Teaching Practical Theology: Implications for Theological Education with Reference to Lonergan's Theoretical Framework

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Abstract: *This paper argues that the effective teaching of theology is enhanced when the theological educator is aware of the educational implications of the task. The implementation of appropriate teaching-learning strategies can facilitate student engagement and shift student horizons. Drawing on the work of Bernard Lonergan this paper explores the notion of teaching to promote a shift in students' intellectual, moral and religious horizons. Lonergan's thought and the student centred strategies of feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp are suggested as helpful approaches for teaching practical theology.*

The Jesuit philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan writes of the central role of the theologian as an attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible subject in the theological process. This paper reflects on some educational implications of Lonergan's position for the teaching of practical theology. The paper argues that the effective teaching of theology is enhanced when the theological educator is both self-aware and conscious of the educational implications of the task. It grew out of the experience of teaching practical theology for classes at Australian Catholic University.

Learning

According to Lonergan, "knowledge makes a slow, if not bloody entrance. To learn thoroughly is a vast undertaking that calls for relentless perseverance."[1] Lonergan's understanding of learning is in the tradition of Aristotle's search for wisdom as developed by Aquinas. For Aristotle sense perception is differentiated from reason. Reason unifies and interprets the sense perceptions and is the source of all knowledge. According to Liddy, Aquinas wrote about two dimensions of wisdom. "One was supernatural; it came from above. It was a gift of the Holy Spirit, a share in Gods own knowledge."[2] The other dimension is a natural wisdom which is not limited to a particular field of knowledge but

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[1] Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Crowe Frederick E. and Robert M. Doran, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 209.

[2] Richard M. Liddy, "Wisdom and the Transformation of Disciplines," The Lonergan Website http://lonergan.concordia.ca/reprints/liddy-wisdom.htm. Accessed 23-03-11.

is an "over-arching and integrating view of the various realms of knowledge."[3] Theology and by extension theological education has the potential to contribute to the development of natural wisdom.

For Lonergan, "there is no rule of thumb for producing natural wisdom. Natural wisdom is not something we start with, but something we head towards. We only reach it through the long and difficult process of striving to know."[4] This understanding raises the question as to how we make good judgments on the way to achieving wisdom. Following Liddy the view of Aquinas on this question is:

> that from the start we have within us a rudimentary 'view of the whole.' Otherwise, as Plato saw so clearly, we would never be able to say 'That's it! That's the answer to my question – that's what I have been looking for! Without a heuristic anticipation of what true answers would 'look like', we would never be able to say with Archimedes 'Eureka!'[5].

Lonergan developed his transcendental method through identifying the detached disinterested desire to know which Aristotle identified as the search for wisdom and systematically unpacking its implications. Specifically, "[t]ranscendental method is concerned with meeting the opportunities presented by the human mind itself"[6] as it engages the disinterested desire to know.

According to Lonergan to achieve objectification of one's own conscious operations one must,

(1) *Be attentive* in one's experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding, it is catching oneself in the act (so to speak) of experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding,
(2) *Be intelligent* in understanding the unity and relations of one's experienced experiencing, understanding, judging and deciding,
(3) *Be reasonable* in affirming that one's experience and understood experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding are in fact real and distinct operations ,
(4) *Be responsible* in deciding to operate in accord with the immanent norms observed in the spontaneous relatedness of one's experienced, understood, affirmed experiencing, understanding judging and deciding.[7]

The normative force of the method described by Lonergan is in the native spontaneities and inevitabilities of our consciousness. It is these that assemble the constituent parts of being attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible and unites them in a rounded whole.[8] The order of this pattern of operations is normative, since the articulated order of operations reflects the actual order in which each particular operation occurs in human beings. As Lonergan states,

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: DLT, 1972), 14.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 19.

[s]pontaneously we move from experiencing to the effort to understand … Spontaneously we move from understanding with its manifold and conflicting expressions to critical reflection … Spontaneously we move from judgement of fact or possibility to judgements of value and to the deliberateness of decision and commitment.[9]

Knowing and teaching

For Lonergan knowledge is hard won by the learner through the completed sequential process of experience, understanding, judgement and decision. Lonergan differentiates two types of knowing, elemental and compound. "By elemental knowing is meant any cognitional operation, such as seeing, hearing, understanding, and so on."[10] In an elemental sense we know something as we perceive it with our senses or become alert to the appearance of an image in our imagination that may give rise to an insight.

Knowledge does not arrive fully formed as in the model of downloading completed self-contained parcels of information from the hard-drive of the teacher to the hard drive of the student or a traditional mug/jug transmission model. Hearing lectures and reading texts is but the first movement in the vast undertaking through which students come to know something. When students attend classes, they know they have heard sounds, seen images and read texts. This elemental knowledge may be distinguished from compound knowledge, which according to Lonergan is knowledge born of experience, understanding, reflection and judgement.

