Towards a Multidimensional Approach to Theological Education

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ABSTRACT

An holistic approach to theological education seeks a healthy balance between the affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions of learning. Such a multidimensional approach to theological education is both epistemologically sound and practically effective.

Introduction

Many years ago Joe Bayly commented that ‘... the only similarity between Jesus’ way of training and the seminary’s is that each takes three years.’\(^1\) While not all is wrong in the way we have traveled in leadership training from the days of Jesus and the apostles, nonetheless there is much that should concern us profoundly, not least the common complaint that our schools train academics not Christian leaders. In this paper I hope to investigate the framework for a more holistic pattern of leadership training that seeks to break out of our contemporary fixation with cognitive learning, moving beyond mere rhetoric about ‘head, heart, and hands’ to intentional multi-dimensional curricular planning that embraces a broader understanding of learning.

Epistemology and Multidimensional Learning

The centrality of the mind and cognitive learning in our theological institutions is rooted in a faulty Enlightenment-based epistemology where knowledge is seen as some sort of object that needs to be acquired. Parker Palmer summarises this faulty understanding as follows:

[The] mythical but dominant model of truth-knowing and truth telling has four major elements:

Objects of knowledge that reside ‘out there’ somewhere, pristine in physical or conceptual space, as described by the ‘facts’ in a given field.

1. **Experts**, people trained to know these objects in their pristine form without allowing their own subjectivity to slop over onto the purity of the objects themselves. This training transpires in a far-off place called graduate school, whose purpose is so thoroughly to obliterate one’s sense of self that one becomes a secular priest, a safe bearer of the pure objects of knowledge.

2. **Amateurs**, people without training and full of bias, who depend on the experts for objective or pure knowledge of the pristine objects in question.

3. **Baffles** at every point of transmission – between objects and experts, between experts and amateurs – that allow objective knowledge to flow downstream while preventing subjectivity from flowing back up.

He goes on:

In the objectivist myth, truth flows from the top down, from experts who are qualified to know truth ... to amateurs who are qualified only to receive truth. In this myth, truth is a set of propositions about objects; education is a system for delivering those propositions to students; and an educated person is one who can remember and repeat the experts’ propositions. The image is hierarchical, linear, and compulsive-hygienic, as if truth came down an antiseptic conveyer belt to be deposited as pure product at the end.

There are only two problems with this myth: it falsely portrays how we know, and it has profoundly deformed the way we educate. I know a thousand classrooms where the relationships of teacher, students, and subject look exactly like this image. But I know of no field – from astronomy to literature to political science to theology – where the continuing quest to know truth even vaguely resembles this mythical objectivism.

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3 Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, p. 101. In developing his critique Palmer draws heavily on the work of Michael Polanyi, especially *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*
When the Bible speaks of ‘knowing’ it is not speaking of some sort of objective knowledge, but of a relationship. To ‘know’ in the Scriptures is to have relationship – the relationship between God and a person, between God and the community, between person and person – a knowing relationship that finds its source in God’s self-revelation to us. It is not a matter of us discovering truth, but of us coming to know only as we are already known. Debra Murphy observes that ‘the uncritical embrace of objectivism ... is, in the end, a “strategy for avoiding our own conversion”. If ... the knowledge that Christians aspire to is ... knowledge of God and knowledge of self, then such knowledge will not, cannot, leave us unchanged.”

It is significant that in both Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek the term ‘to know’ is used both for ‘sexual intercourse’ and for the relationship the believer should have with God – pointing to the passionate, personal, relational nature of knowledge. As such, the scriptural call to know God is not a call to an objective theological understanding of God’s characteristics (even though this can be of great value). Rather knowing God entails entry into an ‘intimate personal interactive relationship’ as children of a Heavenly Father, in relationship with a community of brother and sister believers – a type of knowledge that speaks less of acquiring a masters degree in divinity as it does of being mastered by Divinity. In short, ‘knowing’ in the Bible speaks not only of cognition, but even more so of heart relationship and obedient action.

Robert Banks points out that:

(Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958) and The Tacit Dimension (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966).


6 1 Cor. 13.12. The verse from Corinthians is echoed in Parker J. Palmer’s To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

7 Debra Dean Murphy, Teaching That Transforms: Worship as the Heart of Christian Education (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), p. 100. The internal quotation is from Palmer, To Know as We Are Known, p. 40.


