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Theological Curriculum Change for the Local 21st Century Context

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What will be the shape of theological education in Asia five or twenty-five years from now? What will be its varied forms and patterns? What events and issues will shape theological education? Schools want to pursue a balanced path in developing curriculum for theological education in the 21st century. However, balance in one context may be imbalance in another. Each institution and organization needs to determine its own curricular equilibrium. Curriculum is more than just course listings. It includes the total of learning experiences (formal, informal and nonformal) offered by an institution or organization.

An often-overlooked component of the curriculum is school culture. This is where important, but not necessarily apparent, nuances of the curriculum are expressed. Organizational culture is the system of values, symbols and shared meanings of a group including the embodiment of these values, symbols, and shared meanings into material objects and ritualized practices. Culture governs what is of worth for a particular group and how group members would think, feel, and behave.[1]

School culture brings out the nuances of theological education. For example, does the atmosphere of the school teach holiness or legalism? Does it develop mature critical

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1 Thomas J. Sergiovanni and Corbally, John E. (eds.) *Leadership and Organizational Culture* (Urbana Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. viii.

thinking or mere conformity? Reformulating curriculum requires us not only to examine course listings but also to address the effect school culture has on students.

As we look to shaping the 21st century, there are at least six issues in formulating the total learning experiences of our charges. During the Curriculum Design workshop at the Asia Theological Association Triennial General Assembly in August 2001, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 120 theological educators were asked how they would address the following questions related to developing theological curricula in Asia.

1) How do we balance the forces of globalization and contextualization in theological education curricula?

2) How do we balance classical and contemporary theological emphases in the curriculum?

3) How do we balance generalist and specialist emphases in the curriculum?

4) How do we balance experiential learning in the field with the theoretical learning in the classroom?

5) How do we balance interschool cooperation with insular development?

6) How do we lead curriculum change for the 21st century, appropriately balancing the forces and counter forces of the theological school?

Many of the practical principles in this paper are a result of the insightful work of the General Assembly.

The operative word 'balance' in the above questions needs some explaining. Any particular balance is not to be viewed as universal across schools and cultures, and neither should it be viewed as timeless. Certainly, there are universal and timeless principles to be taught in theological education, but not necessarily in regard to these six questions. These questions require practical wisdom which is strong in addressing specific contexts at a point in time. Thus arriving at balance is not a static once-achieved exercise. Rather it is dynamic, requiring constant adjustment, like a tightrope walker achieving new positions of balance every step along the way.

Contextualization and Globalization

First, how do we balance the forces of contextualization and globalization in theological education curricula? How do we determine if our curricula is too global for the local good or so localized that the school becomes an educational ghetto? We often think of contextualization in theological terms. However, the three other means of contextualization articulated by the Theological Education Fund Commission of the World Council of Churches should already be well known to us. Missiological contextualization asks if our message and ministry fit our people. Structural contextualization asks if the forms and structures of our institutions are appropriate for our context. Pedagogical contextualization seeks to develop a type of theological training that is liberating and creative. It seeks to close the wide gap between the academic and the practical.

The term 'globalization' means to extend worldwide. Current usage has emerged out of the international expansion of business and commerce in the post-colonial era. International business interests discovered that if they attended to cultural differences they enjoyed greater productivity.[2] Globalization in theological education, however, takes on some new meanings. North American seminaries and especially the Association of Theological Schools in North America, have, 'sought to develop a new global context crystallized under the banner of globalization during the 1980s'.[3]

Based on the concept of the universal reign of God, globalization refers to:

1) the church's universal mission to reach the world;

2) ecumenical cooperation;

3) dialogue with other religions, and

4) the need to address the inequality, human rights, and justice issues in the world.[4]

It is common for Asian schools to be wary of globalization and, given the abuses of the colonial era, there is good reason to resist globalizing forces. Yet, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring* gives some sobering counsel. The leader Gildor says to a timid Frodo, 'The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourself in, but you cannot forever fence it out.'[5] The use of the internet as a curricular tool is an important example. Virtually every country in the world has internet access (Myanmar and North Korea are current exceptions). The internet, dominated by the West, is clearly a globalizing force. Nevertheless, Asia is developing Web sites at a fantastic rate. The contextualizing power of the internet in Asia will be harnessed in the years to come. The growth of theological education in Asia will also become a globalizing force toward the West.

