

## **A Learning-Centered Approach to Theological Training: Insights Gained from Jane Vella's Dialogue Education**

--by Rev. Matthew Norman, PhD

My PhD research focused on creating a way of preaching that encourages participants to actively respond and engage in a shared process of practical theology.<sup>1</sup> This approach is based on their experiences, discernment, and relationships. The research explored how using a learning-centered teaching method as the main strategy for preaching can change the way we think about and practice preaching. I aimed to find out how Dr. Jane Vella's participatory learning theory, called Dialogue Education, could benefit the field of Homiletics.

Doing this research focused on preaching, reminded me of the importance of how we teach, or train, or prepare ourselves for any kind of learning interaction. While my study shows how Vella's teaching method can help participants collaborate in the actions that form the practice preaching, these insights are also valuable for our teaching in any theological environment. In this article, I highlight some characteristics related to teaching, knowing, and theology, that Vella's theory and process can offer to our teaching, training, or learning interactions. I briefly explain how these characteristics can help develop a learning-centered approach to our theological trainings and spiritual formation processes.

### **Teaching Characteristics**

Pedagogically, or teaching wise, there are three key characteristics that can help develop a learning-centered approach to our theological trainings and spiritual formation processes. First, Vella emphasizes that participants should be the active decision-makers during a learning event. This means that the focus is not just on the content, but also on what participants will do with it. Vella's method shifts from the quantity of content delivered by the teacher to the quality of content engagement by the participants, facilitated by clear learning tasks. This approach changes the focus of the learning event from content delivery to learning. It becomes a process where participants actively engage with the content to make it their own. The event shifts from centering on what the teacher says to focusing on the participants' work as they reflect and act with others (including God, from a theological perspective).

Second, Vella's process and theory highlight the importance of context in learning and understanding. Vella's teaching method shows that connecting new content to real-life experiences makes it more engaging and clarifies relevance. Dialogue Education is not about transferring or memorizing content. To change, grow, or challenge oneself with new

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<sup>1</sup> The title of my research is, *Inviting Response(ability): Developing a Learning-centered Homiletic*.

ideas, skills, or attitudes, one needs to connect new content with what they already know. This focus on context in a learning-centered approach to our theological trainings and spiritual formation processes is crucial. It allows our courses and trainings to become a time for exploring how one understands God's work in the world, why they understand God this way, and what these understandings mean for living out their faith. This holistic approach to teaching and learning helps ensure the possibility of real change as a result of new learning.

Lastly, the communal nature of Vella's process can inform a learning-centered approach to our theological trainings and spiritual formation processes. Vella's pedagogical design process is about mutual accountability, movement, and discovery of information, ideas, feelings, and dialogue between all involved. This type of teaching includes more than just the teacher's voice. The communal nature of such a pedagogy challenges us to consider strategies that involve both individual and communal interaction – we need to help participants to connect with self, each other and the content. Vella's steps of design, principles and practices of Dialogue Education ensure the development of teaching processes that honor, invite and include each voice of those present. We learn with and from each other.

### **Characteristics Related to How We Know<sup>2</sup>**

Vella's approach to learning is based on the idea that knowledge is not just about facts or memorization, it involves our thoughts, emotions, and everyday actions. Learning happens when both teachers/trainers/preacher/leaders and participants work together to make sense of ideas and skills, as a group. In this way, understanding grows out of real-life experiences and relationships, not just from listening to information as passive recipients.

This way of thinking about learning encourages people to reflect, analyze, and develop new ideas, skills, and attitudes by trying them out right away. As already mentioned, when talking about teaching, this approach centers on who the learners are, what matters to them, and their real-life situations. Knowledge isn't just something you're given or memorize, it's built through experience, grows over time, and is shaped by interacting with others and the world around you.

Vella's view of learning highlights that we build knowledge through our relationships and life experiences. In other words, learning isn't just about collecting facts; it's about how we connect with others and what is happening in our lives. This means that, in our theological training and spiritual formation processes, everyone has the ability to respond to God and others, and to actively use and develop what they learn.

