

Transforming Theological Education A Practical Handbook for Integrative Learning

Perry Shaw

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Dr. Perry Shaw suggests in the preface of his *Transforming Theological Education* that a common outcome of seminary preparation is the transformation of students passionate for ministry into students passionate for academia “with little idea how to empower the church and often with no genuine desire to do so,” charging the typical western ministerial curriculum with “fragmentation and irrelevance” (vii). We might be tempted to dismiss his criticism as anti-intellectual hyperbole, yet Shaw follows with a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, documented, field-tested and practical response to the challenges facing those theological schools whose mission is to prepare women and men for leadership in a rapidly changing church landscape.

Shaw, a native of Australia, holds an Ed.D. from Singapore’s Asia Graduate School of Theology (Alliance) and also earned degrees in education and New Testament, as well as pastoral studies, actuarial studies, mathematics, sociology and developmental psychology from schools including the University of South Wales in Sydney, and Princeton Theological Seminary in the United States, much of which he brings to bear within this text. He wrote this handbook while serving as Academic Dean at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Beirut, Lebanon, where he currently serves as professor of Education and director of its Educational Ministries Resource Center. The handbook is the outcome of a curriculum and pedagogical review and redesign - actually an academic culture shift - led over a seven-year timeframe, intended to implement a curriculum built on “the basic premise that genuine formation of faithful men and women takes place only when multidimensional learning is intentionally designed and incorporated.” (4).

This missionary critique and response to theological formation is clearly relevant to the situation in North American theological education. High-profile mergers of long-standing seminaries, declining enrollments in mainstay degree programs, predictions of significant and numerous closures, and changing student demographics exist alongside significant shifts in the shape and vitality of the Christian Church in the United States and Canada. In the face of such realities, Shaw, quoting constructive theologian Edward Farley, questions if “even a threat to institutional survival is power enough to offset a school’s structural resistance to reform” (18).

While demographic trends portend continuing decline for the Church as we know it in the West, movements such as the missional-ecclesial renaissance in the United Kingdom and

the United States suggest that the seminaries that will survive to help a new church are those that prepare pastors and leaders for the church that is to be rather than the church that was and is. Shaw's program provides one way forward.

The author carries the reader through the process, or what Shaw calls a "pilgrimage," with each chapter providing various exercises for planners to engage, and myriad appendices comprising cases, questionnaires, summaries, syllabi and rubrics to shape the work of curriculum shift.

Throughout the text, Shaw draws upon various researchers and practitioners that informed the review, design and implementation of ABTS' new curriculum. Citing Steven De Gruchy of South Africa, he compares the challenges of theological education with that of medical education. Patients are served well when health professional are trained by paying attention to clinical practice, pharmaceutical advances and technical discoveries, De Gruchy claims. "By contrast, theological education often proceeds on the basis that we have learnt nothing new about the Christian faith in the last century. ... (T)he truth is that missional practice provides an ongoing contextual laboratory for theological reflection. ... Our commitment to life, and to being on the cutting edge of responding to life, should be as profound as that of medical educators." (51).

Shaw rejects an objectivist epistemology rooted in Greek philosophy and enlightenment thinking that he sees as dominant in theological education. In this model, objects of knowledge flow in one direction from teacher to student, with protections along the way to suppress subjectivity. What is needed to transform the theological preparation of church leadership, he writes, is a "rediscovery of the patterns of holistic leadership evident in the Scriptures" (68). Guided by this exegesis of the biblical text, Shaw draws upon the work of educational psychologists Benjamin Bloom and David Krathwohl, calling for a move away from the centrality of cognitive learning toward a multidimensional taxonomy. This "ABCD" of learning involves the *affective*, which shapes values, attitudes, emotions and motivations; the *behavioural*, which pays attention to action and experience; the *cognitive*, moving past mere transmission toward the development of critical thinking; and the *dispositional*, a balance of learning to form the habitus of ecclesial leadership that moves beyond mere technique.

Shaw also warns planners to pay attention to the education that is concealed by curricular choices, citing research about the hidden training that occurs when particular topics and pedagogies are employed. For example, when cognitive learning is prioritized, this primacy is implicitly transferred to ministerial formation, "so that those with information rather than those who are examples of a godly life are likely to be selected for leadership roles in the local church" (82). Likewise the "null curriculum" comprises the messages that are conveyed by decisions on what topics to emphasize or deemphasize, translating into similar strengths and weaknesses within the practice of ministry.

While the first half of the book addresses such educational concerns in the context of the institution of the seminary, the second part of the text works to provide items for professors' toolboxes, with chapters on course design, lesson planning, cultural literacy

and assessment. In a chapter on “Question Design for Deep Learning,” Shaw encourages teachers to move beyond questions that prioritize “lower-order cognitive learning” recognizing the temptations of ease and reward available for the instructor using such method. Shaw used a variety of examples, exercises and case studies to help professors move students through deeper cognitive reflection. “The level of holistic deep learning that can take place is far more likely to lead to the sort of life transformation that all responsible theological educators long to see in emerging Christian leaders” (215).

While Shaw’s handbook is written for those planning curriculums for the training of church leaders largely through master’s programs, his insights are certainly relevant to directors and professors engaged in Doctor of Ministry education, who have long lived in the world of the integration of critical theological reflection, and practical and active ministry. Indeed DMin practitioners can find in this text confirmation of the professional doctoral model and the increasing relevance of DMin pedagogy for the wider theological education effort.

In his presentation of material, Shaw works to bring together theological reflection and educational philosophy, being diligent in drawing in relevant social-scientific sources. He also works to address the political and logistical challenges that his suggested pedagogical shifts entail. Those challenges are real and numerous and the text would benefit from further critical reflection on how those may be engaged effectively and affectively. In addition, a more critical and nuanced discussion of the place of the traditional divisions of theological education, and theology’s location as an academic discipline would be helpful, especially for seminaries that see their role as training both professional ministers and theological scholars.

While Shaw’s thoughtful proposal is one among many offered to those who struggle with how to shape theological education for new realities, its reliance on research, its wrestling with the complexities of reform, and its rootedness in reality make it an essential resource for those charged with educating new generations of church leaders.