A Practical Theology of Teaching for Transformation

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Introduction

The following Faith and Learning paper is composed of two parts. Part one offers a theological foundation for a learning-centered approach to instruction and design. Part two builds on this foundation and offers a system of teaching and learning that moves beyond the traditional lecture format into interactive engagement. This second part was accepted for publication in an upcoming issue of the *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry*. Due to the scope requested by the editors for that article, the foundational arguments of part one were not put forth for publication but are here included to offer a more complete assessment of the theological as well as the programmatic implications of a learning-centered epistemological approach.

My specific audience is the undergraduate students in the Christian Formation and Ministry department at Wheaton College, particularly those enrolled in CFM 222: Teaching for Transformation. However, there is an intended wider audience and application within a variety of contexts from higher education to the local church.

PART I: A Theological Foundation for Teaching and Learning

Setting the Stage for Practicing the Drama of Transformational Pedagogy: What is Transformation?

How does one teach for transformation? This is the overarching question of the paper. At its core, it is a theological question, because transformation as understood here is concerned with who we are as created in the image of God (theos) and how we become more like Jesus (logos). As the theologian Beth Felker Jones instructs, "Knowledge of the *logos* (Jesus) is reflected in true worship of him, which is manifested in the ways we act and think. It is also reflected in the ways we speak about God to others. When we, as Christians, bear witness to the gospel, we are doing theology" (Jones, 2014, p. 12). Herein, I am interested in "doing theology" that seeks to put into practice the beliefs that are held about teaching and learning. The model I will explore is exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. An emphasis on *drama* is helpful here, to borrow the description of the theologian Kevin Vanhoozer. He writes, "The obedience of faith and faith's demonstration of understanding involve speech and action alike." This "speak-acting," as Vanhoozer calls it, is the language of an "interactive theater" (or drama). It is also a helpful metaphor for the transformational experience that is taking place in a learning environment. It is within this construct of drama that we are invited to experience transformational encounters in order to become more like Christ (Vanhoozer, 2014).

For the scope of this paper, *transformation* is defined as an intentionally designed and guided process of personal and communal growth into Christlikeness. My definition of *teaching* is woven within this definition of *transformation*. Generally understood, *teaching* is the activity of an authority who designs and guides for a specific reason in a specific way to reach a specific outcome. Returning to my definition of *transformation*, teaching is understood to be captured within this phrase: "designed and guided process." It is important to emphasize again that these

definitions of *teaching* and *transformation* are exclusively Christian and considered within the context of learning-centered teaching wherein the end goal of transformation is into Christlikeness.

The Inclusion of the Holy Spirit in Teaching for Transformation

For teaching to be transformational it must be done "intentionally" in partnership with the Holy Spirit as a transcendent authority and guide. The teacher is to teach through a posture of humble confidence while guarding against a posture of arrogant certainty. It is within this humble confidence that the Holy Spirit is invited into the design as well as the guided learning.

As educators leading learners to a transformational encounter with Christ, we are to rely on the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. It is an invitation to those who would teach as well as those who would be learners. It is a life of transformation, a life where the Spirit is the principal teacher. It is this anointing, this abiding in Jesus, which is the central characteristic of one who seek to teach for transformation (I John 2:26-27). To state it bluntly, given our previous definition, one cannot teach for transformation without the empowering of the Holy Spirit. In fact, transformation by theological definition requires a transcendent triune God; it is not something of which man or woman alone is capable. To teach for transformation requires the imitation of Christ and a robust view of the Holy Spirit (Oden, 1994). Part II of this paper will explore some of the ways a learning-centered approach invites the Holy Spirit to work.

Jesus' Demonstration of Teaching for Transformation

Jesus is often portrayed as a master teacher. Such an assessment tends to look at his skillful rhetoric, his use of vivid images and aphorisms, and his memorable summary statements. While it is true that Jesus is portrayed in the gospels as a remarkable conversationalist, he has

much to teach us about genuine, respectful learning-centered education. One significant way Jesus models this learning-centered approach to teaching is in how he relates to learners. The power dynamic (or authority) that Jesus displays in the teacher-learner relationship is a foundation upon which a transformational encounter is able to happen. This is partly why Jesus is said to be one who taught not as the teachers of his day (Mt 7:29, Mk 1:22, Jn 7:46). Jesus is obviously a teacher, however, his example goes beyond the traditional understanding of the title. As the theologian Robert Stein expounds, "The relationship between Jesus and his disciples also differed from that between the rabbis and their disciples. Normally a pupil was a disciple of the tradition of his teacher, but the disciples of Jesus were exactly that—disciples *of Jesus*. Their message was not just the words of Jesus, although they did "receive" and thus now "handed on" his words, but their message consisted of the person of their teacher as well" (Stein, 1994, p. 2). Jesus' appeal was not limited to his message alone. Whom he taught was as much a part of his message as what he was teaching and can be seen through his association with sinners, tax collectors, children, women, the poor, and the sick. The compelling nature of Jesus was not only in what he taught, but in who he was. To summarize, one could say Jesus is the who, the what, and the how of Christian transformational teaching.

One illustration of Christ's teaching that exemplifies best principles and practices of a learning-centered approach to education can be found in John 10. This passage is considered because it reveals a foundational teaching of Christ. As he identifies himself as the Good Shepherd, he reveals the central teaching of laying down his life for his sheep. This teaching emphasizes Jesus' reorientation of a hierarchical power structure and is an example of his dramatic teaching. Table 1 below identifies some of Christ's teaching in this passage with the corresponding transformational learning-centered principles that are exhibited.

