

Developing Curriculum for Ministerial Formation¹

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The founding Principal of Rarongo Theological College pursued, with dedication, his vision for ministerial formation in such a way as to shape this College to become one of the leading church institutions in the Pacific region. His ideas were certainly forward looking, and encouraged fresh thinking about the task of preparing clergy for their ministries. The present faculty is, therefore, being faithful to the founder's intentions, by their continuing development of Rarongo's life and studies.

In July, 1993, the faculty held a major review of the College curriculum, and its process of preparing people for ministry. As the present Dean of Studies, it is my intention, and privilege, to highlight the main proposals and resolutions of that review, and to evaluate the progress, which has been made in implementing them.

In-depth Study and Learning

Probably the most obvious change that has followed from the curriculum review has been the move from having three College terms each academic year, to now having two semesters. This was not

¹ This paper is a slightly-edited version of a lecture given at Rarongo Theological College, Rabaul, in January, 1997, in honour of the founding Principal, Revd Dr Ronald Williams.

simply for convenience in timing; rather, there were several educational reasons behind the change.

It was not (let me state!) a matter of the faculty being lazy, in wanting to have a shorter teaching year. In point of fact, the two semesters provide exactly the same amount of teaching as the three terms: two semesters each, with 15 weeks of class teaching, as compared to three terms each, with ten weeks of classes.

One advantage of semesters has been to have only two sets of examinations each year, instead of the previous three sets at the end of each term. The primary purpose of examinations (and perhaps the only lasting value of them), is as a means of assessment of student learning. Since there is some discussion, and doubt, about the value, appropriateness, and fairness of examinations, as a means of assessment, in theological education, it must now be a good move to spend less time and energy each year, simply on examinations. (In passing, we may note here that, along with many other theological colleges, Rarongo had formerly used a method of “continuous assessment” of student assignments, instead of examinations, which were reintroduced only in the early 1990s).

A more important advantage of the semester system is to allow, and encourage, further in-depth study and learning. The longer, 15-week courses, give the opportunity for teachers to cover their topics in greater detail, and allow more time for students to wrestle with the issues that are being raised. This latter point is particularly important in theological education, since students will have to deal with certain questions, not only on an academic level, but also as matters of personal faith. For example, the “critical” academic approach to the Bible often creates real difficulties for students, as they begin their theological studies. Or again, it may take students considerable time to come to terms with the on-going hermeneutical challenge of applying the biblical message across centuries and cultures.

The aim of in-depth learning is, of course, an excellent one. But it is not yet clear whether or not semesters are the best way for Rarongo to achieve this. There are several questions, both educationally, and in practice, which need still to be proved, in the way that the College is implementing the semesters.

- (a) Firstly, there is the question of whether or not longer courses are the most suitable way for Melanesians to study and learn? Some studies of adult education in African cultures suggest that the majority of Africans learn best with relatively short blocks of material.² Longer blocks and courses may be more appropriate in Western cultures than in Africa. At the very least, this raises the question of whether longer semester courses are a move in the right direction for a Melanesian college.
- (b) Secondly, the opportunity that semesters provide for more in-depth teaching is a challenge, and a demand, on faculty members, both academically and educationally. Their own knowledge of the subject matter needs to be wider, and more up to date, if they are to teach more thoroughly. And equally, of course, a longer block of classes requires (and is an opportunity for) more variety and creativity in teaching methods.

At Rarongo, we are taking a number of positive steps in response to these challenges, to assist all of the faculty members, but particularly the “teaching fellows”, since they are relatively new to the work of theological education. We have been able to reduce, somewhat, the teaching load of the faculty members, so that they have more time for detailed preparation of classes, as well as for their own wider reading and study. The College has

² See, for example, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 25-3 (July 1989), pp. 271f.

also been able to increase the personal book grant, which is made annually to each faculty member.

In regard to the professional development of the faculty, as educators (although we still refer to them as “lecturers”!), last year, two of our number attended a week’s course on tertiary education methods, which has provided the basis for discussion of these issues in the whole faculty. This has raised awareness of the need for further professional development, and of the importance of providing for it.³

- (c) The third question, concerning our implementation of the semester system, relates to the workload required of students, and the balance between formal classes and the students’ own study-time. Unfortunately, the changes that have been made here, were taken, essentially, out of administrative necessity, while the educational factors were not given sufficient consideration.

