

Theological Education: What does this Mean? What's That?

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Abstract

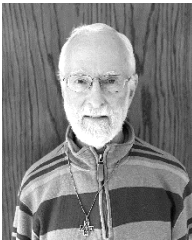
The two basic questions in Luther's Small Catechism—*What does this mean? What is that?*—frame this exploration of the significance of the words “theological” and “education.” In the field of education, various professional resources invite personal reflection, such as David Kolb's learning cycle and Bloom's taxonomy. Thus, this article asks, What are readers' definitions and assumptions for the terms “theological” and “education”? Personal and professional choices regarding course work, the larger picture of a school's curriculum, and the largest picture of what serves mission, are all part of the reflection invited in this article.

Before you continue reading, please consider writing your own definitions or descriptions of these two words:

Theological

Education

An important assumption of this article is that we each already have in hand, or at least in heart and mind, assumptions about and (perhaps unspecified) definitions of these two terms, “theological” and “education.” That is, prior experience with these terms significantly shapes the practice of theological education, and it shapes what we learn from anyone else as we think about these two terms. Hence, exploring our own thinking is an important part of the continuing task of theological education. One writer notes that a theologian could describe oneself as a low anthropologist, that is,



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one who is “curious about other people’s views and attributes beyond willpower and conscious thought. Then they turn the interrogation upon themselves. . . .”¹

Introduction

Perhaps you bypassed the opening exercise. That is understandable. One does not usually begin reading an article by writing part of it. In any case, you are invited here to answer the question, to consider the meaning of the terms and your perspectives on them. This request may sound strange or inappropriate. It may be difficult. For some people, personal learning and thinking styles mean that it is easy to speak or write on a moment’s notice. For others, however, it may take a day or a week to formulate thoughts. You are welcome to return later to that opening task. We learn in different ways.

Whatever your pace or learning style(s), this article intends to enhance the knowledge, attitude, and skills of theological educators and other readers for the shared craft and ministry of theological education in any context. The assignment at the beginning of a university theology course required students to turn in a paper titled “Myself as a Theologian.” Students might well deny that they are theologians, but the paper must show that they have reflected on what “theologian” means. To dig deeper and check one’s assumptions is an important part of working together and learning.²

Education

The writing task that opened this article was an introduction to two significant elements of educational theory, which may already be familiar to the reader in some form. The first element is the David Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle. Kolb first published his learning style model in 1984. He names four parts: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation.³ Perhaps you can recognize all four parts in your reading of this article:

1. You have months or years of concrete experience related to theological education.
2. You paused to reflect, to review your experience.
3. You wrote, offering some abstract conceptualization and perhaps some conclusions from your reflections on your experience.
4. Even now as you read you might be experimenting, testing your definitions or descriptions.

It is appropriate to recognize that such experiential learning has long been part of theological education. As the story is told, theological education in the seminary format is a product of sixteenth century Europe. For how many centuries before that, and in how many other settings down to the present day, has theological education been primarily apprenticeship and mentoring? There was Paul with Timothy, and there was Yale University before the first gift of books. Martin Luther offered his catechisms for theological education, the Small Catechism for the family and school and the Large Catechism for preachers. In particular, the German Small Catechism question, “What’s that?” reflects the full-bodied, eager exploration of a small child.

A second major educational theory underlying the opening exercise is Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning. Beginning with the leadership of Dr. Benjamin Bloom in 1956, some educational theorists have accented three domains or types of learning. These can be called cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Similar terms which have perhaps been used in lesson or lecture planning are "knowledge," "attitude," and "skills." More concretely, one can say that whole-person engagement in learning involves head, heart, and hands. Although scholars early in this century have adjusted or adapted Bloom's terms, especially in terms of the cognitive domain, the essential concept remains: the whole person engaged in learning.⁴ As with Kolb's Cycle, this concept is a proposal for experiential education.⁵

At this point, some will think of an educational saying often attributed to Confucius: "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand." The substance of the saying is perhaps better attributed to Xunzi.⁶ Whatever the source, this comment can move us to keep *doing* in theological education in order to facilitate better understanding, just as the writing of definitions or descriptions at the beginning of this article was an example of "*doing*."

