

WHAT HISTORY AND NEUROBIOLOGY TEACH US ABOUT SEMINARY CURRICULAR REFORM?

Mark Ellingsen¹

Abstract

In view of the declining fortunes of American theological education and its seminaries, the call for seminary curricular reform is widespread. The article offers a contribution to this discussion, first by clarifying what is old and what is new, so that all sides can truly get in conversation. It is shown that some of what critics of present curricular arrangements and pedagogy claim to be “old” is really modern, even new. And that some of the exciting new ideas of the critics are actually old, have precedents in pre-19th century curricular arrangements. Reform may best be facilitated by returning to what was – a Sankofa moment of returning to fetch what was. A sense

¹ Mark Ellingsen is Professor of Church History at the Interdenominational Theological Center. Author of 24 books and hundreds of published articles, his latest books are a textbook for Introductory courses and for parish discussion groups titled, *Theological Formation: Making Theology Your Own* (Mercer University Press), a book about why the Religiously Unaffiliated are growing, what to do about it, and the Black church's special resources for responding titled, *Ever Hear of Feuerbach? That's Why American and European Christianity Are in Such a Funk!* (Cascade), as well as a very practical new book which helps readers cope with globalization and life on the internet titled, *Finding Peaks and Valleys in a Flat World* (Vernon Press).

Seminary Curricular Reform

of history, then, can contribute to our reform agenda. But we also need to combine that with attention to recent research in the field of Neurobiology, to review educational data in that light. When we do that and approach the “new” ideas of some of the curricular reformers (like Student-Centered, Contextual Learning and Design Thinking) we see that these models have largely “become the educational establishment,” are not really new, and may have difficulties accounting for the new data which seem to challenge their efficiency to facilitate long-term learning. The benefits and liabilities of online learning are also assessed in this light, and data which might support the value of older models of theological education for facilitating long-term memory are also considered in closing.

American theology and American theological education are in trouble. Independent denominational seminaries are experiencing severe financial squeezes. For over fifty years theology has played a diminishing role in influencing denominational and parish life. Questions are being raised about whether a theological education really enhances parish ministry.² Even Religious Studies

² Michael Battle, quoted in Daniel Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), p.129; David Sebatsian, “Trends in Theological Education in North America” (paper delivered at Church of God Theological Administrators’ and

programs of the university have not mattered much, are not having significant impact either in church or society.³ At the core of these dilemmas is the question of what to make of the role of theology and of theologians in relation to the Church.

These problems are not just the result of the progressive secularization of American society, though the data clearly authorizes the intuition most of us have

Instructors' Forum, Fritzlar, Germany, March 15-19, 2010); Elizabeth Lynn and Barbara G. Wheeler, "Missing Connections: Public Perceptions of Theological Education and Religious Leadership," *Auburn Studies* 6 (September, 1999). A related issue is the declining impact Theology has had on American Christianity since World War II. For a discussion of survey data suggesting this decline (as mainline Protestant denominations have become "weak communities" tolerating all sorts of different ideas), see Benton Johnson, Dean R. Hoge, and Donald A. Luidens, "The Mainline Churches: The Real Reason for Decline," *First Things* 31 (March 1993): 13-18; Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

³ Opinion research by Mark D. Regnerus and Jeremy E. Uecker, "How Corrosive Is College to Religious Faith and Practice?," *Social Science Research Council* (Feb. 5, 2007), notes that religious practice tends to decline during years of college attendance, but religious faith is also not enhanced by the study of Religion in these institutions. It is not stemming the mounting Narcissism among today's college students; see the references cited below in Note 7.

regarding how secular we have become.⁴ The problems facing seminaries and theological education also have to do with the way theology is done and taught in most American seminaries and university outside the Evangelical orbit.

The dominant model for Western theology and Religious Studies since the Enlightenment has been a Method of Correlation indebted to Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Kantian turn to the subject. This becomes readily evident simply by examining the Method of the prevailing theological alternatives studied in the mainline academy and by recalling the impact of Kant on modern theology.⁵ As Karl Barth pointed out almost a

⁴ The growth of secularism is apparent in that the religiously unaffiliated are the fastest growing segment of the American population, as reported by the Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, "'Nones' on the Rise" (October 9, 2012).