CHRIST'S TEACHING FROM JOHN 10 (ESV)	LEARNING-CENTERED PRINCIPLES
10:1 - "Truly, truly, I say to you…"	clarity
10:3 - "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name…"	sound relationship, safety, respect, inclusion
10:4 – "…he goes before them, and the sheep follow him…"	engagement, accountability
10:6-7 – "…but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So Jesus again said to them…"	reinforcement, clarity, awareness of needs
10:9 – "I am the door. If anyone enters by me…"	respect of learners as decision makers
10:11, 14-15 – "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep…I know my own and my own know me…I lay down my life for the sheep."	sound relationship, awareness of needs, clear roles
10:16 – "And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also…"	inclusion, respect of learners
10:18 – "I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority…"	clear roles
10:24-25 – "So the Jews gathered around him and said to him…Jesus answered them…"	dialogue – participation of learners
10:27 – "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."	sequence and reinforcement
10:32-36 – "Jesus answered them…The Jews answered him…Jesus answered them…"	open questions, participation of learners
10:41-42 – "And many came to him…And many believed in him there."	participation, engagement of ideas, feelings, and actions, accountability

Table 1: Learning-Centered Principles in John 10

As I correlate Christ's teaching to specific learning-centered principles in the table above,
I also want to express a word of caution. Care must be taken to not read one's own
presuppositions or agendas into the teachings of Jesus (what is known as eisegesis). My listing of
learning-centered principles, in connection with John 10, are not meant to be exhaustive, nor are
they meant to capture all of the ways Jesus taught. Rather, the principles are listed as a way to
emphasize how Jesus taught within one contextual setting in an engaging and transformational
way. Thus, in John 10 specifically, we see Jesus modeling certain principles found within a
learning-centered pedagogy and therein he serves as an exemplar to consider as we seek to
engage in best practices of teaching.

Before unpacking the Table, I want to briefly address the potential argument that would suggest Jesus contradicts or even violates what are put forth as learning-centered principles and practices. For example, one might offer he was not safe (i.e. wielding a whip in the temple), or was rarely clear (i.e. the way he used parables), or did not respect his learners (i.e. how some view his response to the Pharisees). The challenges within these arguments are clarified when we define the terms and understand what exactly Jesus is doing as a teacher, while guarding from reading into the text our own meaning or agenda.

Let us now consider what the terms in Table 1 above signify. It should be noted that the following principles do not stand alone but overlap or intermingle. One can see these as cogs in a machine; if one locks up due to misuse, they are all affected:

Clarity: The emphasis here is on using words that are least likely open to misinterpretation when we teach. In John 10:1, Jesus is modeling his authority as he begins his teaching with a *clear* statement that what is about to follow is true. Clarity here does not mean the learning will be without challenge. It is also not suggesting the teacher exhibit a posture of arrogance and elitism. Rather, the emphasis is on a trusted guide who directs the learner to pay attention and welcomes them into the decision-making process. My suggestion of linking this verse to *clarity* is an attempt to highlight the role the facilitator has in helping shape and direct the learning experience. Jesus models his authority or expertise. This is something educators must also take seriously and humbly model. In a learning-centered pedagogy, this is realized when the teacher constructs objectives with observable actions (Diamond, 2009, p. 153-154). These clearly designed achievement-based objectives are engaged by the learners who have all the resources they need to respond (Vella, 2001, p. 8). Therefore, to say Jesus models clarity is to suggest that he employed his authority and expertise in a way that facilitated learning as he clearly guided learners to be decision-makers.

Sound Relationship: The emphasis here is in the keen interest in the perspective of the other (Vella, 2008, p. 88). Jesus offers an illustration of one who intimately knows his flock. An image we would all do well to imitate as we enter into relationship with our students.

Safety: Safety refers to the right balance of challenge and support. It is ensured though the behavior and actions of the teacher and not only the words. Dissent is welcomed and a posture of exploration rather than defending is the guiding posture (Vella, 2008, p. 86). Jesus models this through the trustworthiness of his words as seen through his actions.

Respect: Learners are welcomed as decision makers in the learning process (Vella, 2002, p. 4). Jesus leads his sheep, inviting them to follow (John 10:3) and offers himself as a door through which one enters into life (John 10:9).

Inclusion: Learners are recognized as contributors and invited to respond (Vella, 2008, p. 103). Jesus models this as he seeks out his sheep (John 10:3, 16).

Engagement: The emphasis here is participation. This engagement is physical, mental, and emotional (Vella 2008, p. 105). Though these aspects of engagement are not specifically identified in John 10, we witness the generative theme of this principle in the way a response to Jesus unfolds in the life of the learners in his midst (John 10:4, 41-42). The belief that we witness in Jesus' followers would have certainly included physical, mental, and emotional participation.

Accountability: The learning often happens alone and yet is supported by the group and we guard against exclusion (Vella 2008, p. 108). This is a synthesis principle, as it is the result of using other principles (Vella, 2002, p. 25). Because of this, one can find traces of this principle throughout the John 10 passage and one sees its deep connection with engagement above.

Sequence & Reinforcement: The emphasis here is protection: "to ensure that no one, because of confusion or a loss of confidence, excludes herself from the learning process" (Vella, 2008, p. 93). One moves from simple to complex in the learning process and value is placed on repetition. This guards against confusion. This is so evident in Jesus' teaching in John 10 as he continues to reemphasize the theme of the sheep and the shepherd. John 10:6-7 offers a simplified glimpse of what it entails to turn our attention to the learners and guide them into deeper learning.

Awareness of Needs: A high priority is placed on the learners. Differences in expectations and experiences are identified so that what the learners need is clearly understood (Vella, 2002, p. 6). Designing the learning so that it is experienced as relevant is a central marker within this principle. A guiding characteristic is learning to listen. Jesus undoes our hierarchical structure often found within a teacher-student relationship as he puts his learners first (John 10:11, 14-15). He does this however not in a way that makes the learners' needs paramount; rather, learning is the end goal, and this learning understands the nuance between real and felt needs.

Clear Roles: This principle guards against ambiguity and allows the teacher and student to navigate the power structures within various relationships. It is connected to the clarity principle explored above. "The clearer the role of teacher and learners, the more precise the demands of that role, the more complete the learning" (Vella, 2008, p. 102). Again, the model of Jesus in this passage offers a beautiful picture of authority and power rightly engaged so that the learners are cared for in the best way possible (John 10:11, 14-15, 18).

Open Questions: A learner learns when she hears her own voice. This principle emphasizes dialogue and therein participation. Through the use of open questions, an opportunity for transformational examination, analysis, and synthesis is fostered (Vella, 2008, p. 113). Learners are actively engaged in considering the implications of what is being learned. Jesus is a master of asking questions to elicit a response (John 10:32-36).

