

## Persuasive Pastoral Leaders: Epistemological Issues in DMin Projects

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The art of persuasion is a competency rooted in awareness of what counts as knowledge. Although skepticism over the value of theological education and challenges to the authority of pastoral leaders are not new, they are certainly dynamic factors today. The decline of pastoral authority in the public sphere intersects with complex epistemological issues. Perhaps the extent to which our Doctor of Ministry (DMin) programs shape the future of congregational life depends partly on our epistemology. My argument is that DMin projects benefit from epistemological tools suggested by philosopher Karl Popper, such as considering the limits of induction, including falsifiability in the research design, and attending to the issue of demarcation.<sup>1</sup> These reflections on enhancing DMin education with these tools are offered to strengthen theological education in service of effective, persuasive pastoral leadership.

Because pastoral leadership is a public profession, it behooves us to reflect carefully on how we evaluate the claims of knowledge in DMin projects. As educators in seminaries and divinity schools, we may spend most our time talking to others who work, study, and learn in theological education. But, the majority of lay persons educated in the United States are schooled in hard sciences or social sciences that are often skeptical of both the relevance and the legitimacy of theological education. In order for DMin programs to play an important role in translating the benefits of theological education in comprehensible and persuasive ways, our students need competency in articulating what counts as knowledge. We need to draw collaboratively on resources from philosophy, social science, and other disciplines to enhance theological education. This article demonstrates one possible example utilizing Karl Popper's work to fortify the persuasive power of DMin education.

After reviewing dozens of DMin project reports from a wide variety of schools across the United States, I found that many of the projects drew conclusions based on unexamined assumptions. Like some students in my own program, many students have not adequately considered how the design of their project yields the conclusions they claim to have demonstrated. For example, a student might claim they have identified a method or program for success in some aspect of ministry without adequately examining or explaining their criteria for what they call success. In response to the problem of students overgeneralizing their findings, I think that DMin programs often need greater emphasis on questions of epistemology in project design. The epistemology of philosopher Karl Popper offers helpful tools for DMin project methodology. Although often accused of being a positivist, Popper was primarily concerned with

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Popper, *In Search of a Better World: Lectures and Essays from Thirty Years* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

defending against relativism.<sup>2</sup> For example, Karl Popper wrestled with two problems of the theory of knowledge: the problem of induction and the problem of demarcation.<sup>3</sup>

Popper's insights about the problem of induction are helpful in methodology for DMin project design. Students need to consider the limits of induction when planning how their anticipated conclusions will result from their methods. Induction is the movement from particular observations to a universal claim. For example, a student might begin with a hunch based on observation such as: All growing churches have websites. The student might then observe 100 growing churches and discover that each of them had a website. Then the student might argue that if a church wants to grow, it needs a website. Does this mean that the student has actually added to the fund of knowledge about ministry? Regardless of how creative or dogmatic the student is in asserting that she has discovered that all growing churches have websites, she has not. This would be an example of overgeneralizing from the evidence, and would illustrate the problem of claiming to have established a truth by failing to understand the problem of induction.

Following Hume, Popper noted that causality can never be observed. We observe constant conjunction of certain phenomena, and we assume the future will be like the past. We observe the church creating a website and the congregation growing. But, we can't observe the causal connection between these two things. A causal connection is a theory that can never be empirically verified. This has significance for DMin research because students need to understand the limits of knowledge when they try to theorize from their experience as pastors or researchers. Their projects should have relevance beyond their own particular location. But, students should take care not to overgeneralize the results of their study. Understanding the limits of induction requires that we be circumspect about suggesting that we have generated transferable knowledge. We are more persuasive when we do not overreach claims about the exact causal connections, despite the pressure to generate formulaic methods for successful ministry.

Ironically, the best way to add to the fund of knowledge about ministry may be to prove that a theory is false. If I observe even one growing church that does not have a website, I can reasonably say: I have discovered that I was wrong, not all growing churches have websites. Although this example sounds trivial, it illustrates the tendency of many projects to overgeneralize conclusions and overlook additional variables that should be considered. For this reason, Popper claimed that the best way to expand knowledge is to use the tool of falsifiability. Use intuition and observation to explore a problem, then come up with a bold, imaginative theory, and then test that theory. For instance, a student may think that attending Interim Ministry Training leads to longer pastoral service. The student can document numerous cases where this seems to be evident. Still, the student can't prove it is true.

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<sup>2</sup> Popper denied being a positivist. He was interested in "the objectively critical rational grounds for preferring one theory to another, in the search for truth." Popper, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Popper, *In Search of a Better World: Lectures and Essays from Thirty Years*.

We need to recognize the limits that preclude the ability to completely prove our theories. However, our theories can be falsified by one counter example.<sup>4</sup> If students can find one empirical observation that runs counter to the theory, then they are able to demonstrate that the theory is false. If I can find one case where Interim Ministry Training did not lead to longer pastoral service, I have discovered that my theory was false. Of course, I can modify my theory to draw more humble conclusions. It could still be persuasive to argue that often Interim Ministry Training leads to longer pastoral service, and this deserves further study. Therefore, most DMin projects will make a greater contribution by showing that certain theories are false rather than by seeking to demonstrate conclusively that their theory is true. I have found that students need reassurance that their projects can be successful and their ability to earn the doctorate is not in jeopardy even if the conclusion of the project does not generate the results they had theorized. When students over-generalize, they are less respectable conversation partners and lose credibility. One corrective is to use the tool of falsifiability. In addition to recommending falsifiability as an antidote to the problem of induction, Karl Popper explores a second epistemological problem.