In elemental knowledge, if we are conscious we are engaged in perception and our experience gives rise to questions. It is from our spontaneous and intentional efforts to understand that insights arise. Insights however "are a dime a dozen"[11] and they too are in the realm of elemental knowledge. Applying Lonergan's methodological framework to the dynamics of teaching-learning until experiences are understood, conceptualised, judged to be correct and evaluated, they remain in the realm of elemental knowledge.

In the teaching-learning process it is the role of the teacher to create structures that facilitate the probability of students learning, that is, attaining compound knowledge. Learning is enhanced when a teacher is reflectively self-aware of what he or she is doing when they are teaching and why they are engaging in a particular teaching-learning process.

Conversion

Lonergan identifies conversion in the theologian as providing the horizon in which theological doctrines can be understood, articulated, systematically reflected upon and effectively communicated. The effective teaching of theology is strengthened when the teacher has an awareness of the teaching-learning strategies that facilitate a change of horizon in the student.

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[9] Ibid., 18.

[10] Ibid., 12.

[11] Bernard J. F Lonergan, *Philosophical and Theological Papers, 1965-1980*, ed. Robert C. Croken, Robert M. Doran, and Lonergan Research Institute, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 17 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 337.

Lonergan describes conversion as normally a prolonged process that results in the gradual realisation of a change of course and direction. He understands conversion as a "transformation of the subject and his (or her) world."[12] Similarly theologian Rebecca Chopp describes a feminist approach to theological education as beginning:

> by attending to the subjects and asking what is going on for them in theological education. In most, if not all, of the literature to date, the subjects of theological education are not mentioned. Education is not simply about correct ideas or handing down tradition or training in technical expertise; it is also about human change, transformation, growth. The "subjects" of theological education are the students. [13]

For Chopp the subjects of theological education are the students and, at least in part, theological education is about promoting growth and transformation in the students. We suggest that Chopp's understanding of transformation is akin to Lonergan's notion of Conversion. For Lonergan the process of conversion may begin as "concentrated in a few momentous judgements and decisions"[14] but it is not coterminous with these events or even a series of such events.[15] Conversion as lived, affects different levels of conscious and intentional operations. At the level of experience it directs the subjects gaze and pervades his or her imagination so as to releases the symbols that penetrate to the depths of his or her psyche. It enriches understanding, guides judgements and shapes decision making.[16]

According to Lonergan there is a typical, yet not strict order in which conversion occurs: religious; moral; intellectual. "Normally it is intellectual conversion as the fruit of both religious and moral conversion; it is moral conversion as the fruit of religious conversion; and it is religious conversion as the fruit of God's gift of his (sic) grace."[17] Theology is traditionally defined as faith seeking understanding. In terms of the typical order of conversion as described by Lonergan, one possible implication with regard to the process of theological education is that for students to be open to the possibility of intellectual conversion they need to have had some experience of religious conversion and moral conversion. In the absence of religious and moral conversion teaching and learning can still occur, but without the students having some experience of religious conversion the learning occurs in the horizon of Religious Studies. One of the objectives of Religious Studies is the attempt to understand what others believe. With regard to promoting a broadening of the horizon in the students in which religious and moral conversion may occur students may be prompted to ask questions related to the beliefs of others and these questions may prompt them to ask their own personal existential questions as to what they believe, and what it is that they value.

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[12] Lonergan, *Method*, 130.

[13] Rebecca S. Chopp, *Saving Work : Feminist Practices of Theological Education*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 13.

[14] Lonergan, *Method*, 130.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 131.

[17] Ibid., 268.

Religious Conversion

Lonergan describes religious conversion as "being grasped by ultimate concern. It is other-worldly falling in love."[18] Such conversion however is not an event or act, "it is a dynamic state that is prior to and principle of subsequent acts. It is revealed in retrospect as an undertow of existential consciousness."[19] For Christians religious conversion is God's love filling our heart through the Holy Spirit given to us.[20]

Moral Conversion

According to Lonergan, "[m]oral conversion changes the criterion of one's decisions and choices from satisfactions to values."[21] Moral conversion is grounded in the gradual movement to "the existential moment when we discover for ourselves that our choosing affects ourselves no less than the chosen or rejected objects, and that it is up to each of us to decide for himself what he is to make of himself."[22] Moral conversion "consists in opting for the truly good, even for value against satisfaction when value and satisfaction conflict."[23] When a person reaches full moral self-transcendence by acting in a manner that is consistent with heading towards goodness, she is constituting herself as a person who is "capable of moral self-transcendence, of benevolence and beneficence, of true loving ."[24]

