered around a “third thing” that is of great importance to all of them. I would say that kind of experience, too, is crucial preparation for the faculty vocation of shaping the character of curriculum creation. We started first with serious and prolonged collegial focus on the values to which we were committed and the mission we imagined, namely, excellence in education in a context both antiracist and multicultural. All this meant the curriculum building took longer than any of us had thought it would and it began in a place that surprised us, though perhaps it shouldn’t have. It began first not with our looking at the old curriculum but with looking at our vocation as teachers of multiple disciplines in a shared seminary and cultural context with a common purpose. If it was hard to talk about a curriculum about which we had mixed feelings, it was easy to talk about something we loved: teaching and participating in the formation of students’ pastoral imagination.

From the beginning, curriculum was recognized as more than a certain number of courses, taken in a fairly determined order that mixed Bible, theology, history, and practical theology requirements, prerequisites, and electives that over the course of three years equaled ninety credits in the MDiv program. Pastoral vocation involves the formation of certain kinds of thinking, ways of doing, ways of being, and skills at teaching those they serve to practice a life of faith. For us particularly, as a largely residential campus with full-time students, it happens in classrooms, through community life, through common chapel worship, and through the practice of shared governance. So curriculum formation began, formally, with a faculty retreat, planned by colleagues who were drawn from each of the three major areas into which we cluster academic disciplines. I put it that way purposefully, because they did not represent their areas, as if they were advocates for certain disciplines; they provided a means for shared participation and a conduit for conversation with area colleagues about implications proposed curricular changes would have for their disciplines. The first conversations took place as a whole faculty, thinking together about the whole curriculum—what we valued from the one we were using, what we wanted to retain, what we wanted to change, and

what we hoped a new curriculum might bring. That worked well for us; it kept us from building fences and staking out claims for individual disciplines in a new curriculum. We also talked about what the church is and may become for which we are preparing our students and what kind of skills and ways of thinking and being our students would need in a complex, diverse, multicultural, multiracial, multireligious, postmodern world. Then we identified how we hoped LPTS graduates would be able to think, what they would know, what they would be able to do, and who they would be when they finished seminary. During these joint conversations, we began to imagine how particular disciplines might contribute to common objectives and expectations for student formation, which kept us from clustering around particular disciplines, from the temptation to rank disciplines by perceived importance, and from counting courses to assure area equality.

Context here helped us again. The old curriculum provided many opportunities for team teaching across disciplines within an area and across disciplines between areas. So Christian History and Theological Studies, a year-long, nine-credit sequence, had three colleagues whose specialties were in theology, history, and ethics, teaching together, with leadership rotating from year to year. For example, Burton Cooper, one of our theologians, taught Theology of Preaching with John McClure, then our Homiletics and Worship professor; Amy Plantinga Pauw, another theologian, and Scott Williamson, an ethicist, taught Feminist and Womanist Theologians; Trisha Tull, a Hebrew Bible scholar, taught a course with McClure on Preaching from Old Testament Texts; and Gene March, another Old Testament scholar, taught the course on Teaching the Bible in the Church with me, his colleague in Christian Education. Any of these courses counted as required electives in a student's course of study. Through this kind of teaching, we got to know and work with one another and borrowed from each other's disciplines for our teaching. As we began to develop the new curriculum, the faculty consciously agreed to minimize area lines between the disciplines and frankly asked why area designations should even be continued in the new curriculum. We intentionally set area designations aside at the outset of the curriculum process, promising to search for another way of organizing ourselves other than into the traditional areas of Bible, theology and history, and practical theology, which was formerly called The Church at Work. Putting that question on hold was, I think, an important, freeing factor for the process. Finding another model for organization remains something still to be done, and currently we are operating with the old, traditional divisions, but the walls between them are even more permeable than they were before and now largely serve administrative purposes. In the past, faculty conversations focused occasionally on how many credit hours were required in each area. In the new curriculum, the question is: which courses does a student need to have, to be a competent, critical, reflective, creative person in ministry? The lines between areas and their requirements are even further blurred in the new curriculum with a concept we call "two-fers," a course that can meet two different area's requirements at the same time. For instance, Teaching the Bible in the Church fulfills the teaching course requirement and a required elective in Bible. I confess there are many details around that concept



still to be worked out, but the important point is that it diminished discipline area distinctions and freed imaginations for building the new curriculum. It underscored the more general understanding that *curriculum* was more than courses in a certain sequence; it included rethinking structures that support and frame the way we relate our disciplines and ourselves to one another as faculty.

There were other important decisions we made about common values and hopes for the new curriculum that also moderated any tendency toward a hierarchy of disciplines or battling over requirement turf.

1. From the old curriculum we lifted several features we wanted to keep and others we wanted to correct in the new curriculum. For example, the old curriculum had been built on four foundation courses of four and five credit hours spread over two semesters. Effectively, each area had a single foundation course upon which its advanced electives were built. So, the theology and history area had a course called Christian History and Theological Studies, which consumed nine credit hours over two semesters in the junior year. (The foundation courses necessarily had to be completed early because they served as prerequisites for advanced electives.) Practical theology had a foundation course called Introduction to Practical Theology, which originally spread over two semesters but subsequently was reduced to a five-credit course in the fall semester of the middler year. The biblical courses have always had a preferential position in the curriculum—and for good reasons. They were all squeezed into the first year and a half, too, including introductions to both testaments.
2. The benefits of the sequencing and the foundation courses were that faculty knew what their students had studied (not necessarily what they knew) when they came into electives in individual disciplines—a feature we wanted to retain but in a more modest way. The downside to the old curriculum was that, because of the large number of foundation courses, a student's schedule was very inflexible and we could not easily have anyone but full-time residential students. Yet, we knew that a significant majority of African-American students whom we hoped would come were working full-time jobs. Moreover, nearly all of the first two years of a student's preparation was filled with required courses and the majority of those from two areas—Bible and historical theology. A student's first glimmer of practical theology did not occur until the first semester of the student's second year, and practical theology electives could not be taken until after that. That arrangement tended to reinforce a false perception that practical theology was really "applied" theology and "applied" exegesis—something none of us from any area believed.
3. We agreed that in the new curriculum, nearly all courses would be no more than three credit hours in length, giving the curriculum more flexibility; second, that practical theology courses would begin in the first year, alongside Bible and theology; and third, that we would continue to offer team-taught, cross-discipline courses. The benefits from these decisions include that students are now going into field education placements bet-

ter prepared because they have had beginning courses in Bible, theology, history, *and* practical theology, and there is symbolic representation in the structure and sequence of the new curriculum of the integration of the so-called classical disciplines and practical theology and of the common work to which our disciplines and curriculum point; namely, the preparation of men and women for ministry in the church and in the world.

