Curriculum Design at Newton College

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Introduction

When, in 1991 I offered part of my long service leave to the Australian Board of Missions, it was decided that I should go to Newton College in Popondetta, primarily to conduct some discussions about curriculum. Although I am not a theological educator, I am an educator for a specific profession – social work. In that capacity, I expected to act as a consultant to the staff of the college.

Although I was well received by the college, the fact was that they had not originated the request for my presence, nor had they planned any curriculum review of their own. My first duty, in this paper, is, therefore, not so much to thank Newton College for its having received me so graciously, but to praise it for having entered so heartily into this project, and having made it its own.

My period in Papua New Guinea stretched from January 7 to April 7, 1991, excepting a period of three weeks in February, when I was an Anglican delegate to the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches. During the period before the WCC Assembly, I had an extensive visit to most of Papua New Guinea, visiting all five of the church's dioceses, and speaking with all its bishops.

In the course of this tour, I had the opportunity to observe much of the life of both the nation and the church. The social problems of Papua New Guinea are notorious, both inside and outside the country. Some of them, particularly those relating to the breakdown of law and order, the abuse of alcohol, the growth of squatter settlements, and the presence of groups in obvious poverty, are examples of what might be expected in growing urban areas. The level of violence appears to be very high, a fact which makes even these familiar urban problems take on increased importance. More disturbing, however, is the observation that the urban problems are invading the rural areas.

This observation supports the view that, despite the appearance of many villages as places of traditional culture, the process of social change is being

experienced everywhere. The villages will inevitably become increasingly like the town. For this reason, the clergy of the future will need to be trained in dealing with urban issues, even while they continue to live in places, which may look as they have always looked, and where subsistence agriculture is still the main support of the people. But there will also be a continuing urban drift. The towns will continue to grow, and more ministry will need to occur in them.

The church is thus being pulled in two directions. There is a need for ongoing indigenisation of the faith, but, at the same time, the culture, into which the faith is to be incorporated, is changing. Secularisation will be part of that change.

I also observed some degree of tension between the expectations of some the older clergy, and what they saw to be the products of Newton College. This tension usually took the form of complaining that the newer clergy lacked discipline. On the surface, this meant that they did not say the Office, or celebrate the Eucharist, in the manner, or with the regularity, of their elders. It also included the suggestion that they did not do as they were told. It is apparent that change, not only in the society, but in the individuals, is obvious, and troubling, to many people. It emphasises the point that the adaptation of the church to a changing environment is not simply a matter of ensuring an appropriate education for aspiring priests. The church itself must incorporate the consequences of that education. This will not always be easy.

One of the major problems in conducting a consultation of any kind is to ensure that, when it is over, those involved will own the results, and begin to implement them. Ensuring this result, involves the interplay of a number of complex variables. The process used must tap, both the interests that the participants are willing to raise, as well as allow for those that they are not willing to raise. Formal and overt questions compete for attention within formal and covert questions.

Before setting out the process of the consultation, it is appropriate to describe the college teaching pattern, as I observed it. The college course consisted of four years, the first two, and the last of which, were undertaken in the college itself. Each student spent the third year attached to a parish, and working under the supervision of the parish priest. This practice, I understand, had its origin in a past time, when there were insufficient resources for the number of students, and represented a reduction in the college component from

four to three years of study. It also represents part of the tension frequently found professional studies.

The college has a minimum entry level of grade 10 in the PNG schooling system. This means that students may not have completed secondary studies. Given that much theological education teaching material is based on the assumption of university-level entry, this creates potential problems.

The college daily timetable for each of the three years consisted of five periods of 50 minutes each. This, with some free periods, amounted to 70 periods each week. Each student thus had 23 class periods, and an equal division among the staff created a load of about 12 hours each. Such loads are well in excess of what tertiary-level students might expect. Given that all the classes were new teaching periods, the staff teaching-levels were also in excess of what might be expected. In fact, the timetable resembled that of a school, rather that that of a theological college. These facts are relevant, not only to work loads, but to the manner of teaching. There appeared to be an over-reliance on lectures, a reliance assisted by the lack of resources for any alternative teaching methods.

The large number of hours available for teaching also tended to take away the necessity to think clearly about what was to be taught. Critical corporate decisions did not need to be taken, if, in principle, there was room to teach many things.

The Consultancy Process

Implementing my consultancy process, therefore, I began by conducting an exercise to identify the objectives of the course. To do this, I used a taxonomy of objectives for professional education, developed by Richard Carter.[1] The basic outline of the taxonomy is in Figure 1.

This taxonomy has a number of advantages. First, it draws distinctions between personal characteristics, skills, and knowledge. These distinctions are important, because professional practice requires all three. Education, however, tends to concentrate on knowledge, and, principally, on factual knowledge. There are continual tensions between the demands to produce

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[1] Richard Carter, "A taxonomy of objectives for professional education", *Studies in Higher Education* 10-2 (1985), pp. 117-134.

people of a particular kind – those capable of doing particular things, and those who know particular things. Much of the criticism, levelled at the products of professional education courses, seems, to me, to arise from different perceptions of the priority of these factors in the makeup of the professional person. They appeared in many of the comments made to me by parish clergy in PNG. Most often, those comments implied a priority for personal characteristics over either skill or knowledge. These tensions cannot be removed by fiat, or by trying harder, since they are integral to professional practice, itself. Such practice brings together the whole person, in the service of specific tasks, or the solution of specific problems. Nevertheless, the explicit recognition of these different kinds of objectives in this taxonomy can help to identify what education can, or cannot, do, or what it should, or should not, do.