Ideas, Feelings, Actions: The emphasis is on the cognitive (ideas), affective (feelings), and psychomotor (actions) learning. When we design for learning with all three of these domains in mind, real change is the result (Vella, 2002, p. 18). The end of John 10 illustrates the impact of Jesus' teaching. The result was belief (John 10:41-42).

Participation of Learners: In a sense, this is a sort of catchall of the above principles. At its core, it focuses on the immediacy of learning. The learning is relevant and therefore useful (Vella, 2002, p. 19). Jesus models for us a teacher who engaged his learners and was sensitive to their needs while he offered an example of his teaching in the life he lived. It is this invitation to participation that leads to transformed encounters.

Personal and Communal Growth into Christlikeness

Continuing to unpack my earlier definition of transformational teaching (*an intentionally designed and guided process of personal and communal growth into Christlikeness*), we now turn our attention to the overarching question of what it entails to teach in a transformational way while focusing on the outcome of personal and communal growth into Christlikeness. Parker Palmer helps unpack what is rudimentary in answering this question when he borrows a description from Abba Felix who says teaching is "to create a safe place in which obedience to truth is practiced" (Palmer, 1993, p. 69). Too often the transfer and impact of learning is limited to a personal experience of an individual learner. My definition captures the need for personal growth but I want to overemphasize the communal growth that must also be the focus of transformational teaching and learning. To teach, as it is being applied here, is an activity of wondering with others and responding to the wonder that God has given us to explore. A central virtue is that of fostering curiosity toward all that is good, true, and beautiful. At its core, education that is transformational is Christ-centered, Spirit-guided, relational, question driven,

and has as its goal deep learning wherein the teacher and learner(s) (of which the teacher is one) experience truth not only as a cognitive revelation but within an awakening throughout all the other faculties that make us human. Thomas Groome offers this guiding thought, "Christian religious education is a political activity with pilgrims in time that deliberately and intentionally attends with them to the activity of God in our present, to the Story of the Christian faith community, and to the Vision of God's Kingdom, the seeds of which are already among us" (Groome, 1980, p. 25). Groome's attentiveness to the political reality of our educational endeavors is another signpost directing the educator to complex contextual underpinnings of a learning environment. This in effect is a move toward an anthropological understanding of how humans relate and learn (which by default is a theological move). James K. A. Smith (2009) offers a helpful construct as he repositions how we understand our pedagogies. His corrective and instructive statements are worth quoting at length:

> Drawing on the anthropology that is implicit in Christian worship—which performatively affirms that we are embodied, material creatures whose orientation to the world is governed by the imagination—the pedagogy of the ecclesial university will extend and amplify the pedagogical genius that is implicit in the practices of Christian worship as well as other Christian practices. It will not be sufficient (or effective) to deliver Christian content in pedagogies that are designed for thinking things. If the practices of Christian worship attest to the fact that we are embodied, liturgical animals whose desire is shaped by material practices, how odd it would be to think a distinctively Christian education could be effective by what Bradley Hadaway calls "read and talk" courses. Rather, a liturgically informed pedagogy, assuming and drawing upon the "education" that already takes place in the liturgy, will also seek ways to extend and improvise upon Christian practices in order to create a learning environment that is animated by intentional practices that form the imagination and shape character. (p. 228)

There is a lot happening in this above quote, and it serves as an important reminder that our learning occurs over time and requires an expertise not only of the content but also of the process of learning. It also requires a significant knowledge of the learners themselves. One example of what Smith is naming is that we cannot teach character formation by only talking *at*

learners. Active engagement is a requirement for transformation. Smith's emphasis on the imagination is another crucial point and can be heard as an echo of Elliot Eisner, a former professor of Art and Education at Stanford Graduate School of Education. Eisner was one who promoted pedagogical complexity signifying that "no single educational program is appropriate for all" (Eisner, 1994, p. v). He too argued for an engaged imagination that moved away from applying teaching as a scientific endeavor and rather saw it as an artistic activity. His emphasis can be simply stated in his own words, "It is my thesis that teaching is an art guided by educational values, personal needs, and by a variety of beliefs or generalizations that the teacher holds to be true" (Eisner, 1994, p. 154).

Returning to the roots of the Christian Formation and Ministry department at Wheaton College, these words from Lois Lebar are as pertinent now as when she taught here from 1945-1975.

> In this critical day in which we live, Christian leaders are needed in every walk of life. The church of Christ should be developing these leaders by a program of training from birth to death. Every believer has been given a gift of the Holy Spirit for the building of the body of Christ. Our talent or ability is God's gift to us; the skillful use of that ability is our gift to Him. We'll never know the thrill of fulfilling that purpose for which we were born until we have developed our gift. We'll never know fulness of life until we're in the center of God's will, making our unique contribution to the church of the living God (1995, p. 27).

Lebar's emphasis on the Holy Spirit for the sake of the church is an important one. Teaching for transformation must be recognized as a corporate endeavor unless we over-emphasize the personal to the detriment of the communal. The theologian Leanne Van Dyk offers some helpful commentary when she states, "Individual choice is the proposed solution to an ecclesial problem; this is uniquely suited to an American democratic, individualistic, modern, and market-driven mentality…The ecclesiological imagination among evangelicals must expand, deepen, and grow more textured. But this ecclesiological deficit can only be overcome if the theological

exploration is thorough and integrative" (Van Dyk, 2007, p. 128, 132). If we are to have fruitful ministries, these warnings need to be considered and addressed.

Deductive and Inductive Learning

Education that seeks to be transformational is holistic in its scope. It happens best in dialogue, among learners, of whom the teacher is one, as it is within this frame of human interaction that a learning environment is created where truth has the greatest likelihood of being experienced. Such learning supports both deductive and inductive ways of knowing. The deductive emphasis that highlights more of a teacher-centered focus of learning is combined with the inductive emphasis that highlights more of a student-centered focus of learning. This combination allows the strengths of each method to be engaged in the proposed learning-centered model. The emphasis is thus on the learning. The role of the Christian educational community is to produce a climate of learning and one that is actively involved in deepening our faith. This community life draws our attention to the communal nature of knowing (Holmes, 1987, p.95). Consider the outworking of transformational learning-centered education through this description: *Questors posing questions with each other while on a quest*. It is within this communal construct that various principles and practices of both deductive and inductive learning take shape on the road of education.

