

Teaching theology in context: Learning together

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In the fall of 1998 Candler School of Theology made a serious wager concerning its future: it launched a comprehensive new program in contextual education. The faculty hopes this program can provide the means of integrating theological learning and practice—something every seminary teacher knows is largely lacking.

Candler's experiment is only just begun, and the outcome is uncertain. We offer merely an interim report on our process and program with the hope of making a small contribution to a conversation that is taking place in many schools.

Candler has long been committed to contextual education. Its program in supervised ministry had been in existence for 30 years. This program was noteworthy at its inception for three elements: it involved M.Div. students in social and church placements in their first semester onward; it involved the entire faculty as well as field supervisors in a process of collaborative learning; and it was based on the clinical pastoral education model.

Despite the value of the program to many students, it became clear by 1995 that it was flawed. For one thing, there was not enough faculty ownership of it. Several generations of faculty had joined the program without necessarily sharing the vision or enthusiasm of those who started it. One irritant was that supervised ministry assignments demanded a great deal of work from faculty, yet were considered an extra activity, over and above the regular teaching load.

Furthermore, the program was based on a model of ministry that was more psychological than theological, and it addressed individuals more than communities. It also, unwittingly, tended to foster an entrepreneurial understanding of ministry rather than one that perceives ministry as an articulation of discipleship within the community of the church. When functioning well, supervised ministry served as a

dose of interpersonal learning. When not working well, the program revealed how disjointed a Candler education could be.

Finally, the faculty came to see that the frequently expressed desire for “more spirituality” among students was not a faddish craving for esoteric lore, but a deep hunger for a process of personal formation at the heart of professional education.

Before initiating any major curricular reform, Candler’s faculty decided to engage a lengthy process of discernment through a three-year faculty conversation. Each year the faculty retreat set a theme that was developed in discussions held before regular faculty meetings. These focused on changes that had occurred over the past three decades in culture, church and educational practices. The conversations prepared the way for two years of work by a faculty committee that ended with a proposal—and a faculty consensus—that theological education at Candler should be contextual in all aspects. Making education contextual means recognizing that 1) theology involves responding to the living God in diverse human situations; 2) theology involves specific practices as much as it does religious concepts and experiences; and 3) theological education requires attention to personal formation and not simply the learning of specialized lore and skills.

We wanted to retain some elements of the previous model: the work in small groups, the participation by the entire faculty, and the collaboration between faculty and people active in parish and other forms of ministry. We wanted to strengthen the program in three ways: first, by putting more focus on the community or congregation than on the individual; second, by giving more attention to formation in discipleship; third, by showing greater commitment to thinking theologically within specific social contexts. Since none of us had actually done these things ourselves, any program we designed would have to educate faculty as well as students.

A final goal was to find ways to enhance the Wesleyan character of theological education at our traditionally Methodist school, which has an increasingly ecumenical student body and a decreasingly Methodist faculty. The retirement of distinguished senior faculty who embodied that Wesleyan spirit, together with the difficulty of replacing them with persons of similar outlook, has made the faculty appreciate the fragility—among faculty as well as students—of the Methodist tradition with which we have been entrusted.

The contextual education committee spent a full year drafting a proposal, which then underwent revisions for another full year in consultation with the faculty. Attention turned to hiring a director of contextual education who could both administer and energetically contribute to the faculty's emerging vision of contextual theology. The same intensive process of discernment and discussion that has characterized the development of the program over the past five years will certainly continue, for Candler's faculty has come to recognize that this process is itself an ingredient in the formation of a faculty that is a community of theological discourse. We have found that shared discussion of pedagogy is not a secondary diversion but, rather, the heart of the matter.

The first-year program, Contextual Education I, began in the fall of 1998, and (after more faculty consultation) the second part, Contextual Education II, started in the fall of 1999. The first two stages of a three-stage process are under way.