And, finally, the common faculty vocation of our curriculum was secured by a common commitment to an overarching theme for the curriculum. Encouraged by an excellent paper on the importance of teaching in congregations, written by our New Testament professor, Sue Garrett,<sup>1</sup> we claimed as a common purpose and goal that students be able to teach those whom they serve to live the Christian faith and to practice the presence of God in a multicultural; multiracial; and sexually, socially, and religiously diverse world. We want our students to be able to empower congregations to practice their ministries in the world. This common goal integrates disciplines, academic areas, and even nonacademic elements of the curriculum. It also lessens the impulse to a hierarchy of disciplines and “dividing the spoils” in a ninety-credit curriculum.

The integration of the curriculum is secured by two new courses: a beginning course called Transforming Seminary Education and a closing Senior Seminar that will begin in fall 2008. The first course is required of all entering students and introduces them to theological education at Louisville Seminary and to our vocational commitment to offer an antiracist and multicultural education. It also provides them with opportunities for critical theological reflection as a part of their own vocation. The course is intended to be team-taught with rotating faculty from all of the areas, in faculty partnerships. It is taught across all the disciplines—Bible, history, ethics, and practical theology. It raises, explicitly, issues of racism and exclusion, including women and gay, lesbian, transgendered, and bisexual persons, through film and reading and writing assignments. The course also introduces students to the city and forms of public ministry and encourages critical reflection on what is read, seen, and heard. The closing course of the curriculum, the Senior Seminar requirement, will provide something of a capstone to a student’s preparation and will include students developing a paper or project that will bring Bible, theology, and pastoral imagination together. These two courses belong not to any one area but are thought of as “seminary courses” or “common courses,” a concept for which we are still looking for an appropriate descriptor.

To return to the president’s question, “How did you all do that without killing each other?” The answer is, we took curriculum building as our common vocation. We worked together, in a rhythm of small representative task force members meeting first to set the agenda for a full faculty meeting, then the larger, longer meeting, then the task force again, with homework from the previous faculty meeting. We worked together over a span of more than two years so the process was not rushed. We consumed heaven knows how many gallons of coffee and tea and water and, on occasion, still better beverages. At least two long working-day retreats were devoted to discussions and decision

making, with regular meetings between. We talked honestly and openly with one another and kept our common commitments and hopes for a new curriculum constantly in front of us. But, above all, what made it work was the sense of our common vocation as theological teachers preparing men and women for ministry in a world of dramatic difference, and the sheer good news that we, as a faculty, genuinely like, respect, and care for one another. And we had done and do, as a part of our ethos, things to nurture that character.

1. What made it harder:
  - a. The challenge to stay on task. The process stretched over two-and-a-half years, punctuated with presidential crisis and change, faculty illness, faculty searches, a change in the dean's office, and the whole host of daily and yearly challenges that fill faculty and administrators' calendars.
  - b. Frustration with the slow, glacierlike progress most of the way. Keeping the process going, and staying on task through the daily routine and academic demands of teaching, sabbaticals, and significant upheavals in our structure was not easy. It was tempting to divert from the road we had chosen to a path that would lead us to more curriculum tinkering than building.
  - c. The painful loss of five key faculty members who left for other positions, including two African-American colleagues who had begun the process with us. It raised the question, Would we give up our focus on becoming an antiracist community with their loss?
  - d. Intractable problems like finding an alternative to the traditional way of dividing ourselves into discipline areas, resisting the impulse to add more and more "essentials" to the required course list, and the worry that too few requirements could result in poorly prepared students, intellectually and practically. These are issues on which we're still working.
2. There are things still left to do:
  - a. Finding more opportunities for structuring across area lines, for attending to the kind of "horizontal integration" Charles Foster describes in his book *Educating Clergy*.<sup>2</sup>
  - b. Testing the Senior Seminar
  - c. Continuing to develop the new evening/weekend/half-time program
  - d. Identifying effects of the new curriculum on our dual degree programs
  - e. Evaluating the minimalist approach to required courses we've taken in light of student learning outcomes
  - f. Evaluating the curriculum with interviews and surveys from the first class to graduate under it and then by graduates three to five years out
  - g. Anticipating the effects of the curriculum, night classes, half-time students, and greater diversity on our ethos

3. Overall, we are hopeful with what has emerged and think it reflects well who we are and what we care about. New courses for the curriculum are only now taking shape, so we'll have to see whether they accomplish what we have imagined they may. There is a sense in which the biblical languages still dominate the curriculum and, as long as they're required, they probably will. Maybe that's appropriate, since we are a school of the Presbyterian Church, but nonetheless, there is a cost to it on several levels. The experience of reforming curriculum has been for faculty a positive and constructive experience and an invitation to think imaginatively about what we're doing and what kind of courses might be taught in spaces that were not previously available because of the tight structure of the old curriculum. Along the way, as we said goodbye to valued colleagues and friends, we made good on our promise to have greater racial diversity on our faculty, particularly African Americans. We have called to join us five new colleagues, three of whom are African American, and a professor of worship who is Brazilian. It has been an experience of common vocation—perhaps a better one than some of us imagined it would be and the process is ongoing.
4. Our experience reflects well some central convictions of the Carnegie study on the education of clergy. The experiences I've highlighted belong in three categories: identity and context (ethos), commitments and values (mission), and teaching and learning practices (pedagogies).

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Susan R. Garrett, "Bold and Biblical: A Vision for the Mainline." (Lecture given for the 100th Winter Convocation, Bangor Theological Seminary, Bangor, Maine, January 26, 2005. Online at <http://www.bts.edu/newsandevents/Convocation2005/Garrett2.htm>).
2. Charles R. Foster, Lisa Dahill, Larry Coleman, Barbara Wang Tolentino, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

# Problem Based Learning and the Master of Divinity Program

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*ABSTRACT: Problem-based learning has a long history in professional education. After a brief description of its use in medical education the question is asked: is there a meaningful role for problem-based learning within seminary education? The article traces dynamics in the seminary that contribute to academic versus professional tensions in the MDiv program and suggests that problem-based learning could be employed as a way to develop skills such as critical thinking, research, substantive dialogue, and clear writing, as well as a way to equip men and women for their roles as ministry professionals. The article concludes with suggestions for implementation and raises questions and cautions for further research.*

## The inception of problem-based learning

Problem-based learning (PBL) was given birth in medical education. Medical students traditionally spend the first two years studying their basic and clinical sciences (gross anatomy, biochemistry, pharmacology, and so on). Along the way, there are large and sundry areas of knowledge to master and exams to pass, not least the intimidating national test (U.S. Medical Licensing Examination). In the third and fourth years, graduating students put to work their theoretical learning as they take care of sick patients in the clinical setting, the hospital. In these years, students become acquainted with the main specialties of the great medical encyclopedia (e.g., pediatrics, surgery, internal medicine).