> **Questors**: It is important to note that at the center are the learners, of whom the teacher is one. These "questors" are unified in the vision they have for the quest. There is defined purpose for their togetherness and a concern for the wellbeing of each other. They are driven by their unifying objectives. Core to their beliefs and actions are the values of challenge and support or criticizing and energizing (Brueggemann, 2001, p. 3).

> **Posing questions with each other**: Inquiry drives their gathering and invites them into the adventure of learning. In the posing of questions a dialogue begins wherein answers are sought and new questions emerge. It is a vibrant learning community built upon trust and intention (Vella, 2001).

While on a quest: This is a traveling community who wander but are not lost. They have the means to complete the tasks at hand. They are active learners experiencing a corporate as well as a personal change. Core to their experience is synthesis and dynamic change. Inevitable is confusion and doubt.

Within these descriptions is the work and discipline of journeying. One begins where one is and with what one knows and anchors the learning through decisions made by the teacher (deductive) as well as decisions made by the learners (inductive). The learner connects new ideas to real experience. From there the traveling leads to the examination of new experiences and ideas by adding new content to the learning experiences of the past, again with the support of both deductive and inductive support. Action is required as one attempts to apply the knowledge that is discovered through implementation, that is, doing something with the new cognitive, affective and psychomotor knowledge. And finally, one gains life lessons that lead to more full living as the learning is integrated in a practical and tangible behavior that is to be applied to their context (Vella, 2008, p. 63).

This journey lends itself to character formation through moral education that is rooted in Christian doctrine as engaged through a learning-center approach that combines the deductive and indicative ways of knowing. As the drama unfolds, a variety of characteristics make their way into the scenes of the learning environment. Students are made aware of the complexities within similarities and differences while recognizing the sufferings and injustices in the world. They are invited into compassionate response and development of their empathetic skills. Values and motivations are more deeply recognized. Learners grow in their ability to take ownership and become personally responsible which leads to a recognition of consequences and the options available within complex ethical analysis and moral decision making. A life of integrity is fostered through knowing how to respond in a way that is right and good. It is within the

formation of these character traits that learners are formed who value participation in community (Homes, 1991).

Each step along the way is rooted in the beliefs we hold about the world and how people learn. Vanhoozer summarizes this well when he states, "Doctrine gives disciples direction for what really matters: for making the most of their place and time, living with others to God in ways that lead to human flourishing and divine glory" (Vanhoozer, 2014, p. 239). In a word, transformation, and this transformation extends beyond the individual. The larger context of such learning needs to be explicitly identified. The proposed learning-centered approach implements a mutual accountability between teacher and learner through a facilitated and active learning process. One designs for learning and guards against over-emphasizing the teacher (deductive approach) or the learner (inductive approach).

The Four Tasks of Practical Theology as a Design Matrix for Transformational Teaching

To narrow the scope of this theological conversation one could say that the work being done is that of practical theology. Richard Osmer, a practical theologian who taught at Princeton Seminary, offers this definition of the discipline, "that branch of Christian theology that seeks to construct action-guiding theories of Christian praxis in particular social contexts" (Osmer, 2005, p. xiv). More simply put one can see this as a "how-to" informed by a strongly developed theory of "why to". Figure 1 below outlines the four inter-related tasks of practical theology (Osmer, 2008, p. 11). It is important to note that one may enter the following cycle at any point, however, the whole cycle is intended to be completed as these tasks together capture holistic ministry engagement. What follows is an invitation for the educator to enter a research framework as one designs for transformational learning.
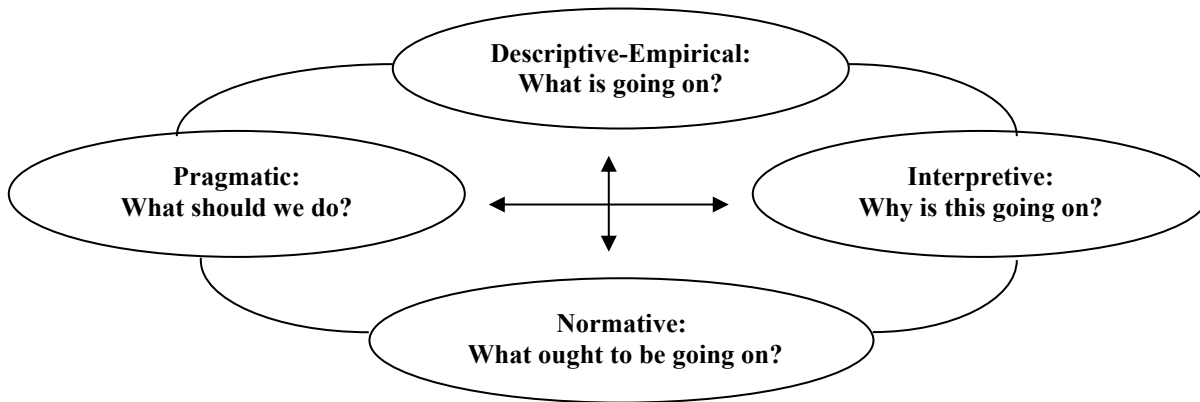
Figure 1: The Four Inter-Related Tasks of Practical Theology (Osmer, 2005, 2008)

In brief, Osmer's four above tasks of practical theology can be summarized in the following

ways:

Descriptive-Empirical Task: The guiding posture is *priestly listening*. The focus of this task is gathering information and describing specific facts. An emphasis is placed on a particular situation, condition, problem, and/or opportunity within the learner(s) or learning environment. The overarching question could be stated as: what is going on?

Interpretive Task: The guiding posture is *sagely wisdom*. The focus of this task recognizing the data of empirical research is not self-interpreting and needs to be understood through a comprehensive framework. One looks to explain patterns of behavior, attitudes and ideas. This lends itself to reflective observation and analysis. The overarching question could be stated as: why is this going on?