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<sup>2</sup> Epistemology is the study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge.

## Theological Characteristics

In Vella's approach, the teacher creates a learning process that lets participants make decisions about their own learning. This means that, in our theological training and faith development, each person can take part in shaping what they learn and how they grow spiritually. We can call this practicing one's theological agency. Here, the teacher's job is to guide the conversation and create an environment where everyone's thoughts, questions, and identities are respected and valued. This way, learning about faith becomes a shared experience where everyone's voice matters and is of importance.

Second, at the heart of this approach is the idea that everyone has the ability to make choices about their learning and life. Vella's method carries the belief that all people can explore their connection with God and others and create their own understanding of faith. By using Vella's idea of "praxis"—doing something, reflecting what you did, and then doing it again differently because of what you learned—our theological education can shift from simply receiving information to a more active and shared process. In this process, people think about and work together with God, the Bible, and their faith traditions, both as individuals and in community, to grow and make meaning together.<sup>3</sup>

Third, Vella's method encourages us to ask practical questions about how our beliefs connect to everyday life. Her approach helps people think through, examine, and make decisions about how their relationship with God and others shapes the way they live, based on their real situations. By focusing on what matters right now, Vella's teaching style guides theological training and spiritual formation from just learning ideas to actually putting those ideas into practice.

To put it simply, Vella's way of teaching combines her ideas about knowledge, teaching, and faith into a unified approach. When we use her process in our theological training and spiritual formation processes, the teacher thoughtfully creates learning activities that fit the subject. By following Vella's steps, the teacher encourages each person to draw on their own experiences, learn new skills or ideas, and then reflect on them together. After that, participants consider how this new understanding can be a part of their daily lives, both personally and as a group. In this way, using Vella's Dialogue Education helps

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout my research, I have used the term "response(ability)" intentionally. This term highlights the importance of being able to respond, which is essential for being human and for learning and transformation. The ability to respond to God and others is central to theological growth and learning. My PhD study shows that all humans can respond to God and others. This ability helps them explore their relationships with God and others, and develop knowledge and meaning. When this ability to respond is taken away, it is dehumanizing. It is God who invites us to join in God's work. Humans do not initiate this response(ability). Through God's presence in the world, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God invites us to join and discover ourselves and God, and to experience transformation by participating in God's work. God initiates the relationship and invites a response.

everyone get involved and think about theology as something active and shared with others.

## **Conclusion**

Looking at the teaching methods, ideas about knowledge, and underlying theological beliefs in Vella's educational approach shows how her theory can shape our theological training and spiritual formation processes. My PhD research asks who is responsible for encountering and learning from God during a sermon? Does the preacher alone have this encounter and then present this encounter in the form of a sermon to the congregation, or should it be a shared experience? We can ask the same question about our theological training and spiritual formation processes. Does the teacher alone have an encounter with God in their preparation and study and then present this encounter in the form of a lesson to the participants? Or can these learning sessions be designed so that each person is encouraged and able to encounter God themselves, and learn and grow together? This is why it matters to think about the teaching style/method/approach at the heart of our learning events. We must ask how the teaching helps or hinders each person's ability to develop their faith. It's worth considering whether the participants are shaping their understanding of faith in a collaborative manner, or if the teaching style expects them to simply take in what the teacher says at face value and believe it.

Drawing on Vella's approach to teaching and learning, a process rooted in dialogue, mutuality, and shared experience, the act of encountering God need not be confined to the teacher alone. Instead, the learning event can become a space where both teacher and participants are engaged in a dynamic process of discovery. When the teaching style shifts from a one-way transmission of insights to an invitation for participation, every participant is invited to encounter God and each other, in their own right. This collaborative approach honors the diverse ways God might be speaking within the participants and allows theological meaning-making to unfold collectively, and personally. A learning-centered approach can transform our theological training and spiritual formation processes into a communal journey of faith, where meaning is co-created and personally experienced.