What are some practical principles in addressing contextualization and globalization? Workshop participants pointed out that these forces are not mutually exclusive, but poles of a continuum. Though we have a timeless message in Scripture, spirituality and consequently the Christian life must be reshaped in each context and era. This requires unpacking and repacking our understanding of both text and context. Balancing contextualization and globalization requires knowledge of marketplace issues and religious pluralism in modern life. We must address how to contextualize the Christian faith in the midst of Asian religions. Globalization, urbanization and modernity create many ethical challenges.

Theological curricula must embrace these challenges rather than avoid them by silence. We teach our students by what we don't address as well as what we do. The

2 Alice Frazer Evans, Robert A Evans and David A Roozen (eds.) *The Globalization of Theological Education* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1993), p. 123.

3 Evans, *Globalization of Theological Education*, p. 5.

4 Evans, *Globalization of Theological Education* p. 35.

5 J.R.R. Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring* (Ballentine Books: New York, 1965), p. 123.

computer is quickly becoming an essential connection to the world around us. Like illiteracy, the inability to utilize this powerful tool is a form of ghettoization. Our schools need both to supply the tools and teach the skills of computer literacy. Faculty development is important, not only in terms of computer literacy but also in developing and delivering a 21st century theological curriculum.

The theological curriculum does not just reside on paper, but rather it is expressed in engagement and interaction, particularly between faculty and students. At its deepest level it is not knowing things, but engaging ourselves, our world, and our Creator in a community of learning. The theological school, more than ever, will have to wrestle with balancing the forces of contextualization and globalization in the 21st century.

Classical and Contemporary Curricular Patterns

Second, how do we balance classical and contemporary theological emphases in the curriculum? Classical theological curriculum stresses mastering the best thinkers throughout the history of Christendom. For Evangelicals an important emphasis is given to a historic, authoritative Word of God. Contemporary curriculum stresses mastering the skills of doing theology and practising ministry in specific contexts—an important emphasis in light of our mandate to minister.

Another way of looking at the classical/contemporary dyad is Plueddemann's split rail fence analogy of theological education. How do we determine if theological education should be primarily upper rail, addressing rational values and the realm of ideas, or lower rail, addressing practical values and the realm of life and ministry?[6] Again, we see poles of a continuum. Classical upper rail theological curriculum focuses on the historic faith, while contemporary lower rail curriculum aims at doing theology in the present. The former can be true but presented in an irrelevant manner. The latter can address contemporary issues, such as ministering to AIDS victims, but lay a weak biblical-theological foundation. One 118-unit Master of Divinity programme this author reviewed was very strong in contemporary theologizing but included only four units of Bible. This raises the dual questions: How do we decide what classical theological education elements we should maintain and what contemporary issues we should address?

Workshop participants identified several guiding principles. Evangelical theological education must be Bible-based. To neglect the Word is to neglect the very heart of our faith. We must see the contemporary context through the lens of Scripture. Our teaching should bear fruit in the equipping of the church for worship and ministry in the contemporary world. It should address the needs of

6 James E. Plueddemann, 'The Challenge of Excellence' in Robert L. Youngblood, *Excellence and Renewal: Goals for the Accreditation of Theological Education* (Flemington Markets: WEF/Bookhouse, 1989), p. 2.

the believing community ministering in the context of the wider population. Theological curriculum developers need to consider the learning styles of students. Some are strong in the realm of rational ideas, others in the realm of experience and practice.

Although our intention should be to expand the toolbox of student learning skills, we must begin with their present learning abilities. Participants pointed out that many Chinese and Indian students can be very philosophical and metaphysical. Students from other people groups may have a bent toward the practical. Finally, we must remember that classical theology was shaped around contemporary issues. It is the task of the theological educator to recapture that context and utilize the classical in resolving issues of contemporary life.

Generalist and Specialist Emphases

Third, how do we balance generalist and specialist emphases in the curriculum? Should we maintain the traditional large-core, four-part curriculum consisting of biblical studies, theological studies, church history and practical theology? Or should we increasingly emphasize large majors in professional areas such as missions, pastoral studies, Christian education, counselling, urban ministry and lay studies. Should theological education in the 21st century focus on the development of these specialized roles or should it focus on Christian thought and ministry skills which can be generalized across specialized areas? How do we nurture the unique interests, gifts and talents of students in these specialized areas and still lay a proper theological foundation?

Participants expressed a need for greater specialization, stating that, 'We must respond positively to the trend towards specialization, but resist the tendency to embrace it uncritically or wholeheartedly.' In a more diversified curriculum with several specializations, it is important to reach consensus on core elements essential for all students. These may be expressed through foundational courses. Coursework should be integrative in nature, tying academic learning to specific roles and issues that graduates will face.

