

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND PRAXIS: AN EXPLORATION OF BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Introduction

The task of preparing men and women for the work of the ministry is indeed an awesome one. The challenge comes from several fronts, not the least being the changing contexts for which ministers of the Gospel are being prepared. The context is a moving target, and the “swampy” and indeterminate nature of many of these contexts requires the application of knowledge in unique ways. The “Office of the Ministry” for the Church of the Nazarene articulates the approach to ministerial development as moving along two rails.

(1) the cognitive domain of the academic classroom and (2) the active domain of experience in the local church. Rail one provides the cognitive input or content. Rail two provides the experience for skill development and competency. The cross ties that hold the rails together represent the dynamic reflection that enables the integration of the informational base and the ministry experience i.e. context. Finally the roadbed represents spiritual formation or character upon which all else rests (Office of Ministry: The Pastor/Mentor’s Guide for the Ministerial Journey pg 6).

While the two types of knowledge are mentioned here, there is little detail given as to how they are to be related. Can one assume that these two types of knowledge can be brought together by dynamic reflection? At what point is this to be done? What part does the classroom setting play

in this? Other issues such as the conservative pedagogical stances of most theological education programs, and the need for transformative learning in the midst of non-residential teaching, requires a regular visitation of the effectiveness of our educational enterprise.

An example of the “gap” that can occur between classroom learning and praxis in vocational ministry, is that of preaching. In a conservative evangelical church, the preaching ministry is an important part of the ministry setting. A graduate is expected to be able to deliver at least two sermons a week. In a common program, the graduate may successfully complete at least two subjects that are highly relevant to the task of preaching – “Hermeneutics” and “Homiletics”. Both subjects teach the exegetical skills required as essential work toward sermon preparation, and “Homiletics” works intentionally at developing the bridge between exegesis and sermon. Despite this, some graduates are perceived as presenting good exegetical Bible studies that lack relevance to the people, and in many cases lack adequate structure for a good sermon. However, if a student is quizzed about the process, he/she is able to articulate what ought to happen. There is obviously a “gap” between the classroom and the pulpit. Similar examples can be cited in pastoral care, and the development of liturgy for public worship. Because of the public nature of the ministry, these gaps are noticed quickly and implications are drawn about the quality of the education the graduate has received.

A look at the problem

The issue of the “gap” is not confined to theological education, for literature in education abounds with expressions of this same issue in a variety of disciplines. However, the issue tends to be most sharply focused in the vocational training areas where specific competencies are sought. It is with this in mind that three theoretical perspectives are explored in an effort to

define this problem more closely. It is anticipated that with a more tightly defined problem, recommendations about the task of preparing someone for vocational ministry can be proposed.

The Problem of Transfer

Perhaps the issue can be understood as a problem of transfer from propositional to procedural knowledge. The complex nature of procedural knowledge is recognised. Stevenson (1991) typically describes the different kinds of knowledge that are needed in vocational education as propositional knowledge (knowledge “that”) and procedural knowledge (knowledge “how”). His concept of “adaptability” defined as “transferring knowledge from one situation to a new one” (Stevenson 1991: 145) is one way of looking at the “gap” between theoretical knowledge and the practical application of that knowledge. For example, there would appear to be a lack of transfer from the theoretical concept in the classroom to the parish setting where a parishioner listens to the sermon. The “so what” question does not appear to be answered in the sermon, leaving the parishioner thinking that the sermon is theoretical and not relevant to the “real world”.

Different cognitive structures may be utilised for different transfer tasks. Thus the procedures utilised to accomplish specific goals may be called specific purpose procedures because they can be retrieved and executed whenever that specific goal is encountered in the future. However, when a new goal is encountered for which no specific purpose procedure exists, the only way in which progress can be made is by applying existing specific purpose procedures to individual (previously encountered) parts of the overall goal. Because specific purpose procedures are utilised in new combinations to achieve the new goal, it is postulated that higher order procedures are utilised to operate upon specific purpose procedures to handle the new situation. These higher order problem-solving procedures divide the goal into sub-goals, retrieve specific

purpose procedures applicable to individual sub-goals, assemble these procedures in a workable order and execute the sequence to secure overall accomplishment of the new goal. These problem solving procedures are regarded as higher order procedures because they operate upon specific purpose procedures. They can also be called general purpose procedures because they can be applied to accomplish a number of different specific goals. (Stevenson 1991:146)

Stevenson's development of the first, second and third order cognitive procedures illustrates the complexity in the procedural knowledge that is required in unique or new situations.