⁵ For the Kantian turn to the subject and his impact on modern theology, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Toronto: Macmillan, 1929), pp.41-42. For the appreciation that Kant is the dominant philosophical influence on Western theology, see Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), pp.25-26; John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity Interpreted Through Its Development* (New York: Scribner's, 1954), p.213; Adina Davidovich, *Religion as*

century ago, this is a theology which cannot critique secularization and relativism, but rather confirms them. If all theological statements are descriptions of human experience or are rooted in meaning patterns we create,

a Province of Meaning: Kantian Foundations of Modern Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

The reliance on something like this Method on the prevailing streams of modern academic theology is evident in Liberation Theology (James Cone, “*Black Theology in American Religion*,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53 [December 1985]: 768-769; Gustavo Guitierrez, “*Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith*,” in *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America*, ed. Rosino Gibellini [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979], pp.1ff.); Feminist Theology (Elizabeth Schuller Fiorenza, “*Toward a Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics*,” in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics*, ed. Donald K. McKim [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986], esp. pp.367-368); Theology of Hope (Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch [5th ed.; London: SCM Press, 1967], pp.180-182,187-191); Process Theology (John B. Cobb, Jr., *Process Theology As Political Theology* [Philadelphina; Westminster Press, 1982] pp.52-56,ix; much modern Roman Catholic theology (Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971], pp.108,112-113,156-158,162-163,167-170; David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* [New York: Seabury Press, 1978], pp.45-46,74-75,84); much modern Narrative or Story Theology (Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* [Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976], pp.17,20-22,36,37,81-88,91-95) *History of Religion* (Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958). And of course Paul Tillich (*Systematic Theology, Vol.1* [3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967], esp. p.8) and Rudolf Bultmann as well as much subsequent Biblical scholarship (*Jesus Christ and Mythology* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958], pp.18,45,48,51, employed this Method.

then the Word of God has no objectivity to stand over-against our perceptions. On grounds of the Method of Correlation and the Kantian turn to the subject, even my insistence that God is transcendent and objective is a statement of my own perception and has meaning only from my own point of view. Theologians operating with these suppositions, as the academy does, are trapped in a solipsism.⁶ In other words, they have no way to escape the all-consuming ideologies of self-seeking, self-interest, and self-expression that surround all our thinking in the academy (at least since the end of World War II, if not before).⁷

The progressive erosion of membership in denominations dominated by this approach to theology and the phenomenal growth of church bodies both in

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol.I/1*, trans. G.T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), pp.141-149.

⁷ Narcissism and self-seeking seems to be the ideology of American campuses. See Jean M. Twenge, Sarah Konrath, et. al, "Further Evidence of an Increase in Narcissism Among College Students," *Journal of Personality* 76, No.4 (August 2008):919-927; Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Free Press, 2009); Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), esp. pp.84-87,125.

North America and worldwide which endorse more theologically conservative hermeneutics seem to support Barth's critique. The dominant theology taught in the mainline seminaries and colleges is not in sync with many parishioners and not able to provide an effective or convincing critique of the present insalubrious trends. Ultimately, if we are to address these issues we need to take a hard look at curricular reform in American theological education, to determine whether the present round of appeals for reform are in fact radical enough to make a difference.

Curricular Issues

Consider the way in which the curriculum of virtually every North American seminary is structured. We find the usual four divisions/departments – Biblical Studies, Church History, Systematic Theology, and the Practical Areas. Critics of theological curricula as it dominates today in seminaries on grounds that it is not wholistic, that we need to abolish the prevailing departmental structure in favor of more integration, are correct. My thesis is that the presently prevailing

structure effectively distances theological education from the Church. Such a structure is relatively modern. The critics just need to know that we have not always educated our pastors and priests the way that dominates today. In fact, the critics are actually calling for a return to the old way of teaching theology.

We begin with the field of Systematic Theology. This is a modern discipline in the history of the Church. Yes, Theology was done in the Church since its inception. But the idea of a distinct field termed Systematic Theology is a modern development, probably rooted in Post-Enlightenment Germany. In earlier centuries, Theology was generally done without regard to whether the assertions made about the faith fit together logically and coherently. The primary norms for determining truth and excellence were fidelity to Scripture and to The Rule of Faith. In that sense the approach was more dogmatic and occasional.

This is not to deny that some pre-modern theologians arranged what they said about the various doctrines in a systematic fashion. Indeed there were proponents of the Method of Correlation, seeking to

interpret the Biblical witness systematically into the categories of Greek philosophy, dating back to the time of the Catechetical School of Alexandria in the first centuries. Medieval Scholastic Theology also had ingredients of a systematic approach. In fact in some respects the development of Systematic Theology as we know it in the modern era is an heir of these developments.