Normative Task: The guiding posture is *prophetic discernment*. The focus of this task is in the construction of theological and ethical norms that assess, guide, and reform the learning experience. An emphasis is placed on theological reflection and the synthesis of gathered data and interpretation through the lens of scripture, tradition, reason, experience, learning theory and methodology, etc. The overarching question could be stated as: what ought to be going on?

Pragmatic Task: The guiding posture is *servant leadership*. The focus of this task is in considering how to implement the normative commitments. It is concerned with the development of action-guiding models and rules of art. Herein, the drama is being performed. The emphasis is on application and building upon the theoretical foundation of best principles teaching and learning. The overarching question could be stated as: what should we do?

Within the next quote, Osmer (2005) offers a deeper dive as one navigates these above four tasks of practical theology. A teacher's design and facilitation of learning should take into consideration the following,

> In addition to these four tasks, practical theologians also make key decisions at a second level of methodological reflection, having to do with their understanding of (1) the theory-praxis relationship, (2) sources of justification, (3) models of cross-disciplinary work, and (4) theological rationale. Decisions made at this second level have a great deal to do with how a particular practical theologian carries out the descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks in his or her work and how he or she sees these four tasks as related to one another. (p. 306)

This dovetails with my definition of transformation as well as the best principles and practices of educational theory and curriculum development and assessment. It is particularly beneficial when considering how we might move from a teacher-centered paradigm to a learning-centered paradigm of pedagogy (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Engagement with Osmer's multi-dimensional model forces an attentiveness to the why and how of teaching for transformation. Let us consider the above quote. First, the theory-praxis relationship points to the way our learning environments are designed through philosophical, sociological, and theological decisions. Praxis does not happen in a vacuum and everything we do in the classroom is built upon a foundation of established ideas. One sees there is a direct correlation between theory and praxis as belief guides behavior. Secondly, when Osmer talks about sources of justification, he is referencing how the practical theologian engages sources of theological truth. What we know guides how we care. Thirdly, the models of cross-disciplinary work points to how one designs for learning in light of other fields of knowledge. Herein, a liberal arts dialogue and engagement is highly valued. Finally, the theological rationale serves to account for the convictions and the specific ways a practical theologian engages in designing for learning.

Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach

A "learning-centered" pedagogy is distinguished by an assessment of need and a clear articulation of stated goals which follow a general to specific scope and sequence of learning (Diamond, 2008, p. 10). One designs for learning, not for teaching, while evaluating and assessing throughout and after the learning experience. In this approach, goals, instruction, and assessment are woven together through a detailed design sequence. Willie James Jennings offers a helpful point of clarification when he writes, "Teaching is important for the Christian faith, but it is not the first thing. The first thing is being a learner. We must remember this truth from Scripture" (p. 8). The educator who has embodied this learning-centered approach while offering the most significant impact on my own philosophy of teaching and learning is Jane Vella. Vella was born in 1931 in New York and became a Maryknoll Sister in 1950. Beginning in 1956, she spent many years living and teaching in Tanzania. During this time she interacted with Paulo Freire whose work in South America deeply shaped her philosophy of education. After leaving Maryknoll in 1977, she earned her doctorate in Adult Education at the University of Massachusetts in Amhurst. She taught at North Carolina State University and in 1981 formed the Jubilee Popular Education Center. In 1998, this center became Global Learning Partners, Inc. and has since offered training and instruction on her system of learning known as Dialogue Education™. This system of learning synthesizes best principles and practices of adult education and seeks to implement the theories from several key educators: John Dewey (1938) and his understanding of the role of experience in education, Kurt Lewin (1951) and his drawing attention to the role of group dynamics in learning, Benjamin Bloom (1956) and his emphasis on the scope and sequence of learning, Paulo Freire (1972) and his work on replacing dominion with dialogue, Malcolm Knowles (1980) and his emphasis on concepts and practices within adult

learning, and Jack Mezirow (1991) and his definition of transformational learning through

dialogue. Part two of this paper will consider this specific system of teaching and learning and

overview some of its pragmatic implications.

What is important to highlight at this point is Vella's appeal and wide-reaching influence.

Malcolm Knowles' (1980, 1984) concept of andragogy (the art and science of helping adults

learn) also influenced Vella's system of learning. Knowles offers this helpful view into Vella's

work through the foreword he wrote in the 1994 edition of *Learning to Listen, Learning to*

Teach:

> Jane Vella is one of the most gifted adult educators I have known. She has discovered
> and mastered the fundamental concepts of adult learning and applies them with flair,
> imagination, and loving, tender care. But she is more than a gifted teacher—she is also a
> gifted storyteller…Although I have written eighteen books on the subject myself, I must
> admit that I was surprised at how much I learned about the theory and practice of adult
> education from this book. But I am also delighted and rewarded by how much I learned
> about the people and cultures of lands I have never visited—northern Ethiopia, Tanzania,
> Indonesia, the Maldives, Nepal, El Salvador, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh. I understand the
> world better now; I am a more competent global citizen. (vii)

I offer this snapshot of Vella as it identifies the need for our educational models to be grounded

in generative themes of the human experience as well as translatable to local and global contexts.

Our evangelical theology is the foundation upon which we build a place where such

transformational learning can take place. In its simplest form, Vella offers this summation of her

system of teaching and learning: "The means is dialogue, the end is learning, and the purpose is

peace" (Vella, 2008, p. 214). This is a theological statement upon which Vella's learning-

centered model is built.

PART II: Dialogue Education: A Learning-Centered Pedagogy[1]

Are you filling pails or lighting fires?

Ancient wisdom attributed to Plutarch states, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." Too often in our ministry preparation and training we are filled as pails when we could have been lit as fires. Dialogue Education invites us to offer content for the critical reflection of learners. How often do we talk at and tell the learners in our midst the truth they need to hear when we should be casting a vision that ignites a response? Truth in a pail is a heavy weight and often a burden to carry. Truth as a fire draws forth an image of the Holy Spirit that refines as well as lights our path. Teaching for transformation invites us to design to light a fire.