However, physicians came to realize that, despite the years of intense training, many medical students and residents were simply not clinically competent. They often lacked the requisite clinical skills needed to take care of patients well. These observations led to the verdict that it does not make much sense to confine students in classrooms where they learn content and theory for two years, before allowing them to encounter the clinical setting.

At Case Western and McMaster medical schools, in the mid-60s and 70s, a new curriculum was designed based on a simple yet profound thesis: structure the curriculum so that the clinical problems form the center and backbone of the learning experience. Thus, instead of studying separate subjects (e.g., anatomy or psychiatry), students work in small groups and deliberate over carefully designed clinical problems. Professors now act as facilitators. Medical education, using this method, happens in the learning *encounter* with realistic clinical problems. PBL is now the teaching standard in many medical schools; it is also common practice in professional fields such as business, agriculture, law, engineering, social work, education, and others.<sup>1</sup>

The most interesting observation, for our purposes, is the similarity between the original context that led to PBL for medical students and the current situation among seminary graduates. There is a growing, if disquieting, realization in many quarters that seminaries can often frustrate the ecclesial desideratum of preparing pastors-in-training.<sup>2</sup> It is this modern context that elicits our hinge question: *is there a meaningful role for problem-based learning within seminary education?*

### **Learning opportunities in the twenty-first century**

Oon-Seng Tan has argued that the learning challenge for the twenty-first century is about developing intelligences. As Ted Ward observes, real world intelligence is not about how well one does on a test but on how well one interacts with new ideas. The accomplishment of feats of memory or simple understanding are necessary intellectual capacities, but the ultimate outcomes are to learn the art of wise judgment, to engage diverse perspectives with intelligence and understanding, to apply knowledge to new situations, and to be adaptable.

Tan advocates that one of the more effective educational approaches for development of twenty-first-century intelligence is problem-based learning. Observing the tendencies for educators to resist change or to adopt the new without examining the present, Tan argues that earlier developments in educational technology simply advanced the technology and broadened the number of delivery methods. The difference in information gains between computer-assisted modes and traditional methods of classroom instruction was insignificant.<sup>3</sup> The tendency to use the computer as a tool for memorization or information processing is a case in point. Using technology to improve, increase speed, or individualize unexamined and ineffectual processes in teaching does not, at the end of the day, lead to advances in learning.

However, today's challenges call for determined and even drastic attention to the nature and purpose of education. Affirming that many educators do many things right, Tan nonetheless urges us to reconsider assumptions about "knowledge acquisition and participation in learning." For example, many educators have not fully grasped the effect, potential and actual, of the Internet on the role of the teacher as the source of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> "The dissemination of knowledge may no longer be of primary importance at some stages of education as the World Wide Web provides ready information anytime anywhere."<sup>5</sup>

In the immediate context, Tan is writing to inform and guide Singapore's shift to a knowledge-based economy so that it becomes a place where citizens use their talent to create value, where entrepreneurs thrive, and where people are developed through "continuous learning and participation in meaningful jobs."<sup>6</sup> Education, at every level, must foster continuous learning, thinking, and the development of real-world capacities and problem-solving skills. Hindering this development are "single-subject, single-classroom, single-teacher formats [that] lack generative and meaningful collaborative learning."<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, development is enhanced through practices such as incorporating



real-world challenges, presentation of unstructured problems, contextualization of knowledge, team learning, thinking across disciplines, encouragement of lifelong and “lifewide” learning, and so on.<sup>8</sup> Tan’s foundational and far-reaching work for Singapore is helpful in exploring the suitability of PBL in the MDiv program.

### Concerns about the academy and the Master of Divinity curriculum

Although this section offers criticisms of the academy, our intention is not to denigrate it to the exclusion of the potential benefits to the church of a viable community of scholars. As teachers, we have inherited a complex fabric of Western structures, traditions, and pedagogical institutions. These are all inescapably finite and fallen. Educators and administrators do their best to improve matters and to work within the system; but perfection, in whatever sphere, will elude us this side of the eschaton. To put it plainly: some things in this life only Jesus can fix. Nevertheless, the Lord calls us to be good stewards of his gifts. We are responsible to God and to each other for the way we pursue our callings. For these reasons, the situation in the academy presents the theological educator with a cluster of challenges.

First, there is the problem of knowledge splintered into hundreds of seemingly disconnected pieces fostering growing specialization and subspecialization. Academic specialists are increasingly unable, or fearful, to speak on anything outside their area of expertise. While there are advantages to specialization in research, one of its devastating consequences is that many MDiv students are not able to conceive of an integrated picture of what they learn.

Second, this situation is aggravated by the traditional fourfold curriculum (biblical, systematic, historical, and practical theology). Without canvassing the well-worn terrain,<sup>9</sup> it suffices here to say that these disciplinary distinctions undermine the flourishing of pastoral wisdom and practice. To be sure, one can defend a plausible “logic” to the disciplines, but this logic need not translate into or be housed within compartmentalized departments and courses. Nor does it follow that someone trained in a specialization need then be housed in a specialized department. Organizational structures typically result from a *decision*, not doctrine or mandate.

The traditional order of the curriculum also leads to the common student experience that practical theology is lowest in rank (theology or biblical studies occupy the top position). The situation is ironic. The MDiv curriculum is designed to prepare men and women for pastoral ministry, and yet, practical theology is functionally trivialized in students’ experience. We need some form of “symphonic pedagogy,” a teaching methodology that effectively integrates facets of knowledge and wisdom kaleidoscopically.<sup>10</sup>

Third, the traditional curriculum tends to privilege *scientia* over *sapientia*, that is, theoretical knowledge over practical wisdom, which can lead to theorists and practitioners disparaging one another’s curricular domains. We would argue that the *raison d’être* of all theological education should be *sapientia* (wisdom), and, therefore, a sapiential pedagogy.<sup>11</sup> Further, the opposition of *sapientia* against *scientia* is not the way forward; wisdom, let it be said, must

entail knowledge/content (lest we are left with a dangerous pastoral utilitarianism). The difficulty created by the traditional curriculum structure is how to synthesize knowledge learned *and* make it good for pastoral work.