Another principle is that of lifelong learning. It is impossible to teach students all they need to know throughout life. In order for learning to be ongoing and self-directed, students need to develop lifelong learning skills. The ideal minister is someone who is always growing and maturing, always learning new perspectives and ideas. This ideal cannot be achieved by spoon feeding students with material to be memorized and regurgitated in objective examinations. The self-directed learner is self-disciplined, reflective, analytical, curious, open, motivated and confident. He has a love for learning and has information-seeking and retrieval skills as well as problem solving skills. Whether the curriculum is more generalist or specialist in nature, these attitudes and skills must be intentionally developed in the curriculum and present in our faculty if

students are to be growing and maturing ministers.

Understanding the giftedness and life station of learners is also important. Learners already in ministry will tend toward development of their specific roles. They will learn what they will use. A generalist curriculum may not provide the specific kinds of learning experiences they are seeking. Younger students need help in assessing their gifts and guidance in developing those propensities.

How do we know we are at the right place on the generalist-specialist continuum? Maintain an ongoing dialogue with graduates and other significant voices in the church and society. Ask them if the knowledge, attitudes and skills they acquired in theological school prepared them adequately for their calling. Sincerely ask them in what ways they think the ethos of the school and the nature of the curriculum should change.

Field and Classroom Integration

Fourth, how do we balance experiential learning in the field with theoretical learning in the classroom? How do we use the classroom to strengthen current practice in the field, and the field to rethink our theoretical positions? How do we demonstrate that experiential learning is as important as theoretical learning? What teaching methodologies will enhance creative and critical thinking needed for the challenges of the 21st century?

Brian Hill asks the question, 'Theological education: is it out of practice?'[7] Often in theological education, there is significant disjuncture between classroom and field. Kornfield identifies three levels of field education: Skill Development, Theology to Practice and Practice as Locus of Pastoral Theology.[8]

Skill Development: Field education is to develop practical ministry skills usually based on social science theory rather than theology.[9] Kornfield sees this as an unacceptable but common arrangement whereby the student studies theology and practises ministry but does not integrate the two. This occurs through a lack of intention in the curriculum and school culture to link theology and practice. Either the goal of integration is not properly thought through or the actualities of the programme thwart the goal.

Theology to Practice: A one-directional approach whereby field education is 'the application of theology to the practice of ministry'.[10] Theological learning occurs only in the academic setting. Theology is not critiqued in light of experience, but rather applied only to the field. Experience must conform to theology. The social sciences may be seen as a threat. The goal is to guide the student in relating the classical categories of theology to experience.

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7 Brian V. Hill, 'Theological Education: Is it Out of Practice?' *Evangelical Review of Theology* 10:2 (1986) pp. 174-182.

8 David Kornfield, 'Seminary Education Toward Adult Education Alternatives', in Harvie M. Conn and, Samuel F. Rowen (eds.), *Missions and Theological Education in World Perspective*, (Farmington, Mi.: Associates of Urbanus, 1984), pp. 180-181.

9 Kornfield, 'Seminary Education', pp. 180-181.

10 Kornfield, 'Seminary Education', p. 180.

Practice as Locus of Pastoral Theology: Kornfield sees this as a two-directional approach whereby theology and practice are in dialogue, each mutually enriching the other.[11] Reflective practice is to enlighten theology just as theology is to inform practice. The action of God is explored in experience as well as in the Christian tradition. The goal is that the student will become a skilled and critical overseer of the dialogue between one's Christian tradition and Christian experience.

Only in the last model is there a proper integration of pastoral theology and practice. Although many would agree that our practice of Christian ministry is less than perfect, it is more difficult to recognize imperfections in our theology. Affirming a two-directional approach allows students (and faculty) to integrate theology and practice in ways that strengthen both.

How can the seminary better integrate theology and practice? Participants stated that, 'Professors are the key to integration'. Encouraging faculty to participate in varied ministry experiences will provide the experiential depth necessary for a dialogue between theology and ministry. It is not enough to hire a field education director; faculty should embrace, advocate and participate in an integrative field education programme.

Another principle stated was that students' field experiences are to be taken seriously even to the point of changing the academic curriculum. Simply put, ministry cannot be learned in the classroom. Learning must be extended beyond the academy and academics integrated with ministry experiences in the church and life in general. This may require removing some precious content courses in favour of experiential learning approaches. It will require culture change in some schools. Participants identified the need for a 'learning environment that encourages such thinking'. Both faculty and administration need to value practice as the locus of pastoral theology if the school is ever to develop an integrative curriculum.