Intellectual Conversion

Intellectual conversion is the elimination of the notion that "knowing is like looking, that objectivity is seeing what there is to be seen and not seeing what is not there, and that the real is what is out there now to be looked at."[25] According to Lonergan this notion overlooks the distinction between the immediate, tangible world of the infant and the world mediated by meaning. In the world of the infant, a world of immediacy, the only source of knowledge is input from the senses.[26] The world mediated by meaning is a world not known by the sense experience of an individual but by the external and internal experience of a cultural community, and by the continuously checked and rechecked judgements of the community.[27]

> In comparing this position to others Lonergan writes as follows.

> The naive realist knows the world mediated by meaning but thinks he knows it by looking. The empiricist restricts objective knowledge to sense experience … The idealist insists that human knowing always includes understanding as well as sense but he retains the empiricists notion of reality, and so he thinks of the world mediated by meaning as not real but ideal. Only the critical realist can acknowledge the facts of human knowing and pronounce the world mediated by meaning to be the real world;

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[18] Ibid., 240.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 37.

[25] Ibid., 238.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

and he can only do so only in as much as he shows that the process of experiencing, understanding and judging is a process of self-transcendence.[28]

It is through intellectual conversion that one knows, "precisely what one is doing when one is knowing."[29]

Teaching

Taking an educational perspective, we may ask what then is the role of the teacher in relation to students learning? More specifically, what is the role of the teacher of theology in relation to students learning practical theology? Using Lonergan's framework, a major task for the teacher of practical theology is to work to bring about a development in the intellectual, moral, and religious horizons of students. Effective theological education invites the theological educator to take seriously the task of the functional speciality Communications as identified by Lonergan.[30] This task requires the development, implementation and evaluation of teaching-learning strategies that aim to facilitate student engagement with the cognitive processes of insight, understanding, judgement and decision in the religious, moral, and intellectual realms.

The Pastoral Project

The focus of this paper now moves to discuss one teaching-learning strategy, the pastoral project, as illustrative of successful student engagement in the context of a course on Practical Theology.

> The unit descriptor says the course:
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> draws on the fundamental shift in emphasis in theology from the Vatican II that demanded that Christians attend to the Signs of the Times. This approach is intrinsic to the discipline and discourse of practical theology. The unit critically explores the methods, background, nature and theories of practical theology through analysis of contemporary events and contexts.

We suggest that there is a need for the teacher of practical theology to be cognisant of the teaching-learning processes involved in increasing the probability of intellectual, moral and religious conversion in their students, that is, creating or shifting the horizon, in which the students come to understand, articulate, and communicate what they have learnt. One such teaching-learning strategy is a pastoral project. We suggest that a pastoral project has the potential to work across and integrate the four levels of consciousness, that is experience, understanding, judgement and decision and facilitate the probability of conversion, understood as a shift in horizon, in the three identified realms of human experience; intellectual, moral, and religious.

In relation to the particular courses under investigation the idea of the pastoral project has been developed drawing upon the work of feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp, in particular her book, *Saving Work: Feminist Practices of Theological Education.* Beginning from women's experience in theological education, Chopp describes three feminist

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[28] Ibid., 239.

[29] Ibid., 240.

[30] See ibid., 355-368.

practices that she claims make a feminist approach to theological education unique. Chopp names these practices as narrativity, new practices of *ekklesia,* and reconstructive and transformative approaches to theology and Christian life.

Specifically Chopp's notion of narrativity seems particularly relevant to theological education. She describes it as, "the act of creating oneself in the midst of social and interpersonal relation",[31] an act that, "requires new meanings, symbols characters, images and plots", in order "to write one's life as an active agent in the determination of cultural and institutional conditions."[32]

In the context of a pastoral project Chopp's approach is transposed from its original context of the formation of women for ministry to one of engaging both undergraduate and postgraduate students of practical theology. The purpose of the transposition is to facilitate an increase in the probability of development occurring in the intellectual, moral and religious realms of human experience. The pastoral project modifies the notion of narrativity with the subject of the project grounded in the personal yet directed beyond the intentional development of the self. This transposition is based on the notion that it is through self-transcendence that authentic self-development has the potential to occur.[33] The meaning of the terms authentic and self-transcendent however are not self evident and as such these ideas are now discussed.