An experiential understanding of education, that is, learning recognized as cognitive, affective, and psychomotor, can be discerned in the Christian Scriptures. Paul did not simply write doctrinal epistles and add a signature. The cognitive content was intended for living: "Therefore . . . offer your bodies as living sacrifices" (Rom 12:1). This is also experiential learning: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

The questions in the title of this article reflect this same attention to experience. They are questions from Luther's Small Catechism. From the Latin edition, intended for school use, one can see the cognitive at work: *What does this mean?* How much "theological education" at the confirmation level has aimed to explore this question? From the German version for the family, as noted above, the question has the ring of an inquisitive two-year-old, whole heart and hands involved, "whole-personly" engaging with the materials of that little book: *What's that?*

The preceding paragraphs were intended to engage you in both Kolb's cycle and Bloom's taxonomy. It should be acknowledged that such engagement may not be common in theological education and other venues for higher education. A professor's courteous comment to a new ThD student was clear: "In your assignments you should provide scholarly study, not personal comment." Of course, theological education should involve the cognitive, careful research, clearly articulated arguments. Still, personal engagement is happening—heart if not hands involved, acknowledged or not. One's personal engagement with material should be deeply respected. And this respect must be evident from professor to students, students to professor, and students to one another. The classroom, the chapel, the field education location, and the conversation at the tea house or coffee shop must be grounded in courtesy and safety.

Theological

The references above to Romans and Psalms can further transition us to the other term I explore in this article, "Theological." What is at stake when we refer to something as "theological"? What is our definition for "Theology"—a "definition that

goes beyond the self-evident ‘reasoned articulation about God.’”⁷ Virtually in one breath Paul said “one god” and “many gods” (1 Cor 8:4–6). If your theological education practice is in Hong Kong, it may be that as many as one hundred local gods are “present,” or is it just one? “[F]rom ancient records dating back many thousands of years, there have always been two Chinese concepts of the Ultimate, one scholarly and impersonal, the other popular and theistic.”⁸ And what can be understood from the English rendering of the Cantonese, “the god”? This same rendering apparently applies in Arabic, whether one is practicing Islam or Christianity: The God. *What does “theo” mean? What is “theo”?* The detailed definitions within the volumes of the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament only begin the conversation.

And what of the second half of theology, “logos”? One could start with the significance of the Hebrew, *dabar*. Then what of the Greek, *logos*? Does the Chinese *dao* fit also in this conversation? When we announce that we are doing theology, when we are doing the God-Word, *what does this mean? What is this?* Luther answers this question in the Longer Preface to his Large Catechism. In a great glissando he notes, “For this reason alone you should eagerly read, recite, ponder and practice the Catechism, . . . for [the devil] cannot bear to hear God’s Word. God’s Word is not like some empty tale . . . but as St. Paul says in Rom. 1:16, it is ‘the power of God,’ indeed, the power of God which burns the devil and gives us immeasurable strength, comfort, and help.”⁹ Again, please hear permission that if your personal learning styles favor precision and definition, such a sweeping view from Luther may not be helpful: Catechism—Word—Power. There is a time and place for precision in theology: what did a particular term mean in its Hebrew or Greek, German, or Chinese context? But then, what does it mean when the Word made flesh says, “I am the truth.” He did not say, “I am a theological educator who has truths for you.” He said, “I am the truth.” What does it mean to teach *Him*? To do so not only cognitively, but personally?