... the prophets, Jesus, and Paul not only shared the truth with others, but also their lives – with, at times even for, them. Why? Because this was the central truth they were conveying, and teaching it involved living and sometimes dying the truth as well as declaring it. ... For those who hold a classical view of the atonement, there is something contradictory about believing in the power of teaching alone to transform their students. There is a disjunction between their doctrine and their pedagogy. Jesus did not have an impact on others’ lives simply because he was a great teacher, but only as he poured out his life for them.10

Most of our institutions of theological education are appallingly anachronistic. We decry secular rationalism while affirming through the hidden curriculum the basic tenets of rationalism in our almost exclusive focus on the cognitive domain. Even courses that are reputedly ‘skill development’, while perhaps requiring one or more practical assignments, are largely theoretical in nature.11 Meanwhile, for over fifty years educationalists have been discussing and analyzing what have now become known as the three primary learning domains of affect, behavior, and cognition.12 Only when these three dimensions are embraced in an holistic concert can fundamental transformation – dispositional learning – take place. Only through an holistic approach to education in seminary and Church can our learners become increasingly disposed to think and feel and act like Jesus – the ultimate goal of all Christian teaching.13 Only as these three dimensions – affective, behavioral, and cognitive – are brought into balance can we aspire to the sort of holistic leadership training so desperately needed in our Churches today.

10 Banks, Reenvisioning Theological Education, p. 171-172. Italics mine.
11 Of course one of the difficulties is that such ministerial activities as preaching and teaching have many features of art forms, for which direction can be given in technique and style, but for which it is almost impossible to teach the more essential elements of creativity, imagination and emotional sensibility. See W. Edward Farley, ‘Can Preaching Be Taught?’ Theology Today 62 (2005), pp. 175-176.
13 Ephesians 4.13.
Affective Domain

‘Real people have real feelings, not just disembodied information systems called brains. Thus, thinking always occurs within some combination of emotional colorations.’

‘Human beings are full of emotion, and the teacher who knows how to use it will have dedicated learners.’

It is noteworthy that the great commandment does not begin ‘Love the Lord your God with all your mind’ but ‘with all your heart.’ Throughout the Scriptures the heart plays a central role in the process of knowing. According to Paul, justifying belief occurs through the heart not the mind. The characteristics of the mature Christian as expressed in the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, good
ess, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – these are all attitudinal in nature. While right doctrine is certainly important in the Scriptures, right attitude and right motivation seem to be of even greater significance.

This perspective is not unique to the Scriptures. Repeated testing has found that one’s IQ – Intelligence Quotient – contributes at best about 20% to life success. Of far greater significance are factors such as emotional stability, social skills, positive attitudes, and self-motivation – in other words one’s affective intelligence.

15 Leon Lessinger, quoted in Thom and Joani Schultz, The Dirt on Learning (Loveland: Group, 1999), p. 90.
16 It is interesting to note that the passage from Deuteronomy 6.5 quoted in the Synoptic gospels does not include ‘mind’.
17 Romans 10.10.
18 Galatians 5.22-23.
19 Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence (New York: Bantam, 1995), pp. 35-39, 185-187. Research into the traits that most consistently appeared on researchers’ lists has found that affective qualities such as self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability play as significant a role as intelligence. See Robert Banks and Bernice M. Ledbetter, Reviewing Leadership: A Christian Evaluation of Current Approaches (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), p. 50.
Although the affective domain is difficult to measure, it plays a critical role in learning – more so than we usually acknowledge. Back in the 1960s David Krathwohl and his associates developed a taxonomy of affective learning which continues to guide committed teachers in understanding the role played by emotions, attitudes, and motivations in learning, and the stages towards full affective embrace.\(^{21}\)

- The first stage of affective learning is *Receiving* – being willing to receive (or attend to) a particular viewpoint. Unless students pay attention to what a teacher says, rather than allowing their minds to wander off to the film they saw on television last night, the effect of the instruction given is negligible or non-existent.

- But passive receiving is a rather poor sort of learning. We want students not simply to pay attention but to move to the level of *Responding* – where not only do they listen but they actually do something with the material, entering into classroom discussion, asking intelligent questions, or even discussing key points with the instructor after class.