For Lonergan the term authentic has a very specific meaning. The precarious process of becoming authentic is marked by the struggles to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible. The process is precarious as to be authentic is to be ever withdrawing from unauthenticity.[34] For Lonergan the notion of self-transcendence is closely connected to values.[35] Generally a person is driven by both what pleases or displeases him and by a set of social, cultural, personal, and religious values. The idea of acting in a manner consistent with the values a person holds may or may not align with what the person considers to be pleasing.[36] Most individuals have to do tasks that are not always pleasing. In this instance they are transcending their immediate need either in the service of a value or perhaps in the service of meeting a competing need such as when we work to earn money. Self transcendence is marked by the choice to act in the service of values.[37]

A suggested model of a pastoral project now follows. An outline is presented identifying how an issue impacts personally on the student. A description of why the particular issue is a topic of interest or concern for the student is detailed. In an attempt to gain some understanding of the context of the issue or concern the student describes both his or her social/ecclesial location and the social/ecclesial context of the issue or concern. This movement is followed by research in which relevant theological resources are sought

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[31] Chopp, *Saving Work*, 22.

[32] Ibid., 21.

[33] See Lonergan, *Method*, 104-105.

[34] See ibid., 110.

[35] See ibid., 115.

[36] See ibid., 31.

[37] See ibid., 30-41.

and assessed. In most circumstance the theological resources are the moral and social teaching of the student's ecclesial community.

Now more aware of his or her own social location, the student then critically examines the issue in its context, in the light of the moral and/or social teaching available in his or her tradition. Through this process, in the light of the moral and/or social teaching, the student then makes a judgement as to the position he or she takes in relation to the issue examined. Grounded in this judgement the student then begins to develop practical strategies to address the issue. In a limited study and time frame, this is all that can be expected of a project. In the context of a larger ministerial project however the suggested interventions could be fully developed, implemented and evaluated with regard to effectiveness. The evaluation would then provide new data for the cycle to begin again.

Some of the projects that were undertaken by students included, is now presented

The suicide of a work colleague
Domestic violence in a friend's relationship
Divorce and its impact on the student as an offspring of the marriage
Divorce and it impact on the divorcee
Poverty in Western Sydney as exemplified in one school
Youth Suicide in the Gay Lesbian Transgender community
Abortion from the point of view of a pro–life demonstrator
Running a church based youth group
The impact on a family of the Chilean earthquake
Personal experience as an Iranian refugee
Clerical sexual abuse where the cleric was the parish priest.
Euthanasia and the use of artificial life-support systems related to a school friend.
Advocacy around child slavery and the connection with the manufacture of chocolate.
Environmental Stewardship and the government funded infrastructure program "Building the Education Revolution"
Relationship between school, parish and the Neo-Catechumenate movement with regard to a sacramental preparation program.
Inter-church pastoral care
Implementation of a new liturgical practice in a small religious community
The mission of the Catholic Secondary school in a region with a high Middle Eastern population both Christian and Moslem.
The implementation of a systemic restorative justice system in a Catholic secondary school.
Holistic education for Sudanese refugee students.

Development of horizons and the transformational goal of education.

In an educational context this paper has argued for the extension of the central concept of the development of horizon to the student of theology. In terms of religious development through the pastoral project the student's religious horizon may be developed through a new or enhanced appreciation of the moral and or social teaching of his or her ecclesial community. Such an appreciation has the potential to strengthen his or her commitment to the tradition or alternatively, on discovering that there is little developed moral or social doctrine in their chosen tradition this discovery may promote an exploration beyond their tradition with a view to either informing their current tradition or changing communities.

In terms of development in the moral horizon a possible implication of the doctrinal research, self reflection and examination of the broader social context is that the student is existentially challenged to state what his or her own position is in relation to the identified issue. Through this process, previously held positions that may have been ill-informed, doctrinaire or ideological may be modified or changed. This process reflects the intra-personal dynamics described by Lonergan in the functional specialty Dialectics.[38]

With regard to development in the student's intellectual horizon the pastoral project provides an opportunity for the student to move from a commonsense, literal or mythopoetic view of the scriptural narrative to a more theoretical grounded doctrinal awareness of the implications of the meaning of scripture.

This paper suggests that the effective teaching of theology is strengthened when the theological educator is cognisant of the educational implications of the task. Drawing on Lonergan's theoretical framework, the key ideas of elemental and compound knowledge and religious, moral, intellectual and psychic conversion were linked to the implementation of teaching-learning strategies that facilitate student engagement. A modified form of the student-centred approach of feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp was outlined as useful for teaching practical theology. Chopp's approach was then adapted and developed into a model for a pastoral project suitable for use in a university setting. Finally, the range of projects undertaken by students was listed indicating the breadth of practical theology as a discipline and the almost unlimited scope for students of practical theology to learn in a holistic manner from pursuing their own personal area of theological interest.

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[38] For a detailed discussion on Dialectics see ibid., 235-266.