Secondly, in the unique preaching experience (unique in that each preaching experience is conducted in a unique context. No two congregations, even with the same people, are the same second time around) it is anticipated that all the declarative knowledge of the classroom is at the disposal of the preacher. Herein lies the problem. The transfer problem may be expressed by Royer's (Stevenson 1991: 147) differentiation of "near" and "far" transfer events, where the graduate does not see enough similarities in the parish context to draw on knowledge learned in the classroom. Perhaps it is fairer to say that due to the extra pressures placed upon the graduate in the new context, there is a great temptation to be distracted from the transfer process itself. This in effect creates a "far" event in the mind of the graduate and hence the lack of connection with the propositional knowledge that is theoretically at their disposal.

Thirdly, the type of knowledge that is elicited in the classroom evaluation process may lead to an emphasis on content (declarative knowledge). For example, essay exams elicit a different kind of knowledge to that being sought in the context outside the classroom. (Cooke 1999) To be fair on the classroom experience, it may be declarative (content) knowledge that is the intentional focus in the classroom. Billett (2001) points out that, of the several characteristics of the "expert", the

“breadth and organisation of experts’ knowledge ...(and) the experts’ deep conceptual understanding” (Billett 2001: 16,17) are key to the establishment of expertise. One can argue that you can’t apply what you don’t know. At the undergraduate level one needs to impart a minimal core of knowledge at the very least. Sergiovanni (1992) in the context of educational leadership theory suggests,

professional authority as a basis for leadership assumes that the expertise of teachers is what counts most. Knowledge does not exist apart from teacher and content, and so teachers are always superordinate to the knowledge base. They use knowledge metaphorically to inform, but not to prescribe practice. (Sergiovanni 1992: 35)

Thus, *how* the preacher, for example, relates to the theoretical knowledge, may well be the key to understanding the gap. For example, the need to focus on the person’s interaction with the knowledge in the practical setting may create an even wider gap in the environment between classroom and pulpit. While the emphasis remains in the classroom on content, and a knowledge base upon which to react, the contexts from classroom to pulpit will create an inherently large gap.

Nevertheless, Stevenson’s concept of “adaptability” involves the transfer of knowledge from one situation to another. It does not necessarily suppose high level procedural knowledge, for it may only be the learned rote response from successfully carrying out a simple task. However, the concept does allow for the transfer into high level procedural knowledge. *The role of the teacher in teaching adaptability is therefore to create a learning environment which presses students into higher order cognitive activity.* (Stevenson 1991: 148). As such the problem of *adaptation* is understood as a transfer problem. In these terms, the problem of the “gap” is an “adaptability” problem.

Fourthly, how the student reacts with the body of knowledge learned in the classroom, raises the issue of reflective practice and thinking. That is to say, thinking about the process of transfer is almost as important as the knowledge itself. The lack of doing so may assist in creating the “gap”.

The Problem of Adult Development

However, it is also possible to conceive this problem of the “gap” in terms of adult developmental issues. A typical class in homiletics is composed of what is legally defined as “adults”. However, their ages may range from 18 to 60 years of age. Squires (1993) points out that a class of adults with such an age range is hardly a homogenous unit. This raises enormous pedagogical (or andragogical) considerations.