The fourth concern is the nature of the relationship between the academy and the church. This ecclesial gap is deeply frustrating for students, faculty, and church members. We recognize that much of pastoral practice is thoroughly dependent on theoretical material, whether pastors realize this or not. At the very least, pastoral practice presupposes the disciplines of exegesis, biblical theology, systematic theology, and church history. On one level, then, it is disastrous to dismiss the academy as immaterial to the church. But the problem is not the academy *per se*, but rather, the theory-practice (and church-academy) divide, which is exacerbated by a limited view of education. Similarly, one might argue that theological education would benefit from a fresh envisioning of the task of pedagogy, perhaps a directional view of teaching. On this directional view, theological education is teaching as fostering learning for the sake of wisdom.<sup>12</sup>

Fifth, and finally, there are differences in perspective and inevitable polarities among educators. In our judgment, two types of faculty<sup>13</sup> need to be in dialogue for effective implementation of any instructional alternative in the MDiv curriculum.

### ***Faculty who identify themselves as representing the tradition of the academy***

They see their role in the following terms: Content is not a commodity to be delivered. The teaching-learning transaction at its best demonstrates the potential for study to make one wise and fosters conversation about ways in which the subject matter of a discipline relates to contemporary problems. For these faculty members, the discipline is more than information. The themes, questions, and personalities represented by the discipline inspire and transform as well as inform—even when the mode of delivery is that of an engaging lecturer. These faculty are committed, however, to viewing habits of reflection and study as ends in themselves and able to enhance virtue, service, piety, the love of God and neighbor.

### ***Faculty who identify themselves as facilitators of learning***

They see their role in the following terms: Professionalism is not simple mechanics or pragmatism. The professional (and faculty member) is a careful inquirer into theory, knowing that knowledge for its own sake is not sufficient. Knowledge and practice are not separable—personal and professional decisions have to be made about knowledge to which students are exposed. In this sense both types of faculty members share the same value—transformation. However, one group holds that knowledge is a thing in itself; the other that knowledge is only effective when connected to something else—be it virtue, piety, wisdom, practice, or love for God and neighbor. Reasonable dialogue between these types of faculty would expose their similarities, allow productive dialogue over legitimate differences, and reveal semantic misrepresentations caused by the habit of using language understood only by an insider to the discipline.



## **Problem-based learning as one way forward**

Tan, among others, is persuaded that problem-based learning is a significant innovation in education, not least because it is widely used in professional education and is no newcomer in educational design.

While there is little difference in retention of information between PBL and conventional approaches, PBL is more effective in developing problem-solving, communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills.<sup>14</sup> In PBL, teachers become designers and facilitators of learning. Unstructured, real-world problems become “triggers for self-directed and collaborative learning.”<sup>15</sup> Note that Tan nowhere argues for the abandonment of content. Content is a constant in considerations of educational design. However, the ways in which content is organized, presented, and processed differ greatly. The issue is not abandoning content but examining the ways in which students engage it.

Obviously, the pedagogical distinctive of PBL is the use of problems. “Great learning often begins with preoccupation with a problem, followed by taking ownership of the problem and harnessing of multiple dimensions of thinking.” And again: “Problems and the questions associated with them when strategically posed can enhance the depth and quality of thinking.”<sup>16</sup> What is typically deemed as teaching using problems is often the presentation of exercises, sometimes complete with guidelines, or a simple case will be presented that can be discussed in one or two class periods. PBL, on the other hand, when designed well, makes use of complex real-world problems that require participants to seek multiple sorts of resources—and to cope with the reality that most problems are not solved with one right answer.

Nearly all problems are local, or have local consequences, but learners are connected globally. Inevitably, learners will confront different perspectives and cultures. They will also confront multiple perspectives from different disciplines. Though integration of disciplines in a conventional curriculum is often difficult, the very nature of the disciplines is that they are informed by other disciplines (e.g., sociology and anthropology; exegesis and church history; systematic theology and moral psychology, to cite a few examples).<sup>17</sup> In conventional education, students are left with the task of integrating ideas and insights on their own. In instructional approaches such as problem-based learning, they are more likely to learn productive ways of engaging insights from several fields of knowledge, and, thereby, develop the capacity to transcend the theory/practice divide.

One advantage for problem-based inquiry is recognized when we note that specialization and the conventional structure of the curriculum is a persisting reality. Presumably, any discipline offers viable sets of knowledge, affect, and skills—and is strengthened by the fact that it is informed by the questions, methodology, and subject matter of other disciplines. In well-crafted PBL experiences, while students acquire content competency as they work with colleagues and engage professional resources, they also better discern and use the various sets within and across disciplines and thus practice making informed judgments about interdisciplinary relations and their applications in real-world contexts.

Well-crafted problems are not necessarily well-ordered problems. They leave room for unstructured thinking and exploration. Often, engaging problems over a long period of time generates insights that may not appear on a list of course objectives but are nevertheless valuable. Learners engaged in serious problem analysis are developing and strengthening several cognitive functions (e.g., making connections, identifying patterns and themes, judging among alternatives, and so on).

At each point, the teacher or a proctor can be involved to question, challenge, encourage, and suggest. In PBL, the teacher does not abandon his or her role as a knowledge-presenter but is more intentional about thinking through the following: How can I design and use real-world problems as anchors around which students can achieve the learning outcomes? How do I coach students in problem-solving processes, self-directed and peer learning, and so on? How will students see themselves as active problem solvers? The teacher or proctor facilitates PBL processes (e.g., changing mindsets, developing inquiry skills, engaging in collaborative learning), coaches students in strategies for problem solving (e.g., deep reasoning, metacognition, critical thinking, systems thinking), and mediates information acquisition (e.g., scanning the information environment, accessing multiple information sources, making connections).<sup>18</sup>

***The key to effective problem-based learning is a good problem.***

In a PBL experience, someone, or some group, presents the problem. The problem stimulates inquiry where the learners engage in initial analysis (raising questions about the problem), identify what must be known or understood in order to deal with the problem, make assignments of individual and group tasks, meet together in ways that suit the group's work, meet with the teacher or proctor who helps the group clarify and sharpen questions, examine the decisions they have made about learning tasks and resources, and possibly seek additional resources. The group and the teacher meet to discuss findings and the possibility to engage in further examination of a problem incompletely or inadequately resolved.