Cooperation and Insular Development

Fifth, how do we balance inter-school cooperation with insular development? How can inter-school cooperation enhance the 21st century curriculum without losing individual school uniqueness and identity? How can we learn to trust each other enough to make cooperation easier?

Evangelicals sometimes operate like isolated islands. Even schools within proximity of each other maintain only cordial relations. We are fond of saying we have organic unity in the body of Christ but do little to express it in cooperative theological education. Participants asked themselves, 'Why do we need to cooperate?' Generally our schools are small and our size affects the quality, depth and breadth of our programs. Cooperating with local schools will improve our ability to contextualize. Cooperating with distant schools will improve our ability to globalize.

11 Kornfield, 'Seminary Education', p. 181.

Beyond these practical reasons, cooperation is an expression of theological maturity. Participants called it, 'maturing to a kingdom mentality', as opposed to creating our own little kingdoms.

Theological schools would greatly benefit by sharing innovations, resources and faculty and allowing cross-enrolment. In smaller schools faculty are often assigned to teach in areas outside of their discipline. Faculty exchange programmes would reduce this problem. Perhaps the minimum size for theological schools to operate a full curriculum is 500 students. Outside of Korea, few schools approach this size.

Working together, schools can offer a variety of programmes that are tailored to the special needs of students. Possibilities include: diversified music programmes; adequate libraries with fulltime librarians; adequately supervised field education; multiple levels and sections of course offerings; specialized course offerings such as, Theology of Suffering for the Persecuted Church; specialized student groups; guidance and counselling programmes; effective orientation programmes; evening programmes; and tutorial and remedial classes. Combining individual resources into effective cooperative structures, schools could offer a significantly improved learning environment.

Developing a spirit of respect and cooperation is more fundamental than structures. We need to accept differences, recognizing that there is often more than one mature Christian perspective on any given issue. This provides breadth of theological interpretation for our students. Participants stated that we need to, 'imbibe generosity' between our schools. 'Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you' (Luke 6:38).

When these attitudes are present, we will be able to take mutual advantage of each others' strengths, particularly in the area of curricular specializations. For example, we may have a missions programme but not counselling or urban ministry. Developing specific specializations among cooperating schools is one way we can offer a full curriculum to our students.

Participants suggested that this could be accomplished by students spending two years in one school and a third year concentrating on a specialization in another school. Schools could work together in developing specializations such as Islamic Studies. Participants noted that the key is to cooperate without losing school identity and uniqueness.

School mergers may result in at least one of the institutions losing its identity, but there are several forms of cooperation that maintain the identity and uniqueness of individual schools. Schools may enter a consortium where they participate in forming a new institution with degree granting rights, or where the individual schools retain degree-granting rights. Boards, personnel and resources remain with the individual schools which make required

(e.g. dues) and voluntary (e.g. office space, personnel) contributions to the consortium as stated in a consortium agreement.

Schools may also enter into a network of voluntary cooperation in such areas as interlibrary loan, cross enrolment, faculty exchange, dissertation committee work, student mentoring, theological forums, journals or yearbooks, research projects, and representation to the government. Individual Boards may determine their school's areas of cooperation. Personnel voluntarily participate in a joint network committee to guide the network and to carry out its work as stated in a joint agreement. Resources are raised as needed through dues.

Schools may enter associations such as the Asia Theological Association in which a broad-based grouping of theological institutions join for the purposes of accreditation and mutual enrichment. Personnel voluntarily participate in a Board or joint committee to guide the association and to carry on its work as stated in association documents.

Other cooperative arrangements include 'niche institutes' which offer special subjects, such as missions, across a variety of schools. 'Piggyback schools' are arrangements whereby a smaller school 'rides on the back' of a larger school in a long-term relationship. Partner schools have an arrangement whereby a new school partners with an established school for a given period. Cooperative Internet schools work together in providing internet courses that all participating schools use. Validation programmes, where younger schools participate with such schools as the University of Wales, allow for the recognition and granting of degrees.

The words of Solomon are very helpful in considering cooperative arrangements. 'Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken' (Ecc. 4:12).