A theology rooted in logic is appealing intellectually. But is it actually helpful in ministry, other than when engaging in apologetics? The diversity of life experiences of the parishioners addressed suggests that there will be some occasions when the system does not communicate well with everyone in the audience. Our parishioners have different needs, and all Systematic Theologies have strengths and weaknesses. Maybe in interests of becoming more effective in addressing the whole flock and all their various needs, we ought to consider returning to the earlier models of Theology. That is a subject for another day. Our interest in this article is the broader structural issue of what a theological faculty should look like requires consideration.

Seminary Curricular Reform

The entire curricular structure of Western theological education demands our attention. The ATS and its members have already had attention called to the obvious fact that the idea of dividing theological faculties into four departments is a relatively recent, modern development. It is helpful to understand the *sitz im leben* of this curricular structure, as we may not want to live with its aims today.

Of course it is only in the Middle Ages when universities and seminaries were created or authorized.⁸ Prior to that time, at least in the West, theological instruction was largely done through an apprentice and mentorship system. The mentor was basically the instructor in every subject. And of course credentialing of instructors was ad hoc or based on charisma, experience, and/or church office held. Accomplishment or a proven track-record in ministry was an essential qualification for the instructor. Nurture in spirituality

⁸ For this survey I am indebted to Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); David Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992).

(habits of prayer or spiritual formation) accompanied theological instruction.

This structure for theological education was not markedly changed in the first European Cathedral Schools of the Middle Ages, which evolved into modern universities. Though new disciplines other than Theology were introduced into universities, the actual instruction in Christian thought was still unified, often under the auspices of the President of the university (at least in this country during the Colonial era and well into the 19th century in many denominational colleges). But with this development, some fragmentation was starting to develop, as Theology was seen as a distinct subject.

A distinction was now being made between ministerial education and a university education. Eventually in the late Middle Ages, the Catholic Church would actually create seminaries (sanctioned by the Council of Trent) to provide additional theological study for candidates to the priesthood.⁹ The concept took root

⁹ Council of Trent, Sess.XXIII, Ch.18 (1563); cf. *Ibid.*, Sess.V, Ch.1 (1546). It is interesting to note how distinct lectureships in Holy

Seminary Curricular Reform

in European Protestantism and was eventually planted in America with the first seminary established in Andover, Massachusetts in 1807. In the period immediately before the widespread creation of seminaries in the 19th century, at least in America's mainline denominations, a college degree was sufficient training, though some candidates for ministry apprenticed themselves to a professor of a church college or a prominent local clergyman. Again we see all of aspects of theology were seen to "hang together." Theological education was eminently practical, and it belonged to the Church.

Perhaps in practice there was not the harmony I have been describing, that Western theological instruction was too cerebral and not as practical as was desirable. But the real, institutional fracturing of the harmony came in early 19th-century Germany, in the state of Prussia with the establishment of the University of Berlin. Its curricular structure would spread throughout Germany

Scripture were to be created by excess church funds or by donation of Bishops from their own sources of income. These positions were to be appointed by the Bishops, and part of their charge was to teach grammar as well as Scripture/theology and other subjects established by custom. The schools were to target the poor.

and impact the budding American educational institutions.¹⁰

Founders of the new university were committed to inquiry into universal rational principles that allow us to organize any and all specific fields of inquiry (*Wissenschaftliche*). No allegiance (including faith) could inhibit the free exercise of the critical faculty. This put Christianity (Christian students and faculty) somewhat on the defensive, needing to prove that they belonged in the university. Such an ethos changed the sort of teaching of Theology that needed to transpire and in turn shaped the way Theology needed to be done.

Theology now needed to become a science in the sense that all the other academic disciplines are. Theologians needed to demonstrate their discipline's rationality or academic credibility. This had a number of (perhaps unsavory) consequences for theological

¹⁰ For this discussion I am indebted to Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, eds. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), esp. pp.98ff. Cf. Craig L. Nesson, "Mission and Theological Education - - Berlin, Athens, and Tranquebar: A North American Response," *Mission Studies* 27 (2010): 178-180.

education (at least its perception in popular culture) and the Church. Certainly the need to demonstrate Religion's relation to universal rational principles encouraged the dominance of the Method of Correlation which aims to show how Christian faith intends to express universally acceptable rational principles. But this in turn means Christian Theology loses its privileged status, since like any Religion it must demonstrate its status as *Wissenschaft*. The emergence of the History of Religions and the field of Religious Studies, rather than merely limiting religious inquiry to Christian Theology was a logical outcome. Theological education and Theology, now understood in terms of this Prussian model, came to have less and less to do with prayer and spiritual formation. It was (at least among some instructors and increasingly in the eyes of the public) a theoretical discipline (like the Sciences and Social Sciences), not a practical one.