Squires classifies Knowles’ interest in andragogy as a focus on how adults learn but shows that the distinction between andragogy and pedagogy is ambiguous. Andragogy is not the exclusive domain of the adult classroom because of this ambiguity. Some of the reasons that inform adult educational practice are the same reasons that inform child educational practice. (Davenport 1993:110) Reigel, as quoted by Squires (1993), emphasises how adults think. This allows attention to be drawn to the disjunction between theory and practice as well as seeing human development as gradualist and evolutionary. However, Reigel’s articulation of “dialectical operations” seem to impose an artificial “theory or practice” rubric on how adults think and therefore learn. Chickering, also quoted by Squires (1993), thought that the emphasis ought to lie more in understanding adulthood as “life-span development” leading to a greater understanding of life-phases and life-stages. Squires (1993) takes Chickering to task over the difficulty in describing these phases/stages and whether they can be considered normative. While each of

these particular emphases enrich our understanding of teaching adults, these emphases illustrate some of the complexity of this enterprise. Leaving aside knowledge issues, the fact that adult phases may influence learning adds an impressive array of problems to be overcome. Squires (1993) points out yet another incongruity in education. When embedded in an understanding of learning styles, this incongruity opens the possibility of further adult “mis-education”.

It is one of the paradoxes of compulsory education, that although its aims are individualistic, its means are collective. Examinations test individual achievement, not the achievement of the group. Norm-referenced examinations in particular set one child in competition with another. The stated aims of the schools are often expressed in terms of ‘individual development’, yet most work in schools is done in groups, in classes ranging from under ten in a sixth form to more than thirty in some lower forms. ... In higher education, individual ends are also pursued by collective means, though here the pattern is rather different from the schools. Teaching alternates between extreme collectivity (mass lectures) and extreme individuality (library-based studies or tutorials) ... the aims or ends of higher education are still typically stated in individual terms: the development of this person’s intellectual capacities, that person’s competency to do a job, or the other person’s general maturity. (Squires 1993: 98)

With many life experiences, the adult has access to an enormous reservoir of knowledge that is socially mediated. Just being part of society and living with people provides the opportunity to learn from experience. In fact it is conceivable that an adult who has not been in the formal educational process for some time will continue learning primarily in social and not individualistic ways. Much of this learning may be informal and even unintentional. Formal settings that emphasise propositional knowledge in direct didactic form, may be viewed as

irrelevant or even incomprehensible! If, as Squires (1993) suggests, that adult development impacts learning efficacy, then the learning context of the classroom is important. To ignore this development is to add a hurdle to the adult learning process that may contribute to the gap between propositional and procedural knowledge. In a discipline that has remained very conservative educationally, theological education may need to look at its andragogy more critically to work with this drift.

Tennant (1997) works with the concept of “field dependence and field independence” when talking learning and cognitive styles. He points out that there are many studies that show a correlation between this field dependence / independence and a number of personal characteristics, social interaction patterns and life choices.

For example, there are studies reporting how field dependent people rely on a social frame of reference to formulate their beliefs, attitudes and feelings, and self-concept; that they make fewer self-references in their speech; that they adapt their rate of speech to the rate of the person to whom they are communicating; that they are more sensitive to social cues; and that they like to be with people; that they are better liked; that they prefer to be physically closer to others, and so forth. (Tennant 1997: 82)

Just as importantly Tennant points out that the research indicates that the different types of knowledge are “more or less” accessible to people with different cognitive styles. However, field independence is valued more highly than field dependence, because the skills that are associated with field independence (analytical, impersonal domains like mathematics, engineering, technical and mechanical activities) are valued more highly by society. But, preaching, and many other skills required by the clergy, would appear to be highly field dependent. The connection with the audience, and the ability to mold what is said, to the dynamic of the particular

communicative episode is highly valued of a speaker. To devalue this important knowledge by thinking it less rigorous or less academic, is to contribute to the gap in a significant way. If we follow Squires' argument about the "individualised" focus of education and add this to an adult's increasing experiential knowledge, then we can see that adult education form and context is much more varied than when in school. Does, then, an andragogy that focuses on content, leave untapped a host of learning potential in the adult? Probably. Does this explain some of the "gap" problem? Squires says: *if there is any ...tendency in adult education, it is likely to be some form of existential drift, a vague but nevertheless powerful pull towards, for want of a better word, life.* (Squires 1993: 106)

Thus accordingly, the "gap" may well find its source in a too narrow andragogy as well as in a parish context that is heavily weighted in experiential learning with its commensurate diversity.