The introduction of semesters has meant that the number of formal classes each student is expected to attend has increased, while the number of required assignments has decreased. This happened, primarily, as a matter of the logistics involved in restructuring the entire range of courses, from terms into semesters. In reality, the increase in the number of classes, and the decrease in assignments, is perhaps not very great, but we may well consider that this move is in the wrong direction, if we are, indeed, looking for more in-depth learning, through

³ In common with many other theological colleges, Rarongo’s senior faculty members have each undertaken Master’s degree studies, in their own academic discipline, but have not been given the specific opportunity to develop their teaching skills. Future faculty development programmes should give serious consideration to this need.

students, themselves, wrestling with the issues raised in their studies.⁴

Integrated Study

A second main purpose, in the changes to Rarongo's curriculum, has been to create the opportunity for some inter-departmental teaching, across the boundaries of the established disciplines of biblical studies, theology, church history, ministry, and "religion, culture, and society". The restructuring of teaching into longer courses, naturally, gave this possibility, which has been taken up, primarily, by encouraging the ministry department to draw upon other teachers for parts of its courses. Our success here has been somewhat limited, perhaps, because one person (the ministry teacher) has basically done the course planning, rather than more-openly attempting an integrated approach.

Perhaps, then, it is more significant that 1997 will see the reintroduction of a "theme study" course, in which a particular topic is discussed from the perspective of the different academic disciplines. In the past, for example, the themes of "conflict", and of "sacraments", had been studied in this way, and a new suggestion for this year is to take up "gender issues" with this approach. Whichever theme is chosen, it will be essential for the various faculty members involved to do detailed planning together, so that the course may indeed be "integrated".

Choice of Courses

A third aim of the curriculum changes, was to introduce the new feature of "electives" to studies at Rarongo. This was piloted during

⁴ The actual average figures are as follows: In the terms' system, a student would have 13 classes per week, with five study periods, and had to produce 18 major assignments per year. For semesters, a student has 15 classes per week, with three study periods, and has to produce 14 major assignments per year.

1996, with reasonable success, and the experiment will be considerably extended for the 1997 academic year.⁵

Students are required to take the foundation courses in each department, but are then given some choice over the more advanced, or specialised, courses. This effectively means that students' first residential year of study is made up of required courses, while, in the second and third residential years, a significant number of choices become open to them.

For example, in biblical studies, electives are being offered in wisdom literature, biblical laws and Melanesian norms, as well as in advanced Hebrew, and advanced Greek. Similarly, in ministry studies, there are various foundational courses, after which, electives are offered in (among others): health and healing, communication, and youth ministry.

The arrangements for these electives mean that, in the second semester of their second residential year, students will be required to elect four courses out of a total of ten that are offered by all of the departments together. And, then again, in the second semester of the third year, they will take four other electives, out of ten different courses being offered.

This plan has been generally welcomed, as it obviously attempts to recognise, and respect, the needs, interests, and ministry gifts of the individual students. The year, 1997, is the first year, in which these electives are being fully implemented, after which, a careful evaluation of the programme will be made.

Wider Opportunities for Study

A further recommendation of the curriculum review was that the resources of the College should be made available to a wider

⁵ The introduction of "electives" is not specifically tied to the semester system, and could equally well have been developed with the previous structure of terms.

group of people than only the residential students (whose number is limited, by accommodation, to approximately 90 at any one time). It was also specifically suggested that lay people should be given more access to the College learning programmes.

The faculty have responded to these recommendations, by giving further attention to the extension studies programme, and also to the possibility of holding Christmas holiday courses, both of which had previously been given less emphasis. These two programmes are separate, and yet, closely related, in that people undertaking extension studies are encouraged to take the opportunity of face-to-face teaching in the Christmas courses. Both of these programmes were originally offered only to clergy (as a means of continuing education, to upgrade their theological qualifications), but they have each now been opened to lay people, who have attained grade 12 education, or its equivalent.

Again, these are, clearly, positive developments, and there has been an encouraging response to the publicity of these programmes. But inevitably, turning such ideas into fruitful reality, demands a good deal of work and the availability of extra resources. At present, all of this work (i.e., both the administration, and, especially, the preparation, of the extension materials) is being carried out as an extra responsibility of the regular faculty members, which, naturally, means that progress is rather slow. If the interest, and enrolment, for these courses continues to grow, then we shall need to look seriously at the creation of a special position, to undertake responsibility for them.