Because it seems obvious that men and women involved in the professions need to learn to deal with real-world problems, problem-based methodology has become commonplace in virtually all professional education.<sup>19</sup> The teacher does not provide answers; he or she provides the context, points toward or presents key foundational concepts, and encourages collaboration, which allows participants to learn with the specialist how to function effectively in their professional roles.<sup>20</sup>

***A good problem has several characteristics.***

An ill-structured problem, as the starting place for learning, is as close to a real-world situation as possible. While some problems are less ill-structured—since they are by nature less multidisciplinary and more focused on one specific issue—a well designed, ill-structured problem will foster individual and collaborative learning, stimulate curiosity, obligate the search for primary and secondary sources, provide enough information to assist but not so much as to

shut down creative process, and is reasonable in terms of time expectations.<sup>21</sup> A good problem will require examination of multiple perspectives. Students should quickly see that knowledge and insight from various subjects, disciplines, and resource persons is necessary. Inevitably, the problem will reveal gaps in current knowledge, attitudes, and capacities. At this point, the habits of conventional education will be difficult to overcome. Students will falter if they are unwilling to seek information and exercise cognitive skills such as inquiry, analysis, synthesis, critical judgment, and so on. Similarly, faculty who are unwilling to suspend the conventional practice of content transmission will hinder student development in the capacities required to function as a professional.

Clearly, determination of the background knowledge both possessed and needed in order to deal with the problem is a factor in good problem design. Here Tan differs from some PBL exponents. PBL purists maintain that knowledge is gained through the process of working with the problem. Tan asserts that, "We also have to ascertain that students have the basic and foundational knowledge needed to inquire and to understand the problem."<sup>22</sup> To be sure, knowledge is gained and deepened through the process of seeking resources, developing questions, and so on. However, it may be necessary for a teacher to actually present or make available necessary information. Students may be given a learning package that contains summary material, the problem, expectations for advance reading, and so on. However, an "answering pedagogy" is to be avoided in PBL design.

The characteristics of good problems reveal the limitations of conventional course scheduling and time tables. PBL activities do not fit into neat curricular boxes. Conventional curriculum design focuses on content coverage and exposure to a field of knowledge (however narrowly or broadly). Conventional curriculum also tends to be organized in self-contained, noncommunicating units of departments or courses. In making the decision to organize a curriculum using problem-based learning, the assumptions that inform conventional curriculum need to be examined in light of expectations related to student learning and practice. However, it should be noted that PBL is not a replacement curriculum but an alternative design employed for sound reasons.

***Several types of problems are possible.***

(1) A malfunctioning system that requires intervention and/or improvement. (2) A normally functioning system where there is a need to raise or revise standards or improve quality. (3) A description of a phenomenon or an observation where students are required to examine, assess, and offer proposals or observations related to the phenomenon. (4) A problem that describes the gap between the current state of knowledge in a field, or in a particular practice, and the actual understanding or expertise needed. (5) Because decision making "represents one of the most important forms of challenges"<sup>23</sup> in the real world, a problem can incorporate matters related to policy, opinion, human rights, ethics, and so on. The problem reflects that such matters involve rational and emotive reasoning. (6) Finally, "Creative problems that lead to a new system design or an invention represent an important category of prob-

lems in the knowledge-based economy. Are there new ways of doing things? What are some of the possible consequences and impacts?"<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, there is no one right way to do problem-based learning. The elements described thus far can be employed in a variety of ways, depending on the problem and the background of the participants. The relevant question here, for our purposes, is whether PBL, at its best, is one educational design that offsets many of the challenges that beset modern theological education and, in particular, the MDiv program.

### **Possible approaches for the implementation of PBL in the MDiv program**

Once problem-based learning is implemented, faculty teams will need to discuss processes such as integration of content areas, evaluation, and design of problems. Administrators will need to discuss various contractual arrangements with faculty. Specific training areas will need to be identified (e.g., how to design a problem, facilitation skills, and so on), resources and resource persons secured, and communication processes organized. The remainder of this document, however, simply presents possible options for implementation with some cautions.

1. Develop two parallel tracks for the MDiv: the conventional program and a problem-based learning track. In some cases PBL experiences could overlap with traditional classes.
2. Develop one class that runs throughout the MDiv curriculum in both semesters.
3. Create one or more prerequisite classes that present the technical information and/or content required for particular PBL experiences.
4. Develop PBL problems that lead students through content acquisition and conceptual understanding.
5. Design an experimental PBL course that parallels the MDiv internship experience.
6. Organize a cohort that moves through one or two years of the MDiv program together using PBL as their primary experience.
7. Organize cohorts that change each semester and that are involved in PBL for at least two semesters of their program.

### **Reasons for skepticism? A cautionary tale**

Good pedagogical theory does not always yield good learning practice. The experienced faculty member thus has sufficient reason here to adopt caution about the pedagogical merits of problem-based learning. One is wise to ask the hard questions; PBL is no exception. We suggest eleven broad lines of interrogation that a concerned faculty member may want to pursue:

1. As with any educational design, including that which is currently in use in most seminaries, studies disagree on the efficacy of problem-based learning compared to traditional education.<sup>25</sup> If PBL is adopted in some part of the MDiv program, questions such as, In what ways is PBL helping us achieve learning goals for the program? In what specific areas of learning has PBL demonstrated its usefulness? will need to be asked. It is conceded that there is little difference between conventional lecture modes and PBL in terms of amount of content gained. The extent to which outcomes related to conceptual gains and development of learning capacities are better achieved by PBL-like approaches will need to be assessed.
2. The traditional theological disciplines are significantly different from medicine or business. Medical knowledge may be “always changing”—and therefore ripe for PBL. Clearly, knowledge related to biblical studies, theology, church history, philosophy, and so on is always “changing” or developing as a result of scholarly inquiry, research, and practice. But, to what extent would the nature of development in these disciplines affect the implementation of PBL? In what particular areas is development in these disciplines evident? What particular problems require investigation in these distinctive disciplines?
3. A curriculum is only as good as its students. Motivated students tend to fare well in whatever curricular circumstances they are placed; students without motivation will fail irrespective of curriculum. Suppose PBL is adopted in the curriculum. Will we discover, in the end, that the students who do well are the same students who did well with the traditional curriculum? And if so, what have we really gained?
4. The perceived purpose of the MDiv program is to develop pastors—professionally and academically. However, because the MDiv is organized and typically taught as if it were an academic degree, some students may perceive that the MDiv degree is a program leading to further studies. Therefore, students may resist PBL as a professional development approach precisely because they are using the MDiv degree as preparation for an advanced masters program or a doctorate. In this respect, a two-track MDiv is likely the sensible option.
5. The possibility of integrating PBL with a conventional MDiv program should be left open. To what extent would two separate curricular approaches (PBL and traditional) contribute to the solution of admitted problems in the current MDiv curriculum? In what settings would combining PBL with traditional, text-oriented learning be practicable? Is it possible to have clear curricular distinctions between those elements that may need to be learned through careful study and those elements that may require a PBL approach?
6. The theological school curriculum is almost hopelessly overcrowded. To simply add one or two PBL courses will exacerbate the problems faced by faculty and students trying to work with too many courses in a time-bounded degree program. Further, learning and the desire for alternative curricular designs can be held hostage by inflexible class scheduling procedures.