The Problem of Cognitive Load

Sweller (1999:17) draws an important distinction between understanding and competence. If this distinction is not made, it is quite possible to assume that once a student understands a concept, he or she is able to apply it. Sweller places this gap in knowledge into the "difficulty in learning" category rather than in a "transfer of knowledge" difficulty. Key to his idea is the concept of cognitive load that is required in making the shift from theory to practice. Prawat (1989) speaks of the same issue in "transfer of knowledge" terms when he uses the concept of "accessibility". In both cases a connectivity of the elements in the subject is required. It appears that the subject of Homiletics has a high degree of interactivity of its elements. For example, the interplay between text, its original intent, and its current meaning is less than straightforward. Intrinsically, this produces high cognitive load for the student. Sweller (1999:46) lists in addition to the intrinsic cognitive load of high elemental interactivity, several sources of extraneous cognitive

load. These include, means-ends analysis in problem solving, split attention, and redundancy. All three of these are issues in the study of Homiletics. For example, while exegesis is an important component of preparing a sermon, it is not the only, or even the most important part. Consider the game of tennis. To be a competent tennis player may be my goal, and so I learn the rules and variations to those rules. I may even develop ball skills (eye hand coordination, different types of strokes, learn to serve the ball, etc). However, I then need to apply these skills to the game of tennis to be competent. A competent tennis player assumes the use of these skills as he or she develops the playing of the game of tennis.

Consider the art of homiletics. Exegesis of the text (Scripture) is assumed to be a part of the *repertoire* of the preacher. Here Sweller's concept of "split attention" and consequent increased cognitive overload applies. A student sees the importance of getting the interpretive step right to such a degree, that the other steps in the process get little attention. Thus the finished product is a lecture of exegetical significance, but not a sermon. "Redundancy" is also relevant here as, many times, other issues impinge on the development of the sermon that are really not a part of the process. For example, side issues from the text that don't relate to the sermon itself, or memories of previous sermons on the text in hand that are not appropriate for this time, or extraneous environmental factors.

Organizational structure is provided by the connections or links between elements of the knowledge base. It is the adequacy of this structure that determines the accessibility of availability of information at a later time. Good teaching, then, fosters ...relational understanding. (Prawat 1989:6) Key ideas are seen as helping the expert organise the knowledge base around more central understandings. This is where the novice needs help in processing the information. (Prawat 1989) Sweller speaks of schemas rather than key ideas. He defines schemas

as *cognitive constructs that permit us to treat multiple elements of information as a single element categorized according to the manner in which it will be used.* (Sweller 1999:10)

Whether or not this elemental connectedness be understood as a vehicle for transfer, or as a learning strategy, this does suggest an approach to teaching Homiletics - collaborative learning. Dillenbourg defines such learning in general terms as a *situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together.* (Dillenbourg 1999:2). The various terms of this definition are then defined more closely, but the process characterised by this approach to learning is our goal. The following are listed by Dillenbourg:

1. Induction – where shared perceptions are “represented” in a way that draws out the similarities;
shared cognitive load – where the regulating of others appears less demanding than self-regulation and can lead to a shared responsibility;
2. explanation – where different view-points are explained and take into account the context in which the explanation takes place;
3. conflict – where a discrepancy between two peers leads to conflicting statements that need further articulation and explanation. This also gives opportunity for the student to enter another’s world and to relate. (Dillenbourg 1999:15);
4. internalisation - where there is the transfer of tools from the social plane to the inner plane (a process that is very much a part of the transformational educative experience sought in the area of metacognition);
5. appropriation – where the student reinterprets his or her own opinions in the light of what others in the group say; mutual modeling - where there is opportunity to be fashioned by and fashion the group. (Dillenbourg 1999: 15)