The Development of Specializations

The new status of Theology in the university led it increasingly to be construed as having the status of

Medicine and Law, as a profession. (This status would become very significant when these German dynamics were transplanted to America in the 20th century.) The real heart of Berlin University was no longer Theology (as it had been in European and American colleges and universities since their inception). The Humanities (esp. Philosophy) took its place.

In the professions and especially in an institution like Berlin dedicated to rational, scientific inquiry (albeit philosophically driven), specialized research becomes a way of life. All the instruction must relate to this research. Faculty become less tutors and mentors than researchers, specializing in their field of inquiry. With a scientific model driving the institution there is less place for the generalist.

This description of what happened in this very influential German university, and its impact on both German and the U.S., explains the development of the four discipline areas in the seminary. Of course the curricular dispositions of Berlin University are not the whole story in this development. The four distinct specialties have a certain precedence in the development

of 18th and 19th century theological encyclopedias. They referred to three theoretical disciplines (Exegesis, Church History, and Dogmatics [not Systematic Theology]) and an applied discipline (Practical Theology). Subsequently Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote a book largely embracing this curricular structure.¹¹ But the developments in Berlin institutionalized this proposed division of labor. Theological education would never be the same.

As noted, not only did this model have significant impact on German higher education in general. In the newly developing elite New England and Ivy League seminaries faculty members travelled to Germany, and when they returned they began successfully to implement the Berlin model on their home institutions. By the late 19th century the stature of these schools (of their setting the agenda for many denominational seminaries) led the Berlin model of the four distinct disciplines to be

¹¹ Christoph Luthardt, *Kompendium der Dogmatik* (11th posthumous ed.; Leipzig: Dorffling & Franke, 1914), 4.1; Julius F. *Encyclopedia of Theology, Vol. 1*, trans. John Macpherson (2 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T/ Clark, 1884), p.299; cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology*, trans. William Farrer (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007).

increasingly characteristic. (There were still some holdout schools into the 20th century.)

In the years immediately after World War II with a growing sense that the Ministry needed to be upgraded to the status of a profession (a sentiment still driving those denominational and ethnic traditions only now insisting on mandating seminary education for its clergy), there was more impetus to embrace the status of theological education and the seminary as providing a professional education, like the law school and the med school. Indeed, to this very day many seminary faculty and administrators would covet those comparisons for their institutions. But because medicine and law are not really hard sciences, but more functional skill-oriented disciplines, not engaged in the quest for truth, so theology no longer came to be seen by many as engaged in a quest for truth. It was purely technical knowledge, only any good if it helped you relate to people and real-life situations.

This opened the door for two different, though related developments. The fields of Biblical Studies, Church History, and Theology find themselves pressured

Seminary Curricular Reform

by the academic ethos to become more and more scientific, less ecclesiologicaly oriented and concerned with everyday issues, in order to demonstrate their academic credibility. And the field of Practical Theology, now effectively functioning as the only discipline still in touch with the issues of everyday ministry in the Church, comes to be the favorite, preferred discipline of pastors and church leaders, who increasingly point out the “irrelevance,” purely academic status of the classical disciplines.

With the growing desire for “relevance” beginning in the late 1950s and 1960s, faculties in the Practical departments grew, not just limited to Homiletics and Church Administration, but added personnel in the fields of Counseling (Psychology), community action (Sociology), and even Education. Administration courses were refined by adding specialists or lessons in Business Management. These courses increasingly became the most popular courses, in part because their claim to relevance was often at the expense of contrasting what was claimed to be “theoretical learning” in the classical disciplines. Rarely was there a real dialogue between

these disciplines. And as more and more seminary Presidents appointed tended to have their expertise in the so-called Practical fields quite naturally these departments became the most influential and were more likely to be enlarged with more members and resources.