This metaphor of the fire is a helpful image to consider when thinking about how I have seen teaching for transformation take place in our learning environments. Fire brings light and warmth. Good things happen around a fire; relationships are deepened and stories are shared. A caution also comes forth however, as fires need to be tended so as not to grow wild and out of control. Being a good steward of the fire is a serious responsibility for teachers who are seeking to teach the next generation of educators and ministers. At the heart of this responsibility are the best principles and practices of teaching and learning. Not surprisingly, such teaching begins with decreasing that Christ might increase.

Rest in Peace Through Dialogue

Not every death is a defeat. In fact, some of the most profound and inspiring stories of life are born out of a story of death. One such story is "the death of the professor." My personal

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[1] The rest of this paper was accepted for publication in a forthcoming issue of the peer review Sage publication, *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry*.

experience has shown that this metaphorical death does indeed bring life. When I enter my classroom as a learner among learners, I challenge the power structure within the traditional student-teacher relationship. What I value as a teacher shifts; this, in turn, affects the posture of the students. I am not lecturing at them; I am listening with them. We are on the "quest" together. I design for dialogue. My content matters to me deeply, but my learners matter to me even more. The "death of the professor" ushers me into a role wherein the opportunity to link content with students' lives expands. Together we commit to a learning-centered approach of education. I welcome this "death" because it breeds safety, respect, sound relationships and a willingness to engage in dialogue. And like all deaths, it carries with it various challenges.

Jane Vella (2002), a global educator who was a colleague of Paulo Freire (the Brazilian educator and author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), recalls this interaction with him on the topic:

> Another vital principle of adult learning is recognition of the impact of clear roles in the communication between learner and teacher. As Paulo Freire put it in conversation with us one evening: 'Only the student can name the moment of the death of the professor.' That is, a teacher can be intent upon a dialogue with an adult learner, but if the learner sees the teacher as 'the professor' with whom there is no possibility of disagreement, no questioning, no challenge, the dialogue is dead in the water. Adult students need reinforcement of the human equity between teacher and student and among students. It takes time for adults to see themselves and the teacher in a new role. (p. 20)

It is through this "new role" that students and teachers alike can enter into transformational learning. As Vella suggests, this new understanding of roles takes time and a role such as death can be a painful process. Due to our traditional learning structures, these ideas are easily questioned: Is such a "death" really necessary? What about all the information my students must possess? I know more than my students, why would I waste time with dialogue? How will the students learn what they need to know if my lecture is diminished or removed? As valid as these questions may be, they are born out of an understanding of teaching and learning that is limited

to the lectern. They also tend to be more rooted in fear and control than discernment and wisdom. An educator's role requires expertise of content and also expertise of how one facilitates learning. Knowledge must lead us to care and care requires an attentive and engaged posture of listening along with meaningfully constructed questions.

When a teacher moves away from a hierarchical relationship with students into one of collaboration and collegial participation, the result is a learning environment framed by active dialogue. The lecturing professor will experience a death, as lecture is no longer utilized as the only way to teach. The teacher will have to talk less and be required to facilitate participative reflection on new content. These practices take serious preparation and knowledge of content, as well as skillful use of open questions while facilitating conversations around topics of relevance. That is, designing and setting learning tasks. The teacher welcomes student engagement and designs the learning for it. The teacher's role is not simply to tell, but rather to invite all learners to tell their experience of new content. The teacher becomes a learner in the classroom. She starts fires she herself will feel.

As a teacher creates a safe space where students are invited to dialogue and practice the truths they are exploring, an opportunity for transformation arises (Palmer, 1993). This application of learning through dialogue is a desperately needed practice in all our venues of teaching, from church ministry to higher education. Through dialogue, as opposed to monologue, the teacher and student enter into the possibility of disagreement, questioning, challenge, and correction. This dialogue (or dia + logos: "the word between us") turns the chairs of the classroom away from the lectern and toward one another (Vella, 2008, p. 216). When one conceptualizes this dia + logos with a capital "w" ("the Word between us") one finds an invitation to construct a practical theology of the Holy Spirit that is defined and will be

implemented. In this pedagogical shift, the professor, as lecturer alone, dies; yet the classroom is not a funeral parlor but a living room of celebrated learning. No longer does content matter more than the people in the room. The complexity of learners and their multiple intelligences and learning styles are identified and engaged. The teacher and student are together and meaningful human relationship is fostered. The "death of the professor" does not end with a lifeless corpse in the classroom. Rather, the "death" that Freire suggests is one wherein the teacher and the student are led into a new relationship. Therein, a communal experience with our triune God is also made available, if we have ears to hear and eyes to see.

Burden of Proof

It is important to note that lecture can be an effective way to bring new content before a learner. At times it can even be the best way. In fact, this essay represents a form of lecture and I believe learning can come from it. However, lecture is but one methodological approach and tends to accommodate a limited frame of learning styles. New content must be engaged physically, emotionally, and mentally. For the use of lecture to be effective, one must consider how the learners are actively connecting with the material. There is a famous (yet fraudulent) statistic (Thalheimer, 2017), often attributed to Edgar Dale, that we remember twenty percent of what we hear, fifty percent of what we hear and see, and ninety percent of what we do. Even this inference resonates with what we know about how humans learn. I am not suggesting we remove lecture from our ministries. We need to look at how our prevalent lecture-style learning environments provide points of engagement and interaction. I believe knowledge is more than content and information. To truly learn, to truly know, there must be real life transfer and impact. Simply sitting and listening to a lecture does not lead to transformation. It can be a helpful point

of contact with content, but the whole person must be invested for deeper learning to take place. Dialogue education is not anti-lecture but rather, pro-learning.

How we understand what we know is also a crucial factor. Too often the design for learning defaults to lecture with the assumption that if the teacher speaks it, it will be known. Freire (1990) questions this approach when he refers to turning students into "containers" or "receptacles to be filled by the teacher." He continues,

> Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. (p. 58)

Freire reminds us how quickly an educator can create a space wherein creativity and curiosity are devalued all the while damaging the opportunity for exploration and inquiry. I will note that in conversation with Jane Vella she expressed how she personally detests these condemnations (even if it is Freire) simply because they are not effective in helping people learn.