In a similar vein, one theologian has discussed the significance of the Genesis creation narratives this way:

The biblical statement about the creation of the heavens and the earth is a statement about God and our relationship to him. . . . [To highlight the] fixation on how to interpret the factual truth of these is to miss the point. ‘In the disagreement over the details we lose the very thing that the writer inspired by the Holy Spirit wants to communicate. . . . This is not a passage about the ‘how’ of creation, or even primarily about the ‘why’ of creation. Rather it is a passage about the ‘who’ of creation.’¹⁰

Perhaps the point of experiential theology can be described in this way:

True theology is soteriology. In other words, true theology is not primarily concerned about God’s or even Christ’s being in the abstract, but about Christ’s blessings for sinful human beings. . . . The fullest knowledge of God is not to be found in his essential attributes, but in the place of his apparent weakness—the cross. It is

this condescension that comforts the heart, in contrast to contemplating the naked majesty of God . . .¹¹

A point at the end of the discussion of educational theory is worth repeating here. In theology as in education, to establish and maintain a climate of safety is important. This does not mean that such a relationship is all sweetness and light. The safe relationship with God includes permission to say, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!”—and that relationship was practiced in Israel a thousand years before Jesus spoke truly on the cross. How much more significant, then, is this relationship for us now in Christ? We read in Romans 3 that God in Christ has freely given us the right relationship. We can therefore practice it with one another.

Engagement

At this point, educational theory and theological truth can be seen to meet one another. In both, not just knowledge matters, but also personal engagement, personal attitude, and skills.

This concern for engagement, for *fides qua* joining *fides quae*, can be noted this way: “Both [of Melancthon’s catechisms] not only presented theological tenets common to the Wittenberg Reformation but also advanced the Protestant concept of vocation. . . .”¹² So also, “Both subjective and objective usages of the term faith are appropriate but quite different. The subjective meaning refers to the experiences of the one who believes . . . Objective refers to what we believe.”¹³

If theology and education involve engagement—with God in Christ and with the whole of creation—what might be the implications for the future for seminaries and all levels and forms of Christian and theological education? There are biblical models. They include significant critique: Ezekiel speaks harsh words about Israel and about her enemies; Jesus calls the Pharisees whitewashed sepulchres. Theological education in Scripture includes smashed pots and smelly clothes, and Jesus walking arm in arm, friend to friend with people.

In these biblical models, what is essential? The news must be good. Perhaps theological education should abandon the word “Gospel.” It is a religious word, perhaps too routine for many believers and too complicated for unbelievers. The news of Jesus is Good News. It is News, and it is Good. Perhaps instead of “Gospel” or even “Good News,” for engaging theological education and for mission, one could say and do “beautiful things.” Yes, in our classrooms and in our evangelizing, let us speak and do beautiful things.

To be sure, in terms of educational theory, there must be attention in theological education to personal relationships and affective learning. This includes the reality that if we are working with Good News, some other news must be bad. If there is honor from God, or life, then there must also be shame and death at work among those of us in theological education. Both inside and outside scholarly settings, can we create safe relationships in which bad news can be spoken and good news risked? Once, when I expressed sympathy for people who don’t wish to confront their bad news by means of confession, a colleague politely rebuked me: “It’s not the confession that’s the problem; it’s the absolution. We are afraid of being loved that much.” Are those of us

in the field of education, theological education in particular, prepared to engage, discern, and even to hear *love*?¹⁴

Personal engagement in theological education can be described in different words: “First, doctrinal assertions have a doxological function, as they help Christians fulfill the First Petition of the Lord’s Prayer.”¹⁵ What place have prayer and praise, the Psalms and song in theological education curriculum?¹⁶ Frustrated in a year-long internship, an intern lamented, “These church leaders aren’t doing what I’m telling them.” Personal engagement? The intern might want to do more than *tell*. In view of Article VI of the Augsburg Confession, which states that justifying faith is bound to produce good works, if good works are not appearing, perhaps the intern needs to ask if justifying faith is actually being heard.