Other Implications Of The Prevailing Model

Our recounting of the history of the prevailing curricular model makes its deficiencies clear. Theology understood as a science (as *Wissenschaft*) in the German sense tends to render the subject a purely theoretical undertaking. The harmony of Biblical-theological concepts and spiritual formation, of academy and Church, which we have noted in the origins of theological education, had been shattered. The Church no longer has a say in determining qualifications for teaching theology. Those judgments and personnel decisions are a function of the standards of the academy. And also the unity of the field of theology was shattered, with different professors carving out their territories and increasingly not doing much to help students see the unity of Biblical Studies, Church History, and Systematic Theology. The rivalry,

with very little interaction and a lot of discounting of each other between the so-called academic and the classical disciplines, is also an outcome of this model which prevails on most American seminary campuses. As a result, what Allan Bloom has written about the American university applies to theological education today:

Each department or great division of the university makes a pitch for itself... They are competing and contradictory, without being aware of it. The problem of the whole is urgently indicated by the very existence of the specialties, but it is never systematically posed. The net effect of the student's encounter with the catalogue is bewilderment and very often demoralization... Most professors are specialists, concerned only with their own fields, interested in the advancement of those fields in their own terms... They have been entirely emancipated from the old structure of the university, which at least helped to indicate that they are incomplete, only parts of an unexamined and undiscovered whole. So the student must navigate among a collection of carnival barkers, each trying to lure him into a particular sideshow.¹²

¹² A. Bloom, p.339.

There is no question about the applicability of this sense of loss of curricular integration among many seminary students and undergraduate Religious Studies majors. It is essentially the logical outcome of the prevailing model, and no doubt is contributing to our present woes in and ineffectiveness of theological education. But this does not have to be the final word on the subject. In the models of the early 19th century American seminary and in pre-modern ways of doing theology we may glimpse at an alternative.

An Ecclesiological-Wholistic Alternative

Specialization and fragmentation were not the way theological education was conducted in the first decades of American seminaries. Aspects of this model were firmly in place in some smaller denominational seminaries of the early 20th century. In some respects they resembled the style of pre-modern theological education. There were no specialists in the strict sense on these faculties. They were learned generalists, with experience in Ministry. And they had largely been appointed to their positions by the Church, on grounds of ecclesiological not just academic accomplishments. Even if they taught

Seminary Curricular Reform

different courses, the professors knew a good bit about the subjects they did not teach, and had the wealth of parish experience to relate to the subject. Integration of the theological curriculum happened in the classroom! The academic and practical courses of study were not competitors; their agendas overlapped.

Is this so far-fetched a model for implementation today? Could seminaries not become more sensitive to the importance of parish experience in hiring faculty, to the ability of pastors hired to have doctorates in fields of Biblical Studies, Church History, and Theology (or at least equivalent competence in these fields), while expecting faculty members in these departments to devote more attention to doing exegesis and theologizing about everyday issues? And in the so-called Practical areas, these courses would need to focus at least as much on Theology, historical precedents, and exegesis. Every insight from these disciplines would need to be evaluated critically from a theological perspective. Then students would experience the practicality of Theology, Ethics, History, and Biblical interpretation. If this would happen

in all our classes we might not even need distinct departments in our seminaries.

Of course I am not naïve about how many challenges the widespread initiation such new/old criteria for faculty appointment would encounter. It would not happen overnight. But perhaps one could begin with the latest round of appointments, and even more immediately by praying more in class and with more team-teaching across disciplinary lines. (Also a truce in verbal jousting between academic and practical disciplines needs to be called.)

A long way towards ending the sense of theology's irrelevance for everyday life could be made by breaking with the Systematic model and the heavy dependence on the Method of Correlation. We need a theological model which takes seriously the rich diversity of religious experience, is open to addressing it. In pre-modern theology (and even in early Pietism) an alternative emerges. But as I've noted, that is a subject for another article. We've made the case that the call for a more unified curriculum is not so new; it is really a call for return to older models. Let's consider now what

learning models would be most effective in implementing such a curriculum.

Learning Models For A Unified Curriculum

More and more the call of reformers for change in the way theology is taught has become the establishment, though these “reformers” are not inclined to admit it. True enough, the lecture method with instructors developing their next academic contribution (book, article, academic presentation) as a function of the prevailing disciplinary curriculum remains in place in many cases. But it is clearly a watered down version of this mode of education, as the influence of Student-Centered Learning, Contextual Education models, and the general critique of content-based education with exams as a means of evaluation are increasingly the norm. Why in a lot of seminaries we no longer even award grades and those administering exams are increasingly a minority, often need to defend the practice with colleagues.