7. As we have described above, the learning problems are *the* central component of PBL. The learning experience is thus only as good as the problem. This implies that any PBL curriculum will need excellent problems and excellent facilitators. Some faculty do not see themselves as facilitators of learning. Given that PBL requires effective facilitation and problem design, certain faculty with the skill set, or interest in developing the necessary skills, may need to be invited as the early adopters. Further, the dean will need to give thought as to how faculty contracts can be designed in relation to the time required to develop PBL experiences.
8. The traditional curriculum works with disciplinary divisions and faculty experts. These faculty professors carry out important research in their fields, contribute to scholarship, write books, and of course, teach students. Our argument has been that this traditional framework may not always be ideal for pastors-in-training. PBL emphasizes instructors *qua* facilitators (not merely content experts) as well as the integration of the disciplines. Accordingly, a proposal to implement PBL in the MDiv program might force the questions: Where does this leave the academic specialist? What is the role of the scholar in a PBL design?
9. Fenwick and Parsons<sup>26</sup> raise the concern that PBL “teaches through problems abstracted from embodied social contexts and objectified for the [training] of preservice professionals . . .” They suggest that an objectified PBL may “reinforce the dominance of the professional elite” and privilege control over those served by the profession.<sup>27</sup> To what extent, therefore, has the learning experience helped students to reflect on their own habits of perceiving and responding? To what extent have students learned to collaborate with those they presume to help?
10. If PBL is understood as problem-solving activity, the student will miss the point that not all problems in life and organization are solvable.<sup>28</sup> When problems are constructed to give the student a good problem-solving experience “the perspectives, intentions, desires and priorities of the various actors forming the network of any situation, including the professional taking responsibility for it all, are generally rendered irrelevant by the push for productive solution that regulates problem-based practice.”<sup>29</sup> Humility and suspending the habit of control are among the appropriate lessons in PBL; otherwise, the student will apply “cookie-cutter” responses to ill-understood situations. “A hermeneutical response to life’s difficulty is not to solve it, but to understand it, interpret what it is, and seek a deeper understanding of one’s changing and dynamic relationship to the changing and dynamic situation.”<sup>30</sup>
11. The final question that must be examined in any PBL experience is the extent to which the student is equipped through this (or any other) medium for professional practice. Therefore, the role of evaluation is, in some ways, more crucial in PBL and PBL-like learning experiences than in conventional cognitive-based testing. Typically, evaluation in higher education is done poorly. Understanding the nature and practice of effective evaluation is a critical element in PBL.



## Conclusion

Problem-based learning has proven to be an effective approach for professional education. Will it work in ministry education in a theological school context?

Clearly, conventional schooling creates significant challenges for the incorporation of PBL. Large numbers of students; time-bounded classes; separated disciplines of knowledge and faculty that seldom interact across the curriculum; students acculturated to a more passive and individualized learning environment; diverse faculty perceptions of knowledge and teaching; and faculty expectations of teaching load, classroom time, and assessment perspectives conspire to hinder the development of learning-focused approaches such as problem-based learning.

But let us assume a willingness to overcome these difficulties and to develop a learning environment suited to the academic *and* professional goals of the MDiv degree program. Because the program is considered a professional degree with academic and professional elements, it is necessary to consider that which will enhance the professional development of students, develop content competency, and enrich their academic capabilities. Problem-based learning is a plausible option.<sup>31</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

1. See Barbara B. Levin, ed., *Energizing Teacher Education and Professional Development with Problem-Based Learning* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001); Peter Schwartz, *Problem-Based Learning: Case Studies, Experience and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2001); Carol Baillie and Ivan Moore, eds., *Effective Learning and Teaching in Engineering* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004); David Boud and Grahame I. Feletti, eds., *The Challenge of Problem Based Learning* (London: Routledge, 1998); Barbara J. Duch, Susan E. Groh, and Deborah E. Allen, eds., *The Power of Problem-Based Learning: A Practical "How To" for Teaching Undergraduate Courses in Any Discipline* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2001); Imogen Taylor, *Developing Learning in*

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*Professional Education: Partnerships for Practice* (Buckingham, England: Open University Press, 1998); David Boud, "Problem-Based Learning in Education for the Professions," *The Journal of Higher Education* 58, no. 4 (1987): 490–492. On the use of PBL outside medicine, see <http://www.pbli.org/pbl/pbloutside.htm> (accessed May 8, 2008). For a good news-bad news trial of PBL in an anthropology course: see <http://www.udel.edu/pbl/dancase3.html> (accessed May 8, 2008).

2. See Robert Banks, *Revisioning Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Jackson Carroll, "The Professional Model of Ministry—Is It Worth Saving?" *Theological Education* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 7–48; Linda Cannell, *Theological Education Matters* (Illinois: EDCOT Press, 2006); Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); Edward Farley, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Barbara Wheeler and Edward Farley, eds., *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 1991); Paul Wilkes, "The Hands That Would Shape Our Souls," *Atlantic* 266, no. 6 (December 1990): 59–88; Charles Monroe Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study* (Decatur, GA: Scholars Press, 1985).

3. Oon-Seng Tan, *Problem-Based Learning Innovation: Using Problems to Power Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Singapore: Thomson, 2003), 6.

4. Simply saying that a revolution is called for will not, of course, make it so. The divide will persist between one group of teachers who consider the Internet another form of computer assisted instruction and thus insignificant in its impact, and a second group who advocate that the Internet is one of the important factors fueling the shift from an instructional to a learning paradigm. Note the recent newspaper articles about students who annoy teachers by accessing the Internet in class, particularly, it is noted, when class gets boring. Is this simply the twenty-first century version of passing notes in class—and all we have to do is turn off wireless access (the first group of teachers)? Or, is it an indication that something potentially powerful in learning is possible (the second group of teachers)?

5. Tan, *Problem-Based Learning Innovation*, 6.

6. *Manpower 21: Vision of a Talent Capita* (Ministry of Manpower, 1999), 18, cited in Tan, *Problem-Based Learning Innovation*, 9.

7. P. Schlechty, *Schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1990), cited in Tan, *Problem-Based Learning Innovation*, 11.

8. Tan, *Problem-Based Learning Innovation*, 11.

9. There is also a helpful discussion in David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 165–193. Clark may not go far enough in his diagnosis but his discussion is useful. For a more critical and prophetic treatment of this issue, see Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Also consult the older, but justly famous, Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

10. The allusion is to Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987).

11. See Dan J. Treier, *Virtue and the Voice of God: Toward Theology as Wisdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006).