Kurt Lewin (1951), a founder of social psychology, draws attention to the fact that sustained learning is more effective when it is an active process. Unfortunately, the traditional lecture format found in most educational settings (from churches to schools to businesses) tends to be informed by the passive tendencies within a monologue approach. The invitation in active learning is for the teacher to bring her expertise to bear on the lives of her students and to design for interaction. For deep and impactful learning to take place, the environment must be one where the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of being human are engaged. Educators must pay attention to the learners in their midst and ask, "What will enhance their learning?" The answer should include the whole person as well as the multi-faceted variables involved in any system of learning.

One must ask, do our learning environments foster relational points of deep connection? Figure 2 that follows is a representation of the core elements involved to ensure learning through connections. Herein, we can explore what is required for transformational learning encounters. It is through connections with self, connections with others, connections with content, and the connections we have with God that the best principles and practices of teaching and learning are meant to be engaged.
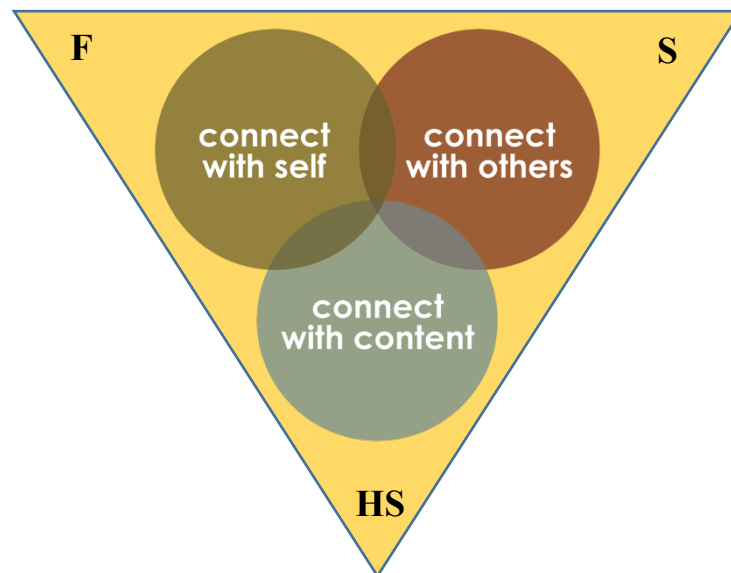

Figure 2: How to Ensure Learning Through Connections: The 4C Model

1) Connect with self. Learners need to connect new content to existing knowledge or experience. They need to compare it to what they already know and do and to decide how it lines up with what is best for them. They need to weigh it against what they believe is right and true, and assess how they feel about it. They need to imagine it in their lives and ask themselves: "Do I want to start using/doing this? Why?" To decide this, they need quiet time alone for reflection, introspection, imagining and questioning.

2) Connect with others. Learners need to share their stories, experiences, thoughts and questions with other learners. They need to hear what others think and to debate it. It is through this testing, trying and challenging alongside others that learners can discover new meaning and understanding for themselves. It is by seeing themselves in others or learning from them that the learner begins to gain clarity.

3) Connect with the content. Learners need time to examine new content they are learning. They need to decide what they think and feel about it and how it compares to what they already know. They need both challenge and support to grow and develop in their knowledge and its application. They need to see how the new content fits into the bigger picture and with other content. If they

are learning a skill, they need try it out. Learning is in the doing and deciding, and this takes time in the learning design.

4) Connect with God (F = Father, S = Son, HS = Holy Spirit). Learners need to experience Truth as they engage in the learning process. Their connection with self, connection with others, and connection with content leads to transformational encounters (i.e. dia + logos: the Word between us). This is always situated in a specific <u>context</u>. This fourth point, as illustrated by the triangle on the diagram, has been added to the original three themes and corresponding circles created by Global Learning Partners (http://www.globallearningpartners.com/). This is to highlight the transcendent, Trinitarian reality that is always contextually present in transformational learning (whether it be explicit or implicit in expression).

Consider Henri Nouwen's chapter title on teaching in his book *Creative Ministry*: "Beyond the Transference of Knowledge". He warns against the dangers of "teaching as a violent process" marked by harmful competitive, unilateral, and alienating characteristics. He concludes by stating, "The core idea of this chapter has been that ultimately we can only come from a violent form of teaching to a redemptive form of teaching through a conversation that pervades our total personality and breaks the power of our resistance against learning" (Nouwen, 1971, p. 20). In essence, we need dialogue. And this dialogue is not merely conversation for conversation's sake. It is rigorous and thoughtful engagement built around structured tasks designed for learning. Content matters, but the learner matters first because our interaction with information is a relational endeavor. Our pedagogy is worked out in these above connections as they form within the contextual realities of the learning environment. At the center of it all, we are invited to come and gather around the fire of God's truth, which surrounds the other three connections.

After Death Comes Resurrection

The foundation that educators build is crucial because it determines the support offered to their students; or, to use an axiom of Jane Vella's, "The design bears the burden." Ironically enough, when one designs for "the death of the professor" one offers life to all learners. When

one designs for the connections unpacked above one offers life to the learners. The teacher's knowledge and expertise, as important as it is, is not of utmost importance. The learners and the learning take precedence over the lecture. In fact, use of lecture, if it is to be used at all, is to propel true learning. The teacher is identified not by the accumulation of knowledge but by the opportunity to invite others on an adventure of learning. The teacher is a wise guide and a trusted friend. Parker Palmer (2007, p. 10) provides a helpful orienting posture when he asserts that good teaching cannot be reduced to technique but comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. Again we find that teaching is more than offering new information. The teacher finds an enlarged identity as he or she leaves the lectern and takes a seat in the circle of learners. In the end, the death of the professor leads to the resurrection of an educator. The fire is lit and people gather.