So also one writer asks,

What’s up with equating ‘Bible study’ [and theological education] with knowing God anyway? Wouldn’t it be a horrible thing if we studied the ones we loved instead of bonding in deeper ways by doing things with them? . . . they have names for guys who just study things about a [girl] they like but don’t do anything about it—they’re called bachelors. . . . I can’t think of a single time where Jesus asked His friends to just agree with Him.¹⁷

Teaching and preaching in the personally engaged ways explored in this article is a risky venture. Is safety or “engagement” a covert proclamation of a postmodern world, that you have your truth and I have mine—that my truth, “liberal” or “conservative,” is *the* truth? Our experiences do convey reality, and each of us has a different background. Our backgrounds have shaped the assumptions we bring to theological education, but that does not mean going forward that individual definitions or assumptions are true. It would be foolish not to recognize that both we and our students have already packed our bags with particular knowledge, attitudes, and skills from our pasts. Will we, beginning with ourselves, wisely unpack our bags from time to time so that in the future we listen for the Truth—not identified or equated with our personal truths?

Setting aside personal truths for the Truth is a challenge as we engage in theological education:

In the context of higher education and the life of the mind [the substance of the Lutheran tradition] means that every scholar must always confess that he or she could be wrong. Apart from this confession, there can be no serious life of the mind, for only when we confess that we might be wrong can we engage in the kind of conversation that takes seriously other voices. Further, it is only when we confess that we might be wrong that we are empowered to critically scrutinize our own theories, our own judgments, and our own understandings.¹⁸

Curriculum

This term can be used broadly or narrowly, describing what one has in mind for (theological) education. For example,

1. Particular courses;
2. A program of courses, perhaps the most common meaning;
3. Activity outside of courses: chapel, personal prayer, counseling, encouraging sabbath rest and physical health, etc.;
4. Theological study that is not “higher education,” not an academically shaped earning of degrees¹⁹;
5. In any location for theological education, at any level, what might be the consideration of cultural and personal factors?

Some issues/topics that could surface in any of these contexts include the following:

1. Do we help “students” at whatever level, aiming for pastoral leadership, to consider whose mission it is? For example, “Ministry is carrying out God's mission, not our mission. Ministry is not the pastor's ministry but the carrying out of God's mission in that community. It is valuable when a pastor sees his role as shepherding the members of a church to be engaged with carrying out God's mission and not simply letting it be . . . only [the] pastor doing the work.”²⁰
2. Consider education in church music ministry, through years of growing skills and service: “It is not the university degree that defines an expert in this profession [of church music], but rather it is the musical talent and the heart of faith that the professional brings to the task.”²¹
3. How do our efforts at theological education compare with Paul's work? “Paul continued to teach daily at his new location, Luke reports, *for two years*. As a result of this program of theological education, “all who lived in Asia . . . heard the word of the Lord.”²²
4. What would theological education look like, and why would it look that way, among the Tausug? They “are Sunni Muslims (98%) but they have also retained many pre-Islamic religious beliefs and rituals. Their world is full of spirits that influence their daily lives, such as causing sickness or good fortune.”²³
5. How would you design theological education, at all levels, in Hong Kong? “Many Christian schools and churches in Hong Kong . . . have long used Scripture to justify Confucian teaching—even when those teachings have led to heretical conclusions. Few examine the difference between Christian instruction to honor parents and traditional Chinese filial piety.”²⁴
6. In all the theological contexts/curricula, what *doing* is possible? Small group discussions, PowerPoints and videos, role playing, reflective writing?

Conclusion

Perhaps this article is an extension of a “W” with a circle around it. That is, early in my university teaching, seeing that students could use important words but likely not know their depth, I would write, “What do you mean by this?” I wrote this question so often that I began to simply use an encircled “W” next to these important words and explain the practice at the beginning of each course. In one course, around the middle of the term, a student exclaimed, “I get it. When I think about it, it goes deeper.” Yes!

Current studies in education are “rediscovering how profoundly the professor’s inner life (the professor’s identity, integrity, and engagement) colors and shapes the learning encounter.”²⁵ May God bless the theological education journey and all its participants as they explore what these terms “mean” in fully engaged, almost childlike exploration. May we be blessed in our choice to practice theological education in a way that engages knowledge, attitude, and skills, that engages head, heart and hands—always doing so in the context of the Word of grace and Truth, in Jesus’s name.