If this is so, then what might instruction look like in the subject of Homiletics? Firstly there may be the elaboration of the elements of Homiletics. At this level much of this could be given as theory, but what if some of this was discovered by way of social interaction? By taking away the specified “goal” of learning (the steps in sermon preparation), perhaps some of the elements can be found inductively while being socially mediated. For example, the viewing of two or three videos of preachers delivering sermons in a variety of settings in different styles might start the process. The video could be watched in small groups and then a discussion held of some key questions like: what was the passage of Scripture used as a base in the sermon? Was appropriate exegesis applied according to the genre and original context? What was the over-riding theme of the sermon? To what kind of congregation would this be appropriate? What illustrations were used? Did these communicate to you? To who else would these illustrations be appropriate? Describe the style of presentation? Did it match the message of the sermon? What improvements could you suggest? Carefully designed questions can help in the integration of the information and the development of schemas while sharing of the cognitive load. This small group setting would allow students to observe how the sermon impacted their peers, and note the differences. Once the small group had gone through the questions, a verbal report could be brought back to the whole class for wider comment. This would also allow for the student to make an oral presentation, and begin the process of public communication. (Similar to learning the ball skills in learning to play tennis – this practical skill is an important base from which to learn the skill of the larger goal i.e. playing the game of tennis).

At this point it must be considered whether such “worked examples”, to use Sweller’s phrase, decrease cognitive load. Further work needs to be carried out on this issue. Sweller’s (1999:71) comparison between geometry and algebra problems show that the correlation is not a simple one. In observing the preaching of sermons, there is high potential for split attention and extraneous information sources. Having some of the sermons in written form as well as video,

may allow for the student to process more appropriately. (Sweller 1999:140) In this case there is an increased working memory (and hence decreased cognitive load) with two modalities used. The assumption is that working memory for visual and/or auditory is separate to that for written form. Thus by presenting the sermon in two different forms, the andragogy is much more learner friendly.

Towards a Solution

In addition to some inductive learning in social groups to reduce cognitive load, the opportunity to get alongside an “expert” and allow the “scaffolding” of knowledge may prove fruitful. At this point, theories that work with the apprenticeship models may help with the development of andragogy. Lave (1990) explored tailor apprenticeships and made some generalisations.

The curriculum of tailoring names tasks without specifying procedures. “Learn to make garments!” would be the prescriptive message at the highest level. “Learn to sew them, then learn to cut them out” would be the prescription at the next level down. At the third level there are no instructions (only a summing up of my observations about what apprentices do). Apprentices observe and experiment until they achieve a first approximation; then they practice. This curriculum shapes opportunities for doing tailoring work. Master tailors spend a lot of time doing what apprentices want to learn to do, where apprentices can see them do it and can also assist their masters in increasingly central ways. It means that no one is unclear about the goals of apprenticeship, and also that the process of getting there, one day at a time, has both well-defined goals and an improvisational character.

Learning in school, like all practice, is improvised, but there are two reasons why that practice may not be what the teacher intends to teach. When the teacher specifies the practice to be learned, children improvise on the production of that practice but not the practice itself. And it is not possible to resolve problems that are not, in some sense, their own. The more the teacher, the curriculum, the texts, and the lessons “own” the problems or decompose steps so as to push learners away from owning problems, the harder it may be for them to develop the practice. (Lave 1990: 324)

What is of interest in this perspective is the possibility of having students enter the expert preacher’s world. To observe where a preacher seeks his illustrations, what ways he or she begins to develop a sermon, how the words used are crafted into the final product, how connections are made with the congregation, and so forth.