Dialogue Heals

Dialogue Education™, Jane Vella's learning-centered system of teaching and learning, offers the principles and practices to employ as the teacher moves away from monologue and into dialogue (Vella, 2001, 2002, 2008). The lecturer takes a seat and listens, because dialogue requires attention. As the teacher becomes a learner among learners, safety and sound relationships guide the teacher-student interaction. This does not negate the needs for expertise in the teacher's field of instruction. Educators grow by being students of their content areas as well as students of their students. The end result is that the power divide, which too often separates teachers from students, diminishes. Respect is fostered within these relationships as well as a love of learning. Voices of critique and encouragement, meeting through challenge and support, are welcomed, and issues of relevance are addressed with immediacy and engagement. Learners are invited to be decision-makers in their learning. Accountability is offered to help learning

occur through practice and reflection. Ideas, feelings, and actions all come together so that the whole person is taught. Learners flourish in environments where these principles and practices are reinforced; teachers flourish as well. The learning is sequenced in a way where the above characteristics continually mark the experiences inside and outside the classroom. These characteristics, once embodied, invite the learner into a transformed consciousness wherein peace is made manifest.

The brilliance of Vella's approach to teaching and learning is that it is a structured yet open system (About Dialogue Education). The educator is called to design with great intentionality where definition leads to direction. Attention to sequence and reinforcement of learning is key. The steps of design within dialogue education focus on eight questions. My own brief summary is listed below, but it is crucial to note that the execution of what looks like a simple list of steps requires great diligence and intentionality to master.

1. Who: understanding the learners, of which the teacher is one
2. Why: the situation in light of the needs of the learners
3. So That: the desired indicators of change in the learners
4. When: time frame and its influence on depth of learning
5. Where: location and factors that will enhance or distract learning
6. What: content (knowledge, skills, and attitudes)
7. What For: achievement-based objectives addressing what the learners will do
8. How: the design and facilitation of learning tasks (Vella, 2008, p. 41-46, 215)

One of Vella's greatest offerings to the field of education is in the linkage of content (step 6) and the construction of achievement-based objectives (step 7). This approach to design requires the educator to identify specific content (as nouns) and the corollary achievement-based objectives (as verbs in the future perfect tense, i.e., At the end of our time, learners *will have*…).

This tense forces a strong achievement-based verb *and* allows for accountability in the learning process and helps clarify objectives that can be evaluated and assessed because they lend themselves to a specific achieved product or behavior. The opportunity for backward design is made available as the overarching purpose (step 2) of the learning is identified along with a clear articulation of the desired change (step 3) to be exhibited by the end of the learning. Due to the close attention given in the design work, opportunities for feedback and evaluation are in place before the learning actually happens. Recalling the role of connections previously addressed in this essay, one again sees the importance of starting with the learner (step 1) because the content only matters if it transferred into true learning.

In this learning-centered approach, the instructor designs with the learners in mind. Therefore, students are given all the resources they need to respond within the learning environment (step 8). Table 2 offers a brief overview of the four kinds of learning tasks that are a part of this dialogue education learning-centered system (Vella, 2001).

Anchor (or inductive tasks) related to life and topic	Tells the learner not only what she has to learn but also what she perceives she already knows; honoring her experiences as true knowledge, and as the beginning of knowledge. Used to introduce new content.
Add (or input tasks) new content	Presents new content: substantive concepts, data, research, knowledge, skills, attitudes, etc. This is done through a lecture, power point presentation, story, reading, multiple media, etc.

Apply (or implement tasks) do something with the new content	Invites learners to DO something with the new content in the learning environment – practice it. Rule of thumb: for every new piece of content (add) make sure you are immediately applying the learning.
Away (or integrate tasks) move new learning into life	May be a projection task that invites learners to imagine integrating the new learning in their work or life. It may be a task that happens after the course, with some element of reporting or feedback. This is where potential transfer of the learning gets strengthened. Connects with the "desired change".

Table 2: Kinds of Learning Tasks

To establish the resources in a learning task, the educator commits to the rigorous preparation of design and development of tasks that will enhance learning. This leads to a trust of the design with a focus on the learning. As Vella says often and has been previously stated in this paper: "The means is dialogue, the end is learning, and the purpose is peace." This peace being an outcome of commitments to truth centered in glorifying God. The teacher is offered a vision and construct for transformational and healing encounters. With this focus on learning through dialogue, the teacher is released from an arrogant approach to the educational endeavor. Arrogant certainty is replaced with humble confidence. Death humiliates. Peace is restored. The fire is ablaze.

When the educator puts to death the traditional model of lecture where content is king, a new order is established. For the Christian educator this invitation "to lead out" (i.e., to educate) is an opening of oneself to a new kind of rule. A rule established within epistemological humility wherein the Holy Spirit is the ultimate guide. The teacher is no longer alone. The Helper has arrived—and has arrived within a community of believers. The teacher, the students, and their

Maker all meet together and the classroom becomes a sanctuary. Light enters the world and the

darkness flees.

Dialogue Education: Believe it, or not?

I invite you to engage the content within this essay and offer the following learning tasks

to move from monologue into dialogue:

> IDENTIFY a learning experience (in a traditional or non-traditional setting) where you learned through dialogue. NAME how this differs from an experience where you learned through lecture.
>
> LIST two phrases from the essay that strike you as valuable in your setting. Next to each selected phrase, WRITE down one practical way you will implement it with your learners.
>
> CHOOSE one tip (from the list below) to apply in your context. CREATE a detailed design of how you will engage your learners though dialogue:
>
> 1. Facilitate 5 minutes of dialogue for every 12 minutes of lecture.
>
> 2. Discern what content is most valuable to the learners and guard yourself from simply trying to cover material: teach through dialogue.
>
> 3. Invite immediate engagement when new content is brought before the learner and ensure holistic learning and teaching by paying attention to the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor needs.
>
> 4. Engage multiple intelligences and learning styles as you teach.
>
> 5. Guide learners from simple to complex content and interaction.
>
> 6. Ask open questions that lead to meaningful and relevant interaction.
>
> 7. Restructure the learning space set-up for easier engagement and dialogue.
>
> 8. Break into small groups or pairs to stimulate interaction through open questions.
>
> READ one of the resources in the following Reference List or search the Global Learning Partner's website for more on Dialogue Education™. SHARE your learning with me at Daniel.Haase@wheaton.edu.

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