ENDNOTES

¹ David Zahl, *Low Anthropology: The Unlikely Key to a Gracious View of Others (and Yourself)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2022), 34–35.

² The author remains grateful for a conference that fostered this exploration: Theological Education: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong, November 18–19, 2019.

³ Saul McCleod, “Kolb’s Learning Styles and Experiential Learning Cycle,” *Simply Psychology*, updated February 16, 2023, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html>

⁴ Donald Clark, “Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning Domains,” Big Dog & Little Dog’s Performance Juxtaposition, accessed December 28, 2013, <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/bloom.html>.

⁵ Other engaging educational styles include Service Learning and Brain-Based Learning.

⁶ “Origin of ‘I Hear and I Forget. I See and I Remember. I Do and I Understand.’?” *English Language & Usage*, Stack Exchange, updated February 28, 2019,

<https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/226886/origin-of-i-hear-and-i-forget-i-see-and-i-remember-i-do-and-i-understand>.

⁷ Samuel Nafzger et al., *Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 1.

⁸ John Blofeld, foreword to *Chinese Gods: An Introduction to Chinese Folk Religion*, by Jonathan Chamberlain (Hong Kong: Blacksmith Books, 2009), 15.

⁹ Martin Luther, longer preface to *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 360.

¹⁰ Michael Brownnutt, “Science and Religion,” in *Christian Mind in The Emerging World: Faith Integration in Asian Contexts and Global Perspectives*, ed. Peter Tze Ming Ng, Wing Tai Leung, and Vaughan King Tong Mak (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 263. Here, Brownnutt cites David Wilkinson, *The Message of Creation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 18.

¹¹ Nafzger, 11.

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¹² Matthew Oseka, "Melancthon's Contribution to the Art of Catechesis: A Study of *Catechesis Puerilis*," *Theology Today* 73, no. 3 (October 2016): 275.

¹³ T. A. Droege, *Faith Passages and Patterns* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), as cited by Jeff Cloeter in "A Legacy of Grace" (course paper submitted at Concordia University, Saint Paul, MN, May 1, 2000).

¹⁴ "Vulnerability . . . is the birthplace of love." Zahl, 20.

¹⁵ Nafzger, 22.

¹⁶ In the classroom, I followed the church's liturgical calendar with students, reading a paragraph about the day if it was a festival or commemoration. Once, on February 23rd, I read them something about Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg and then two years later found myself on the road to Ziegenbalg's place of landing and ministry in southern India.

¹⁷ Bob Goff, *Love Does: Discover a Secretly Incredible Life in an Ordinary World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 199.

¹⁸ Richard T. Hughes, "How the Lutheran Worldview Can Sustain the Life of the Mind," *LECNA* (February 1997): 14.

¹⁹ A common assumption in the US at this time is that becoming a pastor means four years of graduate theological education. There are alternatives; for example, a pastor was ordained in Nepal after one year of Bible Training, Neeraj, personal communication, March 2, 2023.

²⁰ Jonathan Breitbarth, personal communication, March 2, 2023.

²¹ Laura Petrie, "An Argument in Defense of the 'Alternate Route' Church Musician," *CrossAccent Journal of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians* 30, no. 3 (Fall/Winter 2022): 32.

²² Douglas Rutt, "Theological Education and Mission," *Lutheran Mission Matters* 28, no. 2 (November 2020): 206.

²³ World Mission Prayer League, "Focus on the Unreached: Largest Muslim People Groups in the Philippines," *Together in Prayer* [newsletter], February 2023, 2.

²⁴ Karen Wong, "'Honoring' Your Father and Mother Isn't Always Biblical," *Christianity Today*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/february-web-only/filial-piety-confucius-chinese-family-honor-father-mother.html>.

²⁵ Diana Chapman Walsh, "The Academic Calling: Creating Spaces for Spirit," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 31, no. 4 (1999): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091389909602696>.