Although this taxonomy was produced, originally, for engineering courses, it was of particular usefulness in this exercise, because, possible unexpectedly, it includes "spiritual qualities". The author says this about this category:

> The final category, that of spiritual qualities, is perhaps less obvious, except in the particular case of ministers of religion. But the category includes qualities, other than those of a religious character. It is concerned with the capacity for awe and wonder, with the ability to appreciate, value, and respond to both the world of nature and the highest levels of human achievement. Some would wish to add, that, most important of all, is the ability to respond to the One, who is the Author of all these things. The importance of spiritual qualities may not lie so much in their utility as in their importance in the development of a balanced and mature person. They may be considered crucial in the development of wisdom. These qualities . . . are not given great weight in education, especially at the tertiary level.[2]

I gave the taxonomy, as a blank sheet, to all the member of staff, and requested they fill it out individually. I took the results, and collated them into the summary contained in Figure 2. There is, possibly, little to cause surprise in these results. In particular, the "General" group, under "Factual knowledge", reflects the fact that the students have not completed secondary education, and have many gaps in their general preparation for study. These

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[2] Ibid. , p. 145.

gaps make it difficult to teach the rest of the curriculum. Also of importance, is "Basic orientation", under "Mental skills". For many local groups in PNG, the concept of time is different from the European concept, implicit in the teaching. Thus, it is difficult to teach church history, or biblical subjects. Many groups had no number capacity beyond ten, and a basic understanding of geography is often lacking.

What these results do show, however, is the utility of separating questions of knowledge from questions of skill and personal qualities. Some of the skills, considered necessary, find no obvious place in the list of subjects to be studied. Others of them have definite implications for the way in which the course is taught. In a course, delivered almost entirely by lectures, there is, for example, little opportunity to teach leadership, or to allow for its practice. Matters of administration, and practical skills, also found no place. Similarly, the delineation of personal qualities forced a consideration of the extent to which the curriculum, as it stood, encouraged imagination, inventiveness, or creativity.

Pervading the whole discussion, but, specifically in these objectives, in only two places, was the issue of contextuality. It appears in "Spiritual qualities" as "Appropriate PNG spirituality", and in "Factual knowledge" as "Contextual ministry". Indirectly, it is present in the "Action skills" of "Use and care of machinery", "Gardening", "Problem solving", "Music", and "First aid". This is because much ministry will occur in villages, where subsistence agriculture must feed the priest's family, where solar cells and generators provide power, and where expert help is often not available.

In a counter-fashion, the issue of contextualisation is also present in the "Mental characteristics" of "Imagination", "Inventiveness", and "Independence". In a society, still very traditional in many of its ways, these are among the characteristics, for which little space is found. Traditional societies do not have the future orientation, implied by such characteristics. Their reference is to a past, which dictates how things are to be done. That is not to say that innovative qualities are not called for, in such societies. It is to say that, for them, the value is in the apparent following of the old, not the discovery of the new.

In the other entries, of course, much of the context was assumed. What should not be assumed, however, was that the assumption of context was actually carried into practical effect. Here, as is so often the case in

professional education, the teachers tended to reproduce what they themselves had experienced.

Curriculum Shape

This discussion revealed several problems:

1. The need to deal with the pastoral year;

2. The need to introduce additional material of a general educational kind; and

3. The need to reduce the teaching hours.

The pastoral year represented a particular problem. There can be no doubt that practical experience is an essential part of any professional education program. Theological students must not only know about their trade, they must have an opportunity to learn how to do it. It is not necessary for all practical training to take place entirely outside the college program. Some can take place in the classroom. Role-playing is often more useful than actual experience, because it allows observation and response. Adequate role-playing exercises are made more possible if the sessions can be video-recorded. In this way, the student can see his own performance. If use is made of the local community, small experiences can be incorporated into the curriculum, on a regular basis. An active relationship can be developed with hospitals, prisons, and other community establishments.

Nevertheless, there is a need for direct experience, on an extended basis. But it is also clear that 12 months is too long a period. Experience, it may be argued, never goes astray. But an educational course is not just about gaining experience. It is about taking experience, and making it a conscious part of professional development. This could be done during a year-long, practical period, if there were regular (not less than every two weeks) sessions with field educators, and if the program for the student was set out in some detail. The reality is, however, that the college staff are unable to visit these students at all. Thus, the college has no knowledge whatsoever about what their students are doing, or how they are using their experiences. In this context, writing is not a substitute for direct contact. Neither can it be said that there is any actual program for the students to accomplish during the period, nor any way of ensuring its occurring, if it did exist.