We can report, then, that despite claims to the contrary, theological faculties can change! The most fundamental change has been to move the contextual education sequence to the heart of the theological curriculum for all M.Div. students. The first step in this move was to count faculty participation in contextual education as a full course, one of the four offered yearly by each faculty member. This was a significant and expensive decision, for it reduces the total number of courses the faculty can offer.

The benefits of this step have also been significant. First, by means of more honest bookkeeping, it makes clear the cost of the commitment that the previous Supervised Ministry program had kept hidden. More significant, it has encouraged faculty to treat contextual education as a "real course" with substantial content—syllabi, readings, reflective pedagogical practices. The previous program depended heavily on the "verbatim" submitted by students as the basis for "reflection on ministerial experience." Paradoxically, a commitment to more formal content creates another tension, as faculty members struggle to balance modes of learning from reading and discussion and the sort of theological reflection on practice and experience that the new program seeks to inculcate.

Students are part of the formal contextual education sequence for the first two years of their three-year M.Div. sequence. Their first-year orientation begins the process. Students work in small groups as they engage the contexts of the school of theology, Emory University and the city of Atlanta. They devote a full day to visiting

social ministry sites within the city; upon their return, students form new groups to construct symbolic maps of Atlanta that reflect their perceptions of the city. These maps are offered at the altar in the final worship service at orientation. Then groups are formed that will last for the academic year, each made up of ten students, a faculty member, and a teaching supervisor closely associated with the social ministry that the students will later serve.

In the first ten weeks of the semester, the context for the group's theological reflection is the school itself. The reasoning here is that students have enough transitions to manage in their first weeks without plunging into a challenging ministry. In addition, the faculty wants to make two important points. The first is that discipleship precedes and provides the premise for ministry: formation as disciples within groups is therefore a necessary preparation for their ministry. The second point is that the study of theology is itself a practice of faith that ought not to be taken for granted but entered into deliberately.

Group sessions during these weeks are structured by John Wesley's "Six Ordinary Means of Grace." Groups engage in and reflect on the basic Christian practices of hospitality, conference, searching the scripture, communion, prayer and fasting. Their reflections are guided by selected readings and are given shape by the experiences of the participants in their first weeks of theological education. The session on "hospitality," for example, enables students to welcome each other in all their diversity, as well as to reflect on the ways in which hospitality is and is not present within Candler, Emory University and the city of Atlanta.

This reflection is enriched by readings from scripture (for example, 3 John; Luke 10:38-42; 15:1-32) and theological writers such as Henri Nouwen and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The reflection is given concreteness and specificity ("context") by being embodied by the practices of this specific group of students, who are responsible to each other for the success of the process.

In the eighth week students are introduced to their sites for ministry. By the end of the first semester, they have begun to work four hours a week in one of Atlanta's diverse social ministries addressing the basic human needs of the poor and homeless, the physically and emotionally sick, the elderly and the very young. Once groups have begun this work, group learning progressively focuses on the theological implications of the practices of ministry.

In order to provide a sense of cohesion to the first-year class, and in order to generate a wider theological conversation involving all students and faculty in Contextual Education I, plenary sessions are interspersed with the weekly small group meetings. All students, faculty and supervisors gather for a public presentation or performance (the first semester ends with a jazz vespers) preceding the small-group discussions. Our theme in 1998-1999 was "Urban Christianity," and the plenaries included sessions on the first urban Christians, the city of Atlanta, patterns of wealth and marginalization in the metropolis, and forms of church in the city. In the second semester, plenary sessions focus on the personal and professional qualities of the minister.

Contextual Education II combines the same features of small-group learning and plenaries. Now, however, students carry out their ministry in ecclesial settings. Many are in traditional parishes, though our definition of ecclesial includes campus ministry and other forms of ministry. Students are closely supervised in each site, and have the additional support of lay teams formed in each site for the express purpose of helping student ministers.