The problem of demarcation concerns the issue of drawing a distinction between questions of fact and questions of value. Sometimes this division is described as a distinction between empirical claims that can be tested through sensory experience or observation versus normative claims that cannot be verified or falsified empirically. This is also a demarcation between what Popper called science versus other types of knowledge. This distinction is crucial for any research methodology. To illustrate this problem, consider how popular books proposing the latest techniques and programs for church growth, leadership, or successful ministry often claim to expand knowledge about best practices without evidence to substantiate these claims. When evidence is offered, it often mixes empirical and normative claims. Over-generalizing and universalizing conclusions without adequate supporting evidence is common. Unfortunately, this popular style of writing about church growth is often the model familiar to pastors and congregations. So, when it comes time to write a DMin project, these are the types of studies that often influence DMin students. If theological education is to have persuasive power in both the realms of church and society, DMin students must uncover, examine, and take responsibility for their normative assumptions.

For example, a DMin student's project might include designing and implementing a series of workshops to help youth develop skills for leading successful fund-raisers. The student might create and lead the workshops. The youth who participated might report that they were more successful and comfortable leading fund-raisers after participating. Therefore, the student might conclude that they can share a successful method for leading fund-raisers in youth ministry programs. The tool of demarcation could strengthen the project by asking the student to consider carefully questions such as: which of your conclusions can be confirmed with evidence that anyone could observe? More importantly, what normative claims are embedded in the model? Consider what you mean by a "successful fund-raiser." If the youth raise lots of money selling plastic junk nobody really needs and that has a negative impact on the environment, is that still a

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Popper, *Two Fundamental Problems of the Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.

success? Demarcation requires that we sort out different types of conclusions. First, the student might consider whether or not there is a change at all as a result of the workshop. Since the student will remember the limits of induction and dynamic of falsifiability, the student will be circumspect without overgeneralizing claims about any change being caused by the workshops as opposed to other variables. Second, the student will consider and explain the criteria used in determining whether or not any change is actually progress.

These epistemological tools highlight significant issues related to the ways that project research design builds in assessment or evaluation of the project. The following example is typical of DMin projects from other schools as well as our own program. After completion of the project report, DMin students are asked how they evaluated their act of ministry. One student explained that he conducted a short survey asking youth in his congregation if they were more comfortable leading fund-raisers after they participated in the workshops he led. He discovered that most youth reported feeling more successful as fund-raisers after participating in the workshops. This assessment design fails to take into account the researcher distortion and power/authority issues of clergy dual relationships. People tend to give the response they think you want, especially if you are their pastor. The methods for evaluating the project should genuinely provide many opportunities for participants to contest or critique the project. Students may be afraid that they won't successfully complete the degree unless they get positive results, meaning affirmation of the assumptions they began with. But, students need to understand that discovering that some effort does not work can be a great success.

I am incorporating more teaching about Karl Popper's epistemological tools in the research methodology courses in our DMin curriculum in hopes of improving outcomes for our project reports. Even a cursory reading of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) degree program standards shows an expectation that DMin programs will expand a base of knowledge. "New knowledge about the practice of ministry" is listed as one of the primary goals of the program that an institution should adopt.<sup>5</sup> DMin students are expected to write a project report or thesis that will have value to others. The project should have "potential for application in other contexts of ministry."<sup>6</sup> In order to theorize or theologize about her ministerial experience, a pastor must specify the ways her learning can benefit others. This requires reflection on the theory of knowledge and its relationship to public claims about what we can know. Is the fund of knowledge about ministerial leadership increasing or not? I suspect that some of the best DMin projects do expand knowledge of the practice of ministry (as ATS standards suggest), but perhaps not in ways that are easily transferable to other ministry settings.

As we consider the future of DMin education, these epistemological questions are worth pondering. Do we know any more about the practice of ministry now than we did in ancient times? I suspect we do not have more knowledge with persuasive power regarding best practices

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<sup>5</sup> ATS Degree Program Standards E.2.1.4. Accessed 9/12/15. <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/accrediting/documents/degree-program-standards.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> ATS Degree Program Standards E.2.4. Accessed 9/12/15. <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/accrediting/documents/degree-program-standards.pdf>

for ministry now than we did in any previous period of history. Perhaps we do have an expanding pool of knowledge about false or destructive forms of ministry, although that question invites conversation. However, at the same time, if I ask myself whether or not I know more about the practice of ministry now than I did in 1984 when I was a seminary student, I would answer yes, I do. So, maybe knowledge about the practice of ministry is more like an art than like a science with a pool of shared knowledge. For example, when a scientist says, “I discovered a new virus never documented before,” that scientist has an expectation that others will now be able to see the virus, too. However, when a dancer says, “I was able to execute a leap that I had never accomplished before,” we don’t expect that this helps others achieve that move. If ministry is more like an art than a science, then what does it mean to add to the fund of knowledge about the practice of ministry?

Discovering what we don’t know can lead to authenticity and improved pastoral leadership. Some of the most useful and effective DMin projects may be those that result in increased self-awareness of the limits of knowledge, resulting in increased humility. The dogmatic, doctrinaire arrogance of some pastoral leaders is often a characteristic that repels rather than persuades. Some of our most intelligent neighbors would be more likely to find affinity in congregations if pastors were more circumspect in their methods and claims about what they know. True openness to shared learning, ecumenical collaboration, and humility about theological claims could be the fruit of pastoral learning based on greater attention to epistemological issues. In other words, unmasking our presuppositions, identifying the limitations of our knowledge, and discovering that we were wrong about our theory can improve both our pastoral ministry and our DMin programs.

## References

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