12. It is this peculiar problem, in part, that has stimulated Kevin Vanhoozer to propose a *directional* view of doctrine as fitting participation in the drama of redemption. See Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).
13. Actually, there are faculty who share both perspectives on teaching; we discuss them here as ideal “types” primarily for ease of exposition.
14. Tan, *Problem-Based Learning Innovation*, 12.
15. *Ibid.*, 13.
16. *Ibid.*, 17.
17. Significantly, we define a “Renaissance person” as learned—one who thinks and communicates across several areas of knowledge in relation to real world issues.
18. Tan, *Problem-Based Learning Innovation*, 44–45.
19. Notably, theological education and ministry education are exceptions. Though the MDiv program, for example, is considered a professional degree, courses tend to be arranged and taught as if it were a liberal arts or academic-research degree.
20. Significantly, it is the experiences teachers have had since the achievement of their PhD degree that defines their competency in a discipline. In what ways have faculty members who are considered competent in their disciplines developed those competencies in the years following their schooling? What can be understood about learning from this self-reflection? What clues does this self-reflection provide as faculty members seek to guide professional development experiences for students?
21. Tan, *Problem-Based Learning Innovation*, 86 (see also p. 31).
22. *Ibid.*, 85.
23. *Ibid.*, 80.
24. *Ibid.*, 81.
25. Cf. Jerry A. Colliver, “Effectiveness of problem-based learning curricula: research and theory,” *Academic Medicine* 75, no. 3 (2000): 259–66. This article stimulated a lively debate in medical education.
26. Tara Fenwick and Jim Parsons, “Boldly Solving the World: a Critical Analysis of Problem-Based Learning as a Method of Professional Education” *Studies in the Education of Adults* 30, no. 1 (1998): 53–56.
27. *Ibid.*, 54.
28. For this and other reasons, the use of the word “problem” is problematic, leading some to suggest alternative nomenclature for this learning design (for example, inquiry-based learning, or project learning, and so on).
29. Fenwick and Parsons, “Boldly Solving the World,” 58.
30. *Ibid.*, 62
31. The authors wish to thank Mike Sleasman and Doug Sweeney for helpful comments on this article.



# Consortia Redux

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*ABSTRACT: In 2005, thirteen persons representing eleven consortia of ATS member schools met at a consultation on consortia in Washington, DC. An article, "Considering Consortia," summarizing that meeting was published in this journal (Volume 41, No. 1, 2005, 165–173). In 2007, a second consultation took place in Chicago. Eighteen persons representing fourteen consortia of ATS member schools participated in that event. This article summarizes their conversation regarding certain issues and possibilities inherent in consortial relationships.*

While geographic closeness often helps build the cooperative relationships necessary for consortial effectiveness, proximity alone does not guarantee the good health of a consortium. Even when an abundance of charismatic leadership is present, these two factors are not, in and of themselves, sufficient. In order to be effective, good consortia rely on structure more than charismatic personality, and on mission more than geographic closeness.

## Added value

Still geography matters. When two or three schools are "neighbors," it is not long before someone suggests that doing some things together might work better than trying to do them alone. This intuitive hunch gets at the "why" of consortia—a consortium, ideally, adds value in ways that individual schools usually cannot experience alone.

For example, a recruiter recognizes the importance of consortial membership because potential students can visualize—through the consortial lens—an enriched and expanded educational journey. In similar fashion, a new faculty member, via consortial agreements, can be easily introduced to disciplinary partners, teach in common interdisciplinary courses, help initiate cooperative degree/certificate programs, and share in a potentially broader range of theological and public discourse. It is also clear that consortial arrangements encouraging the teaching of some doctoral students are, in some consortia, significant enough to draw faculty who might teach more comfortably (and with higher salary) in university settings than in smaller consortia member schools.

By its collective nature, a consortium can leverage a variety of resources in support of the academic enterprise. For example, some consortia contain spiraling costs by selective purchasing; hiring shared faculty, administrators, or staff; and building common platforms ranging from shared technology to integrated library systems.

## **Political issues**

Given the value-added potential of consortia, participants in the Chicago consultation were also quick to note inherent political issues associated with consortia. A member school's issues almost always trump consortial concerns.

No matter the value of a consortium, when a member school's budget is in deep trouble, those line-item consortial expenses quickly give way to the cost containment argument presented by the chief financial officer to a member school's president. And this scenario becomes more complicated when consortial member school leadership shifts and the consortium has relied upon the presence of an individual school's charismatic leader. Very rarely does a new president come into office with a high regard for the value offered by a consortium. This is unfortunate, because consortia often come to rely upon the energy and vision of only a handful of persons, and when academic deans or presidents find themselves, for whatever reason, under siege in their own schools, their absence or lack of attention to consortial issues often has an outsized impact on the consortial agreement. If consortial agreements are not systematized, the strengths commonly associated with a particular school or individual can easily disappear. Proactively, if a consortium has a clearly defined mission, and if a consortium can be seen as actively delivering that mission, that consortium will be more readily visible across and throughout the group of schools actively engaged in it. "Brand recognition" is important for a consortium's success.

## **Missional impact**

Because the value-added argument only cuts through political issues when the promised value is realized, participants in both consultations were quick to affirm the importance of a real mission statement for consortia and the usefulness of systemic patterns to deliver that mission. When the mission of a consortium is defined, in part, by goals that produce certain things for member school students, faculty, and staff, the usefulness of a consortium's mission statement seems clear. For example, a consortium might agree that a strategy congruent with the consortium's mission is to support faculty disciplinary conversations. How this helps faculty can be easily ascertained. In some instances, conversations initiated in disciplinary meetings have led to common grant writing, elective courses, and public presentations or articles. In a few situations, such projects have been known to lead to the design and implementation of common degree programs. It is clear that much of the work associated with such multischool-sponsored degree programs or with degrees offered by a particular consortium could not have taken place without the sometimes tacit and often intentional support of a consortium. Such highly pragmatic and visible work, affirmed throughout a specific consortium, easily affirms for faculty the value-added argument raised earlier in this essay.

## Structure

Each school has its own way of doing and being itself. Consortia serve at the will of their member schools. Member schools answer first to their own structures for decision making. These ways are different. School by school there are different sets of practices. As each school approaches this differently, schools in a consortium often talk past each other. Schools accordingly struggle to know how to collaborate.

In this regard, those who are in a consortium cannot afford to allow their own school's pragmatic assumptions to direct or drive the consortial decision-making process. Some clarity regarding mission and relational process of the consortium must be achieved.

Total absorption in consortial business conversation without time spent in relational or personal conversation ultimately is counterproductive. Most consortia flounder because of a lack of intentional, relational communication regarding their missions. In addition, missional intent, patterns of communication, and a strong, relational grounding often fall apart because of the absence of best practices.