Of course the American educational system itself has already effectively bought a lot of the suppositions of the learning theories pushing for more Experiential

Learning, Situated Learning, sometimes a Pedagogy of the Oppressed, or Design Thinking, and so they become more and more advocated for in our seminaries. All of these educational models presuppose Bloom's Taxonomy and Constructivism (the idea that learners are not passive recipients of information, but construct knowledge while engaging in interaction with their environment).¹³

Indeed, in a sense we can say that these educational models are not new, just elaborations of the mode of education which has not been doing too well. Consider how low the U.S. ranked in 2018 in public education (20th) compared to high-achieving nations like Finland, Japan, and South Korea according the Edsys Education.¹⁴ Just talk to African students at ITC over the years who have brought their children to the US, and the

¹³ Benjamin Bloom, M.D. Engelhart, E. J. Furst, et al, *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. Handbook I: Cognitive domain* (New York: David McKay Company, 1956); James V. Wertsch, *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, Continuum, 1970; Jean Piaget. *Psychology and Epistemology: Towards a Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Allen Lane, 1972).

¹⁴ Edsys. Education, "20 Best Education System in the World," 2019, at <https://www.essays.in>>best-education-system-in-the-world.

same tune gets sung: “Our children are not challenged here in the States: they hardly have to work at all.” I had this experience with our eldest child who began his education in the French school system and had years of goofing off to do in the States when repeating here the same lessons with less rigor demanded. Is it not time for proponents of Situated Learning, Experiential Learning, and Design Thinking to grapple with the data suggesting that implementation of Bloom’s Taxonomy and Constructivism (which these Learning models presuppose) has not been good for American education?

Let’s drop that point for a moment and examine data derived from Neurobiology regarding how we learn, long-term memory in particular. This data may force us to consider that a lot of the assumptions of the educational establishment which undergird the calls for more Experiential, Constructivist learning will not facilitate theological learning. As the Word of God introduces us to new worlds, often exposes us to content which is alien to our experience, encourages us to learn some content and even memorize (Scripture), maybe that’s a way to

facilitate theological learning.¹⁵ Just as establishing a unified theological curriculum calls us to critique the relatively new curriculum structure which is in place and return to yet older models, perhaps we need to do the same with Learning Models – critique the dominant relatively new student-centered models which are more and more dominant in order to return to older styles of learning that include concern for content and testing. Of course, this seems so at odds with all we think we know about modern education. But let's study the scientific data.

Relevant Neurobiological Research

Since a big part of theological education has to do with cultivating theological intelligence so that it can be applied concretely in ministry situations, that is with long-term memory of what was learned in seminary, it is crucial to note how scientists describe the cultivating of intelligence. Australian Educational Psychologist John Sweller has found that intelligence is derived from the

¹⁵ For this vision of Christian faith, see Karl Barth, "The Strange New World Within the Bible," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), pp.28ff.

schemas we have acquired over long periods of time. We understand concepts because we have schemas associated with those concepts. Thus, to work intelligently we need to be able to transfer information from our working memory to long-term memory and to weave the working memory into the long-term memory.¹⁶

It seems that when the working memory is overloaded, only a small portion of what has been taught transfers to long-term memory, and what does transfer is a jumble of things and not necessarily a coherent stream from one source. Consequently we cannot make connections without long-term memories (stored in other brain cells) that are relevant to the situation and demand our full intelligence. Put simply, when you are multi-tasking, focusing both on new material and on your own context, situations, or surrounding environment like Situated, Experiential, or Constructivist Learning would have students do, you do not concentrate as well as you

¹⁶ John Sweller, *Instructional Design in Technical Areas* (Camverwell, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research, 1999), pp.4-5,11; cf. Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), pp.124,146-148.

might if we were just reading or learning about new material. And if learners just focus on themselves or their present context, have they learned anything new (or just reinforced existing neural connections)? Does this not help explain why too many seminary graduates report not having learned much in seminary, that it did not help them, or why seminary professors lament that pastors do not use what was taught in seminary? It is not so much that the content taught was irrelevant. (If it was, why has the Church continued to expect study of the classical theological disciplines?) Rather it could just as likely be the cause that with all the peripheral attention to personal experience, context and situation, the increased lack of retrieval exercises, long-term theological memories never had a chance to form.

But now we need to consider how best to make what we are learning useful long-term. Neurobiologists like Eric Kandel have discerned that for memory to persist, the information must be thoroughly and deeply processed. This is accomplished by attention to the information and associating it meaningfully with knowledge already stored in memory – developing the

schemas through neural connections. But the neurons holding these must maintain their electric charges.