- But serious instructors are not satisfied even with responding. They long to see their students move to *Valuing* – where the students have wrestled with a perspective and come to express a preference for the particular viewpoint expressed.

- But expression of preference is only meaningful when *Organisation* takes place – where the students internalise the material and begin acting on it in practical ways.

- The final goal is *Characterisation* – where the student builds his or her life around the particular viewpoint and its value system.

If we were honest with ourselves I think you would agree that the level of affective learning taking place in most of the classes held at our institutions is depressingly poor. Where the goal is characterization, too often students merely survive what they perceive as fundamentally boring, and the willingness even to reach the level of receiving is largely the product of fear of failure rather than a genuine positive motivation to engage with the material.

The heart of affective learning is the quality of the teacher-student relationship.\(^{22}\) Too often we forget that ‘Jesus was not so intent on teaching people religious content as he was on beckoning people into a genuine relationship with him and into compassionate relationships with one another.’\(^{23}\) In a wide variety of formal studies\(^{24}\) it has been found that

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while such qualities as a passionate love for the subject, knowledge of the material, and creative teaching styles are common among exceptional teachers, even more so are warmth, genuine concern for the students’ learning, even love – all characteristics which speak of relationship and a hospitable classroom environment.\textsuperscript{25}

The seminary context is no exception. One piece of research discovered that

... what most people coming into theological institutions desire is the opportunity to get to know their teachers personally, and learn from them in ways that will help them grow spiritually and minister effectively. ... While as teachers we regard academic concerns as the most important, students are equally or more interested in the personal and practical implications of what they are learning.\textsuperscript{26}

If we are serious about nurturing Christian attitude and character it is not going to occur through maintaining a formal emotional distance in the classroom but through a relationship of love in which we mentor and model a life of quality to those God has called us to develop as future leaders of his Church.

\textit{Behavioral Domain}

Albert Einstein once said, ‘Knowledge is experience. Everything else is just information.’\textsuperscript{27}

For a long time teachers in our seminaries have thought that if they could teach students sound theology, Greek exegesis, and Church history, then these students would begin to function like Christian leaders. We have assumed that students would naturally put into practice what they learn in homiletics, education, and counseling classes. In short we have assumed that if we could persuade students to understand and believe the right things, they would act accordingly.\textsuperscript{28}


\textsuperscript{26} Banks, \textit{Reenvisioning Theological Education}, p. 227.

\textsuperscript{27} Albert Einstein, quoted in Thom and Joani Schultz, \textit{Why Nobody Learns Much of Anything at Church}, p. 117.

\textsuperscript{28} This section is adapted from a chapter entitled ‘The Action-Attitude Principle: People Believe What They Do More Than They Do What They Believe’, found in Bill McNabb and
Over the past forty years, however, social scientists have found much evidence to question that assumption. In 1964 Leon Festinger’s research led him to advance the radical notion that the knowledge-behavior relationship actually works the other way around – that is, people are more likely to behave their way into thinking than think their way into behaving. In the years since Festinger’s seminal work the evidence has continued to accumulate, increasingly pointing to the shocking conclusion that the expressed beliefs of a group of people are almost worthless in predicting how they behave.

This applies even among so-called ‘active’ believers. Studies conducted by a Christian researcher in the early 1990s discovered that conservative Christian students who were orthodox in their belief about God and Jesus Christ and active in groups such as Campus Crusade and Navigators were as likely to cheat and as disinclined to volunteer as non-religious and atheist students. Another researcher concluded bluntly: ‘As far as moral behavior is concerned [religious belief] appears to have little effect.’

Steven Mabry, *Teaching the Bible Creatively: How to Awaken Your Kids to Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 73-81.
30 Quoted in McNabb and Mabry, *Teaching the Bible Creatively*, p. 75.
Bill McNabb explains why this phenomenon occurs by observing that ‘... our beliefs so seldom are translated into action ... because there is a [long] process that a thought must survive before that thought becomes an action. When a teacher attempts to affect a student’s behavior with a new thought, that teacher must navigate the following steps:’ (see over)\(^{32}\)

That is a long journey for a teacher’s message to travel before it takes root in students’ lives. Is it any wonder that so few of our students put into practice what we teach? In the words of the great 19\(^{th}\) century educator Horace Bushnell, ‘No truth is taught by words or learned by intellectual means ... Truth must be lived into meaning before it can be truly known.’\(^{33}\)

The key to this process of behavioral learning is understanding the principles associated with the lost art of apprenticeship.\(^{34}\) How did the disciples learn how doctrine impacted life? They served as apprentices to Jesus for three years. While few of our schools are geared toward an apprenticeship model, anything we can do to enhance the behavioral domain in our teaching will have a profound impact on the quality of the education we offer.