Best practices in good consortia decision-making processes have to do with simple things: (1) holding meetings of consequence, (2) keeping clear meeting notes, (3) clarifying decision-making processes, (4) communicating such processes and procedures to consortia member schools, and (5) transparency in consortial decision making.

Consortia in ATS member schools that try to follow such systematized processes regularly and effectively hold student cross-registration; promote cross-library usage; produce team-taught, special area, consortium-sponsored academic courses; sponsor cooperative student programs; sponsor common orientations for field education programs; and sponsor, publicize, and hold public lectures. In all this, consultation participants agree, consortia benefit from keeping clear records, and when memoranda of agreement are struck, housing them in secure but accessible locations.

## Actions of consequence

Good decision-making processes are political; that is, they are an exercise in human, social, meaning-making. Decisions in such processes take time and often are reworked; that is, some actions reached in consortial meetings will *not* occur because unanimity was impossible "back home." Nevertheless good consortial decisions often result in "actions of consequence." For example, consortia in ATS member schools offer joint degree/certificate programs; share space, faculty, and equipment; hold joint service contracts; and, in purchasing for libraries, hold joint collection policies.

That said, consortia seem to work best when people, over time, build relationships in which trust is present; that is, reaching a higher level of transparent cooperative trust among member schools sometimes is a direct result of quality time spent together (for example: retreats and relational time at decision-making meetings) and/or crisis time during which member schools

weather potential disasters. Cooperative trust cannot be taken for granted, and those with formal consortial roles to play must actively work at providing and maintaining the kinds of contacts that nurture such relationships.

## **Leadership**

If a member president or someone with a key consortial role cannot affirm transparent, relational leadership, consortial conversation becomes difficult. Trust is helped, of course, with a clear structure, transparent processes and procedures, and member knowledge as to how a consortium makes decisions, including those related to its consortium's budget.

It seems important to note, at least to those who gathered in Chicago, that some ideas of leadership are not compatible with good consortial leadership. And, while different models of leadership will be apparent across member schools, there needs to be a "buy in" of relational, trustworthy, and transparent consortial leadership; that is, if it is going to work, those who form the consortium's leadership have to embody such relational patterns of leadership. If leaders are not on the same page at this basic level, the consortium tends to fall apart.

When relationships of trust become the norm for consortial leadership, the strengths of member schools come to the fore. Relationships that matter become stronger. The goal here is to bring, in trust, as much to the consortium as one takes, in trust, from the consortium.

Consortia staff at the consultation were quick to agree with this statement, but noted that relational leadership is not an exercise in innocence; that is, consultation participants reported that knowing the various leaders in their consortia and their school cultures, in addition to understanding what is going on in the different schools of each consortium, makes the question of consortial leadership a complex, evolving entity.

## **Governance**

Appropriately, one case at the consultation focused on consortial governance. It was agreed that because trust is the basic core principle of good governance, a best practice for a consortium is to bring governance issues to the table and directly address them. If a staffing problem arises, address it. Avoiding conflict is not, over the long term, a good practice. And yet, governance arrangements in consortia are not always clear. There may be an elected or paid director, yet questions of role and authority still may not be clearly defined. What is the governance role of those who hired the director? Or, does some other entity have authority when things go bad? When not clearly defined, both those who represent member schools and the hired director might wonder about their roles. Like a president, should the director direct? Or, should the director facilitate those representatives of member schools who themselves serve as the decision-making body? Or, does good governance imply something else? Is the governance of a consortium like the governance patterns associated with a school?

In its own way, this discussion on governance hinted at the larger conversation regarding governance currently being carried on in ATS member schools across the Association. In that conversation, presidents are trying to understand how mission carried out in curricular decisions by faculty relates to the often confusing suggestions delivered to a school president by faculty stakeholders and/or constituencies. In such situations, a governing board sometimes does not understand the parameters for healthy deliberation. Leadership and trust are at the heart of such deliberations. And when the issue under discussion in either a school or a consortium is the director or the president, often pastoral orientations toward helping and caring for someone overpower more direct conversations. Nevertheless, common understandings regarding the principles of governance (for both the individual school and a consortium) need to be reached *before* such questions of leadership emerge.

## Conclusion

Consortia are complex entities. When carefully structured to promote mission-based initiatives, consortia do things appropriately and well. In this regard, best practices for consortia rely on transparent and regularized decision-making processes and procedures. Cooperative trust forms the core of good consortia governance, and the relationships modeled by consortia member presidents accordingly are suggestive of how well (or how poorly) a consortium might work. Crisis, in addition to regular meetings of consequence, sometimes gives a consortium missional clarity, but crisis is not something a consortium pursues, even when crisis-driven results are positive. Instead, a consortium assumes that by working well, its value-added argument to member schools for existence is visible and compelling.

*William R. Myers retired in January 2008 as director, leadership education of ATS. In that role, he developed the Master of Divinity Curriculum Revision Folio that schools can use when approaching curriculum revision.*





## Theological Education Submission Guidelines

The Association of Theological Schools is a membership organization of schools in the United States and Canada that conducts post-baccalaureate professional and academic degree programs to educate persons for the practice of ministry and advanced study of the theological disciplines. The Association's mission is to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public. The Commission on Accrediting of ATS accredits schools that are members of ATS and approves the degree programs they offer.

*Theological Education*, the journal of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, is devoted to the distinctive concerns of graduate theological education in North America. The journal supports the mission of the Association by providing those concerned with theological education—including administrators, faculty, and independent researchers—with scholarly discourse and reports on issues and trends, research findings and resources, and models of critical analysis and effective practices in graduate theological education.

Unsolicited submissions are reviewed by members of the journal's Editorial Board, who then make recommendations regarding their publication. The Editorial Board will not consider articles that are being submitted simultaneously to other publications.

### Article Formatting Requirements

1. Recommended length of articles is 5,000 words (approximately 18 double-spaced pages).
2. Follow *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition, using endnotes.
3. Convert footnotes to ENDNOTES, if necessary, using author's given name and then the surname with no intervening comma.
4. The *American Heritage Dictionary* and the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* are the references for preferred spellings.
5. Provide a paragraph ABSTRACT at the beginning of the article in approximately 80 words.
6. Add a short (2–3 sentence) paragraph at the end of the article identifying the author(s), institution or relationship to the project/topic, position held, and/or other information relevant to the experience of the writer(s).
7. Articles should be emailed to the managing editor (brown@ats.edu) in Microsoft Word, followed by a hard copy sent by conventional mail to: Eliza Smith Brown, Managing Editor, *Theological Education*, The Association of Theological Schools, 10 Summit Park Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15275-1110.