Leadership in Curriculum Evaluation and Revision

Finally, how do we lead curriculum change for the 21st century, appropriately balancing the forces and counter forces of the theological school? Barriers to change in theological curricula are significant. In some institutions, the existing curriculum has become a second canon as sacred as Scripture itself. We sometimes become overdependent on specific curricula, texts and materials. Our boards, administration, constituency and even our own leadership may be too conservative and traditionalistic to allow for significant change. We allow dysfunctional interpersonal relations that inhibit change to continue. Under these conditions, our change systems are insufficient, evaluation is lacking, and we tend not to reward innovators. These barriers need to be overcome if curricular change is going to take place.

There are four key roles in curriculum change: the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the Chief Academic Officer (CAO), the Heads of Departments (HOD) and the Chief Financial Officer (CFO). Participants empha-

sized that the 'CEO is the key in the entire process'. His task is to cast new vision throughout the school regarding revision outcomes. He approves the extent of evaluation and encourages the process of change. He promotes and models the mission, values, and goals of the institution in relation to the curriculum by using its primary documents as the guiding force in the revision process. The CEO ensures that evaluations of outcomes are based upon these documents. If these documents are not properly formulated for a 21st century curriculum, he is to lead the school constituency in reformulating them. The CEO makes sure that an appropriate timetable is set, that there is adequate follow-through, and that the overall work is done well and with integrity. He networks with his board and the CAO on the evaluation and development process; makes certain that adequate resources are available; pastors the personnel involved; and communicates relevant outcomes to the school publics.

The CAO organizes and orchestrates the evaluation and revision. He ensures that primary documents as well as notations of the regional accreditation association, government standards, and university standards are reflected in the process. The CAO champions the examination of important issues (e.g. social issues, such as urban poverty or curricular issues, such as excellence) in relation to the curriculum as indicated by primary documents. The CAO provides an understanding of curriculum theory, foundations, design and engineering. He supervises the utilization of review instruments (e.g. faculty and course evaluations, applies research skills such as survey, document analysis and interview to the review process, and guides appropriate reflections on findings. Relationally the CAO networks with the CEO, HODs and faculty. He must demonstrate authenticity (genuine, having a self-examining, open orientation) throughout the process; and must utilize relational/political skills needed to bring diverse parities together. Finally, the CAO sustains continuous evaluation of the various aspects of the curriculum as well as a major evaluation every four to five years.

HODs maintain a listening ear to what students and other stakeholders are saying. They utilize evaluation reports in relation to departmental work and curricula and make recommendations to the CAO and academic committee after gaining consensus in departmental discussions. The HODs ensure that primary documents as well as notations of the regional accreditation association, government standards, and university standards are implemented through the revision and development process. Finally they oversee implementation of departmental changes, explain changes to students and other publics related to the department, and champion excellence within the department.

The CFO plans a budget for curriculum evaluation and development. He asks what needs to be done before, during, and after the process. He plans a budget around four questions: What internal and external

personnel need to be involved? How long will they be needed? What will be the actual cost? How much will be the out-of-pocket expenses?

Leadership of curricular change should be seen as a corporate task where people and their ideas are valued. Creating an atmosphere of trust and compromise will help curriculum innovations move forward.

Seven Key Questions to Ask

There are certain essential questions to ask in preparing to evaluate and revise theological curricula. These questions, presented by Dr. Ng Peh Cheng, keep the evaluation and revision process focused on the big picture of what the curriculum is to accomplish.

1. What is the ultimate purpose of the church?
2. What is the mission of the institution?
3. What will be the context of the institution and learner in five or twenty-five years?
4. What will be the 'levels' of workers needed?
5. What qualities should workers possess?
6. How can the institution develop these qualities?
7. How should the institution administer and implement the decisions made?

Conclusion

Theological curriculum change is a difficult but essential process in the life of the school. Avoid this process for too long and your institution will become moribund and irrelevant. Pursue it periodically with an ear toward your constituency and an eye on the world around you and your students will become more capable ministers of the gospel.

The Silent God

In a noise-filled world we frequently misinterpret silence.
Polluting our moments with relentless prattle, we struggle to fill the internal void;
A hollow cacophony masks insubstantial existence, and shrewdly protects us from our desperate emptiness.
Terrified of the word, we fiercely complain of divine absence to insulate ourselves from the risk of hearing.
Content with our muted deity, we are safe from that comprehension beyond words, and the exacting demands of communion;
Until that voiceless emptiness within reveals the listening silence at the very heart of God;
And we discover the sacramental word, and the sacramental silence.

Garry Harris, Adelaide, South Australia (used with permission)