Each of the aspects, discussed up to this point, is primarily academic matter, relating mainly to study and formal teaching. But the curriculum review also highlighted “practical ministry”, and “personal formation”, as two non-academic aspects of the College’s educational process, which are central to preparation for ministry.

Practical Ministry

Along with many other theological colleges, Rarongo has, at times, been criticised for producing good students, but poor ministers, scholars, but not pastors. Naturally, we recognise that ministry is an essentially active, practical, and people-oriented calling, and profession. Knowledge and understanding are certainly important, but ministers must be able to use, and apply, that knowledge, so that it is meaningful and helpful in daily life.

In assessing the practical aspects of our ministerial training (which includes a whole year of supervised pastoral work before entry to the College), the curriculum review recommended the development of further ministry opportunities, throughout the three years of residential study. In previous years, there have naturally been various practical requirements for ministry courses in counselling, Christian education, worship, and preaching, and the arrangements for these have been a regular part of College life. In addition to these, and certainly as important, Rarongo's community life-style is, itself, an opportunity for pastoral caring, and the exercise of leadership, in various capacities.

Further, practicals have recently been arranged in some other ministry courses, which have given extra experience to students. A week's placement in a local congregation is now organised, in conjunction with the course in pastoral theology. The students are supervised by, and work alongside, an established pastor, and then reflect upon the experience, by making a written assessment of pastoral care in that congregation. And again, assisting the chaplains in the Kerevat prison, the Nonga base hospital, and in the Kerevat national high school, have provided experience in these special ministries. All these have proved to be worthwhile opportunities, in spite of the language barriers that are at times encountered.

In a more general way, the semi-rural setting of the College, and the emphasis upon self-reliance, through food gardens, fishing

(and some chickens), all require the use, and development, of a person's practical skills. In previous years, one special week, dedicated to the learning of such skills, was included in the calendar, but, for various reasons, this opportunity has recently lapsed, which is something of a loss for an overall balance in College programmes.

Personal Formation

Lastly, the curriculum review emphasised that “students should study, closely, the questions of their own personal and cultural identity, conscience, and moral character, and spiritual formation”. Arguably, this is the most important of these recommendations, in that ministry is ultimately less about what a person may know, or is able to do, as about who we are; about how we live in relation to God, and to our fellow human beings.

This, of course, is one reason why theological colleges exist at all, with the intention that, living within a Christian community, for several years, will accelerate the personal development of the students. And, in a Melanesian setting, at least, this is surely true, because of the natural sharing of life with people from the different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (and, perhaps also, from different church traditions, as we have here in Rarongo).

Since 1993, the College has emphasised the importance of personal formation, by taking the bold step of giving “life and witness” assessment equal weight with academic results. The final grade, awarded to graduating students, is calculated as a simple average of their study performance, on the one hand, and of their “life and witness” grade, on the other. This latter is assessed by all of the faculty members, on the basis of 15 different categories, under the main headings of College life, ministerial performance, and Christian maturity.

This policy is intended as an encouragement to the personal life of students, although, at times, it seems to have created an unhelpful

atmosphere and attitude, by seeming to set the faculty up as “spiritual policemen”, and judges. Perhaps the hoped-for encouragement, and value of this assessment, could better be brought out in two ways:

- (a) The “life and witness” assessment should be done, not only shortly before graduation, but also, half way through the residential studies. In this way, students would be given some guidance, and help, towards growth, over the second half of their time in College, and not simply wait for a “judgment” at the end.
- (b) And, secondly, this assessment could be done, in the first place, by the students, themselves, each writing a report on their own sense of strengths and weaknesses, and of personal growth. This would enable the process to be shared, in a more pastoral manner, instead of being received as an external verdict.

As a final example of developments towards personal formation, I would refer to the introduction of student “retreats” over the last few years. For some time, the week of “orientation” for new students has been structured for continuing students, as an opportunity to reflect upon their own sense of calling to ministry. In 1993, we arranged a further week of retreat (away from the College), for the final-year students, as a personal preparation for their graduation. The success of this retreat has meant that it is now a regular feature of the annual calendar, and that their wives (separately) now also have a similar weekend away.

Naturally, there is no perfect plan, which will be timeless in its suitability as ministerial formation. There remains a continuing need to develop the College’s curriculum and life so as to be most helpful to students, both academically and personally.

Bibliography

Evangelical Missions Quarterly 25-3 (July 1989).