Attention to new information and assessing it based on past memory begins in the brain's frontal lobe, which executes control over the mind's focus. When this transpires, the neurons (nerve cells) of the frontal cortex send signals to neurons in the midbrain that produce the monoamine (brain chemical) dopamine. This good-feeling chemical sends signals from the frontal cortex neurons to other brain neurons that eventually facilitate their connections. You need dopamine for a present memory to be remembered long-term. And if these neurons have not been connected, connections facilitated by dopamine, you forget what you learned. And if such neural connections made do not continue to be used, they harden and are of no use. Lose it or use it is a core principle of our plastic brains.¹⁷

¹⁷ Eric Kandel, *In Search of Memory: The Emergence of a New Science of the Mind* (New York: Norton, 2006, pp.210,312-315; cf. Carr, pp.193-194.

If you are not focused, not getting the prefrontal cortex active and the dopamine flowing, you do not remember long term what you experienced. And that means that you can't study casually and expect to remember it. There seems to be some neurobiological validity to the old educational techniques of repetition and memorization. Likewise, if you do not continue to keep your neural connections active – not regularly drawing upon your long-term memories with present memories – the connections atrophy and you forget. Repetition of what we know has its place, despite what the educational establishment has been contending. It is not clear how the prevailing learning models in seminaries today encourage these brain dynamics.

In view of this data, several study projects have found that the best way to facilitate long-term memory is through retrieval, the sort of retrieval practice which transpires through studying for repeated tests.¹⁸ This

¹⁸ Benedict Carey, "Frequent Tests Enhance College Learning, Study Finds" *The New York Times*, Nov. 21, 2013; Jessica Siler and Aaron Benjamin, "Log-term inference and memory following retrieval practice," *Memory & Cognition* 48 (2020): 645-654.

finding seems counter-intuitive to recent educational truisms about how little people retain when cramming for exams or standardized tests.¹⁹ But all these studies demonstrate is that we don't remember much of what we cram. The studies used to discredit the value of exams do nothing to measure or discredit the value of repetition and study as aids to long-term memory. The Neurobiology of intelligence and memory makes it clear that there is no real education without consistent drill and repetition.

Does the theological academy need to start attending to these lessons? Not only does the data discredit the widely propagated fallacy against testing and the belief that Student-Centered Learning enhances education. Because you do not learn as well when you are scattered and distracted, it follows that online education is not as effective as in-person contact with the instructor in a classroom, as you must concentrate enough to take handwritten notes. For when you are on the internet you are bombarded by a variety of stimuli which undermines

¹⁹ Alice Kahn, *The Case Against Standardized Tests* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000).

the concentration required for understanding to happen through the action of our brain's frontal lobe.

The data already cited and experiments by Steven Rockwell and Loy Singleton and other studies conducted at Cornell University verify these findings.²⁰ I've written an article recently for the Association of Theological Schools which further elaborates on the challenges Neurobiological research poses for online education, the way in which the sole use of online delivery systems does not facilitate learning as well as on-campus models.²¹ At least theological educators need to begin to grapple with this data in developing and deploying online education.

Nor should it be overlooked that when our frontal lobe operations are diminished (when we are scattered or

²⁰ Steven C. Rockwell and Loy A. Singleton, "The Effect of the Modality of Presentation of Streaming Multimedia on Information Acquisition," *Media Psychology* 9 (2007): 179-191; Helene Hembrooke and Geri Gay, "The Laptop and the Lecture: The Effects of Multitasking in Learning Environments," *Journal of Computing in Higher Education* 15, No.1 (September, 2003):46-64; cf. Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), esp. pp.116-117.

²¹ Mark Ellingsen, "Neurobiological Data on What Online Education Could Be Doing to Our Spirituality and Our Brains: Some Augustinian/Niebuhrian Reflections," *Theological Education Vol.52, No.2* (2019): 1-11.

not concentrating, as happens in internet use) we also have our sense of transcendence diminished (since spirituality is a function of the activity of the brain's prefrontal cortex).²² One would think that it is in the best interests of the Church to have her seminaries provide educational opportunities which stimulate use of the frontal lobe (neural activities of reading and concentration), for in so doing the student's spiritual sense is stimulated. Again we note the "practical" consequences of theological study. At its best, Theology is not "theoretical."

Another widespread myth that takes a hit from science is the idea that different styles of student learning are genetic. The findings of Neurobiology and the Human Genome Project have demonstrated the remarkable similarities in the gene pool of homo sapiens and the functioning of the human brain. There are not enough genetic varieties possible to account for the diverse

²² See *Ibid.*, p.9 for more details on this point; Newberg, Andrew and Waldman, Mark Robert. *How God Changes Your Brain* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), pp.42-44.

number of homo sapiens who have lived.²³ And there is no evidence that genetics alone determines certain neural connections which would make some of us have stronger brain connections towards musical, visual, or bodily modes of learning. Like all aspects of human uniqueness, neural connections seem then to be a function of both heredity and environment. Granted, some people may have neural connections which make it easier to learn one way rather than others. But insofar as we are never too old to make new connections in our brain, it seems that if we do not expose students to more opportunities to learn in new ways, to help the student who presently is more comfortable learning through personal interactions, if we do not challenge her with reading assignments or exercises in logic, we condemn her to forever not developing stronger neural connections to strengthen her logic.