It may be that the year-long, practical period has other functions. Bishops may feel that they get to know their ordinands better. Parishes may receive much-needed assistance. Whatever these arguments may amount to, they are not relevant, educationally. If they represent real needs, they should be addressed directly and not used to bolster what is, essentially, a waste of student educational time.

Shorter periods of field experience help to overcome these difficulties. They allow for a greater specification of what is supposed to be accomplished.

Given that the staff are unlikely to be able to visit the students in the field, the shorter period allows reflection to occur, when the student returns to the college. What will remain lacking, for as long as the staff cannot visit the parishes,is the opportunity to involve the supervising clergy in any discussion. My experience with a similar program in my own Department at Sydney University, shows that the opportunity to involve supervisor, student, and educational staff in a three-way discussion has direct educational benefits, as well as other results. There is also the opportunity to support the parish clergy, and to expose them to new ideas about ministry. The fear that students actually come with more-up-to-date knowledge frequently lies behind adverse reports on their performance.

The fact that grade 10 of the PNG secondary education system is the entry point for the college, means that students arrive less than prepared for their studies. Most of the theological material available to the college assumes, at least, readiness for tertiary-level studies. That assumption, obviously, includes adequate levels of English, but much more is involved. There must be a valuing of knowledge and study itself, as well as adequate general knowledge, and conceptual development. Since most of the material is Western, in its origin, it also requires a general cultural familiarity with West, not only in areas like history, but in basic science, geography, and social thought. Without this, much of the teaching effort is wasted. In these circumstances, the college must make some effort to redress the balance, presumably by some direct introductory input of its own.

Such a decision raises the questions of teaching resources, and the choice of subjects to be studied. The college staff may not have the resources to teach general education subjects, in the way most useful to adult students. There may be a need to use persons from the local community in some areas.

The choice of subject matter also runs the risk of simply creating more pressure to teach. For this reason, there needs to be a strict test of direct relevance, placed on the choice. Obviously, English language is a high priority. This is because it is the language of instruction, and the language, in which any literature, which might be used by graduates in the foreseeable future, will be available.

Study skills also rank highly. This is because one of the purposes of the final two years of secondary education is to develop such skills. Since, however, the students at Newton College have all had other occupations, prior to entering the college, it will have been some years since they last did any study. They will all find the transition to student life difficult.

There is also a need for some form of social studies. Of all the competing substantive subject areas, this is probably the most important. As the society of Papua New Guinea changes over the coming years, clergy will need, both to understand what is happening, and to assess the effects of change, for their own work. The social studies must, therefore, cover both the world at large, and Melanesian society: the world, because it will come ever closer to even the most remote locations, Melanesian society, because it is the world of the PNG church.

Conclusion

When I left Popondetta, just after Easter 1991, I took with me a memory of a community facing some of the greatest challenges that theological education has ever faced. That Newton College appears to be a small institution, in a small nation, should not be allowed to disguise the fact that it faces issues comparable to those faced by theological schools in the Reformation, or by the Tractarians in 19th-century Oxford. In both those cases, the society in which the theological education was placed was changing rapidly. Previous social certainties were being threatened. New theological directions had to be formed. It is the same for Newton College today.

And the stakes are just as high. The fundamental question is whether the church of tomorrow will be equipped to deal with the problems of tomorrow. Education is one of the keys to ensuring that it is. It is not the only thing needed, but it is a necessary part of the process.

Figure 1. Summary of a taxonomy of objectives for professional education

	Mental Characteristics	Attitudes and values	Personality Characteristics	Spiritual Qualities	
Personal Qualities					**Being**
	Mental Skills	Information Skills	Action Skills	Social Skills	
Skill					**Doing**
	Factual Knowledge		Experiential Knowledge		
Knowledge					**Knowing**
	Cognitive		Affective		

Figure 2. Objectives for Professional Education at Newton College

	Mental Characteristics	Attitudes and values	Personality Characteristics	Spiritual	
Personal Qualities	Imagination Inventiveness Independence Objectivity	Acceptance of difference Personal responsibility Concern for social justice	Resilience Courage Integrity Industry	Qualities Christ-central spirituality Discipline PNG spirituality Search for God Fruit of the Spirit	Being
	Mental Skills	**Information Skills**	**Action Skills**	**Social skills**	
Skill	Reasoning Attention Critical thinking Basic orientation to time/space/ number	Value information Find it appropriately Record Apply in new situations	Liturgical behaviour Use and care of machinery Gardening Problem-solving Music First aid	Leadership Relate to different people Ability to delegate Tact Articulation	Doing
	Factual Knowledge		**Experiential Knowledge**		
Knowledge	GENERAL English History Science Geography Current affairs, etc.	THEOLOGICAL Contextual ministry Pastoral studies Bible Church history, etc.	Tap prior knowledge Personal prayer discipline "Priestly" behaviour Social experience Reflect on above		Knowing
	Cognitive		Affective		

Bibliography

Carter, Richard, "A taxonomy of objectives for professional education", *Studies in Higher Education* 10-2 (1985).