Apprentices learn to think, argue, act, and interact in increasingly knowledgeable ways, with people who do something well, by doing it with them as legitimate, peripheral participants. (Lave 1990: 311)

The doing of the task of preaching is something that needs to be done frequently in real ministry contexts, to develop the expertise. The vehicle for this is probably not found entirely within the Homiletics class. A “Supervised Ministry Experience” program that intentionally assigns a student a mentor for 2 years is a much more effective way to address the transfer, developmental and cognitive load issues (Nazarene Theological College 2001). For example, the Ministry Function W204 “Preaching”, could be articulated in the following way:

W204.1 Plans / prepares and delivers at least 12 sermons (over the 2 year time period). Most “Homiletic” course requirements ask for the delivery of no more than 3 sermons which is

insufficient experience to develop the craft of sermon making. In addition to this, the intentional evaluation of the mentor's sermons could be added. For example, a similar number of sermons of the mentor could be discussed with the mentor while the sermons are in the preparation phase, as well as in review once the sermons have been delivered. Going through the thinking processes of the mentor as he or she develops the sermon, is a potentially useful way for the student to "get into the head" of the expert. It may even be helpful for the mentor's sermons to be video-taped and replayed when they are together in a form of "stimulated-recall". (Wear & Harris: 1994)

W204.2 A specific look at the church's strategic plan and the mentor's sermon calendar may help in articulating the relationship that is needed between these two features.

W204.7 Some intentional work at "exegeting" the congregation in which the mentor works, and to whom the student will preach on occasion, would be useful. This would hopefully make explicit what is, many times, implicit in a preacher's world. The need to make connections between preacher and congregation can be found here.

This use of a mentor relationship in guided learning illustrates the Vygotskian and Wertsch *concept of a zone of proximal development and the use of an expert other in providing scaffolding*. (Billett: 2001) An important distinction is also made between *internalisation* and *appropriation*.

Appropriation and internalisation are not synonymous. ... Internalisation implies the passing of external knowledge intact from the outside to the inside, whereas appropriation is individuals' interpretations of external knowledge. ... Therefore appropriation does not lead to identical understanding and organisation of knowledge.

The constructive process of knowledge appropriation resides within individuals' interpersonal constructions and mediations of socio-cultural practice. (Billett 2001:31)

In this guided learning, we are not seeking a “clone” of the expert, but rather a student who has been able to gain access to the same knowledge as the expert. The student’s preaching style, emphasis, and presentation may be very different to that of the mentor. It is through this appropriation that values and attitudes are developed that will guide and shape the future of the student preacher. Being around a preacher, and entering the world of the preacher, allows for what Billett terms, a “community of practice”. (Billett 2001) Such transformation is socially mediated and forms a wonderful example of what the student preacher is seeking to attain in his own preaching.

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought to examine some andragogical issues in the teaching of Homiletics that seeks to address the problems of transfer and learning. It is noted that there is a high degree of overlap in the theories that seeks to work with the problem. Whether this gap be defined in transfer of knowledge terms, in terms of a learning problem, or as cognitive load issues, it is the purposefulness in addressing accessibility to procedural knowledge that is needed.

Collaborative learning potentially not only can reduce cognitive load, but also begin the experiential learning by the student by having some of the knowledge socially mediated. Learning to “read” fellow students and hear different perceptions of observed sermons etc. all give the student opportunity to experience the increasing connectedness needed between speaker and audience. The appropriation of knowledge in the light of dialog, allows for more than the production of a “generic” preacher who produces a sermon that is appropriate for a “generic”

congregation. Rather there is real opportunity for the student to allow values, personality, and idiosyncratic features to contribute to the development of skills in preaching.

In the light of this discussion, directions for further potentially fruitful inquiry present themselves. A careful look at the course objectives for Homiletics, the andragogy used in the classroom setting, and a search for adequate texts that reflect the course objectives, all bear further investigation. In a course that is competency and outcomes based by its very nature, the educational journey to procedural knowledge needs to be intentional. The above discussion has indicated that there is an “ethos” to be entered into as a budding preacher. My suspicion is that along with some significant reworking of our andragogy in homiletics, we will also need to work intentionally with our expert preachers, if they are to mentor effectively. Creating experiences for an expert preacher to reflect on the art of preaching will assist students as well. Video-stimulated recall, reflective discussion times, and intentional exploration of knowledge in action protocols are ways to establish informed guided learning experiences for novice and expert.

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