²³ Francis Collins, *The Language of God* (New York: Free Press, 2006), pp.124-126; National Human Genome Research Institute. "About Studying Environmental Impact," July 24, 2012, at <https://www.gevome.gov/17516715/2006-release-about-studying-the-environmental-impact>.

Neurobiological research kills a lot of sacred cows in the educational guild. But does this entail that all efforts to contextualize learning are less effective learning models for Theological Education? Not at all.

Design Thinking: Strengths And Weaknesses

The model of Design Thinking is getting a lot of attention among some of the leading companies like Apple and GE and having an impact in prestigious universities. It postulates five phases, moving from empathy, through divining needs, offering ideas for innovative solutions, creating solutions, and then testing solutions.²⁴ I think that this model could be useful if room were made in it to allow for instruction and testing at the innovative solutions phase in order to nurture long-term memory among students. However, some tough questions still need to be posed to this model. First, though the model clearly works for business and some academic disciplines, it is not clear that the model works for Theological Education. If the aim is to create

²⁴ Jeanne Liedtak, "Why Design Thinking Works," *Harvard Business Review*, September-October, 2018, pp.72-79.

solutions, then what prevents heresies from gaining approval with this model? Many heresies work (have worked). What safeguards are built into the process to ensure that we do not arrive at heresies as resources for problem-solving?

The other potential problem with this model, and this pertains to all Student-Centered Learning Models, is that it makes education relevant for the issues of the day. But are we only educating pastors to solve today's problems? Is it not the job of seminaries to prepare pastors for ministries 40 years down the road? It is not clear that Design Thinking or any of the other models considered thus far can avoid the problem of just preparing pastors for the moment, not for the long haul of a career in ministry.

There is a way out of this dilemma, I think. It entails again a kind of Sankofa procedure like the one suggested in developing a truly unified curriculum, going back to the past in order to solve the problems/challenges of the present. If Theology, History, and Biblical Studies are no longer reduced to theory, but are studied as practical disciplines, then when we study the past we

Seminary Curricular Reform

approach them with an eye towards the challenges addressed. We begin to note that there are certain perennial problems the Church has always faced (injustice, economic disparities, grief, despair, works righteousness, etc.). Then a focused study on the various theological and exegetical approaches would also include an appreciation of the problems addressed or how these approaches sought to solve these problems. Get it? A more focused approach to theological study which typified centuries prior to the 20th might also combine a concern with problem-solving and student-centered learning styles.

Many of the problems of the past with which the Church has grappled are still our problems today! Twenty-first century students can find themselves and their lives in the Exodus accounts, in Amos' struggles with capitalist exploitation, in Augustine's struggles with temptation, in Luther's and Mother Teresa's struggles with a sense of worthlessness, with the Pietist passion for avoiding sloth and injustice, as well as in M. L. King's, Sojourner Truth's, Ida B. Robinson's, and James Cone's wrestling with racial injustice. A focus on the historic

teachings of the Church and approaches to Biblical interpretation (most of which have roots in ancient Africa) is not a return to European theologizing or a neglecting of the African and African-American experience. This sort of approach certainly draws on the strengths of the modified versions of Design Thinking and Situated Learning which we have sketched while not falling prey to getting the brain so scattered that understanding and long-term memory are impeded. Any reasons not to consider this option of pedagogy?

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Don't get too focused on the proposal just offered. The point of this article has just been to get seminary faculty and administrators as well as pastors seeking to establish education programs for their congregations thinking. The main point is not my proposal, but just to facilitate those dedicated to reforming seminary curriculum to look at all the options, to draw on historic approaches and not have their visions beclouded just by latest trends. To those who think an integrated curriculum entails breaking with tradition, that the only way to learn

Seminary Curricular Reform

is to embrace options that go light on content and are more student-centered, this article provides scientific and historical data you ignore to the detriment of your institution. We as Christian educators need to grapple with this data together. And if we don't, if we fail to deliberate on what Neurobiology is telling us about how we learn, then we're worse than Trump when it comes to science.

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