In this second year, learning groups are expected to take more responsibility for their theological growth. Groups meet each week with a teaching supervisor, and throughout the year a faculty member consults with two learning groups. In the course of the year, students gain significant experience in liturgical leadership, teaching, preaching, pastoral care and congregational mission. At the end of each semester over the first two years, evaluation is particularly intensive: students do peer evaluations, and in turn receive formal evaluations from supervisors and faculty. In the second year, evaluations from site supervisors and lay teams add to the students' learning.

In their third year of the M.Div. program, students can continue their contextual education through a variety of internships, including clinical pastoral education, campus ministry and Christian education, as well as in other ecclesial settings in the U.S and abroad.

The greatest stress created by the new program is on the rest of the curriculum. We have placed an ambitious and expensive program at the heart of theological education at the same time that a concern for proving a solid academic preparation has led the faculty to stress a core curriculum. These two emphases are now pushing against each other like tectonic plates. The next step for the faculty is to

assess the rest of the curriculum to see how it might serve the goal of a thoroughly contextual education. We anticipate a similar period of planning, experimentation and testing—and similar pains of adjustment as we learn to teach in ways none of us was taught.

In a creative project, lessons are learned from the very process of implementation. Some aspects of the new program are going well, while others need attention. At least six major aspects concern us now.

1) Conceptualization: Faculty need to work constantly on a shared vision. Is contextual education one large class with 16 colloquies attached, or is it 16 loosely coordinated classes? Faculty also struggle with the need to focus on their individual sections while working collaboratively within a common framework that ensures a consistent and fair program for all participants.

2) Readings: No one doubts that reading texts is essential for the program, but few if any of us know how to combine reflection on practice with discussions of readings. How do we combine a search for wisdom with critical inquiry? At the pedestrian level (but a critical level for morale in a young program), we struggle with finding appropriate assigned readings, with how and when to assign them while also asking students to reflect on practices. We are learning that a structured approach with a short, focused reading that is completed prior to each session works best.

3) Integration: This is the perennial theory/praxis issue. We are trying to learn not only how classical theology can shape understandings of ministry, but also how the practices of the Christian life and ministry give rise to theological wisdom. None of us is already skilled at this. Faculty and students are, painfully and awkwardly, learning together. Theological synthesis is attained slowly. When students recognize the inherent relationships among the readings, the practices of ministry, and learnings from other courses as well, we consider the program a success.

4) Time management: The weekly two-hour group session passes quickly. Covering the readings, ministry practices, and the inevitable issues of group dynamics within this time frame is difficult. Planning ahead by instructors and students helps, as does weekly monitoring and flexibility. We are finding that time allotments vary weekly, and it will take more experience to discover the instinctive rhythms that will make this pedagogy work smoothly.

5) Context: The notion of context is endlessly complex, with each student, ministry site and learning group representing multiple combinations of contexts. Learning to learn this way requires a high degree of competency, creativity and patience. We find that a useful way to engage the issue is to make the difficulties of context a theme in the discussions.

6) Community: At its best, the reflection seminar can provide a community of colleagues with whom learning takes place, as well as a community of mutual care and responsibility. Creating community with persons who are diverse in background, age, experience, perception and capability is extraordinarily challenging. But this is, after all, what it means to minister within the church. No learning for Candler students can equal in importance the suffering and joy of learning together in this way.

This program is hard work for all participants, much harder than the giving and hearing of lectures. The entire Candler community is profoundly challenged by the task. Some faculty and some students struggle. But we are proud to have made the effort to translate Candler's heritage of ministerial education to a new generation.

Some signs tell us that the investment of time and energy is worthwhile. A sense of excitement about ministry, the way discussions of practice find their way into other classes, the degree to which other courses are newly sensitive to context, the increasing ability of students to think theologically—all these tell us that something good is under way, as does the sometimes profound sense of collegiality and support experienced in the reflection seminars. As we continue to assess and develop the program, we are discovering an excitement that has much less to do with innovative pedagogy than with the fact that we are, in truth, acting and thinking together as Christians.