As a framework for understanding the process of meaningful apprenticeship, the educational psychologist Elizabeth Simpson\(^{35}\) has suggested seven stages of behavioural learning which fit into three major instructional phases, which I summarise as: (1) Preparation: (a) Perception – becoming aware of objects and their qualities through one or more of the human senses; (b) Readiness – possessing the readiness to perform a particular action; (2) Supervised Practice. Guided response – performing under the guidance of a skilled trainer; (3) Increasing excellence in performance: (a) Mechanism – performing a task consistently with some degree of confidence and proficiency; (b) Complex overt response – performing a task with a high degree of confidence and proficiency; (c) Adaptation – performing new but related tasks based on previously learned motor skills; (d) Origination – using understanding, abilities, and skills developed in the psycho-motor area, the student creates new performances.

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\(^{32}\) McNabb and Mabry, *Teaching the Bible Creatively*, p. 75.


\(^{34}\) The apprenticeship model of leadership training is central to Charles Van Engen’s ‘Shifting Paradigms in Ministry Formation’, *Perspectives* 9:8 (1994), pp. 15-17.

Cognitive Domain

The cognitive domain of learning is the prime focus of most schools – from kindergarten to post-graduate. Cognitive learning is attractive in that it is easy to control, easy to plan, and easy to measure. However, even in the realm of cognitive learning our record is mediocre at best, as the focus in too many of our institutions has remained on the acquisition of information – the transmission of vast quantities of data that students are required to learn and then regurgitate in the exams.

The acquisition of information is not enough: if we want to help our students to make an impact on the world for Christ, we need to cultivate more sophisticated thinking skills – we need to help them develop the ability to process and apply facts.

In the 1950s a group of educators led by Benjamin Bloom developed an analytic framework for cognitive learning, in what has become popularly known as ‘Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives’. Bloom and his associates suggested that there are six different levels of cognitive sophistication, which I summarize as follows:

- **Knowledge**: the simple remembering of facts.
- **Comprehension**: understanding of what is being communicated, and ability to make use of the material at a simple level.
- **Application**: the ability to use abstractions in particular and concrete situations.
- **Analysis**: the ability to break material down into its constituent elements or parts.
- **Synthesis**: the assembling of elements and parts so as to form a cohesive whole.
- **Evaluation**: quantitative and qualitative judgments about the extent to which materials and methods satisfy criteria.

It is clear that there is a certain hierarchy in Bloom’s taxonomy (figure 3): knowledge is preliminary to comprehension; comprehension is preliminary to analysis; analysis to synthesis; and synthesis to intelligent evaluation. Moreover, the more deeply one grasps the issues related to an idea or question, the more potentially powerful the application. Only when we challenge our students to think more deeply and take steps towards living and leading theologically can we claim to be fulfilling our holy calling of developing effective leaders for God’s people.

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36 Bloom, et. al., Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.
Summary

The learning dimensions do not function in isolation but each affects the other: positive attitudes motivate students to think more carefully and take risks in action; experience changes belief and attitude; and right thinking provides guidelines for evaluating both emotions and behavior. The concert of the ABC of learning works together to form the disposition of the student.

An imbalance between the learning dimensions creates distortions in the disposition: a focus on the affective domain leads to ignorant pietism; a focus on the behavioral domain leads to empty technical excellence; a focus on the cognitive domain leads to the pride and irrelevance that are endemic among our graduates. Excellence in theological education will recognize the need for a holistic balance, which will lead to the healthy dispositional formation of the emerging leaders entrusted to our care.

Conclusion

As responsible theological educators we can no longer accept the status quo of an imbalanced cognitively-oriented education that is founded on the faulty epistemology of modernist objectivism. The challenge is before us to seek a holistic multi-dimensional approach to learning that alone can lead us on the path to excellence in curricular development.
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