Transforming Theological Education through Experiential Learning in Urban Contexts

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Students have become bored and cynical with the many routine, regimented, and meaningless tasks involved in bureaucratic-based higher education. An important paradigm shift underway in education allows students to be partners in cooperative learning and to field test old answers to ever-changing problems in urban life.¹

Since our educational systems often mirror the institutional systems of society, new educational approaches that allow students to travel from classrooms and immerse themselves in urban settings beyond familiar territory might revitalize both educational and urban systems. Students should have the opportunity to assess the theories of abstract education through empirical learning experiences. This requires a new paradigm of education: the spiritual journey. Students have memorized theories about social stratification and social change, but have rarely gone out to field test these cognitive theories through encountering real people in real communities. Such encounters allow the true goal of education to be reached: transformed students become bearers of transformation through direct encounters with people in real social settings. Students in postmodernity are hungry for experiential and relational learning experiences. The

appropriate paradigm of Christian education for the new millennium is the continual journey into neighborhoods and the return journey into the classroom for reflection.

Such a paradigm shift in education requires comprehensive and long-range partnerships in urban communities. Bryan Stone has observed that the Christian church has become middle class and dangerously distant from the poor, often sending its missionaries “to convert the poor of the inner city to its own private brand of suburban

2 Some homeless people have cynically described local missions as “poverty industries” and would rather sleep on the streets.3 Christian higher education has the opportunity to reverse this trend and to set new standards for the church.

New educational approaches seek to reverse stale and worn-out approaches to education and ministry and set a new example by entering into urban communities with the genuine to desire to understand people holistically within their social settings rather than seek to sculpt people into a privatized form of Christian faith. This requires a paradigm shift from control-based to learner-based participation in communities. "One enters into the life of the other and feels it as if it were one's own," declared Presbyterian educator Daniel Johnson Fleming in the early 1900s. "Looking through the other's eyes with one's own mind, something refreshingly new will be the outcome."4

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3 This quote comes from a conversation with Richard Slimbach, Chair of Global Studies and Sociology at Azusa Pacific University. His impact on this article through resources, ideas, and inspiration is pervasive.
4 Daniel Johnson Fleming quoted in Norman E. Thomas, ed., Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1995), 211. Kenneth Luscombe warns, "The need to control and dominate is so ingrained in the way of leadership under the (patriarchal) tutelage of the old and passing paradigm of technical rationality, industrial modernization and enlightened scientific progress that losing control is tantamount to madness" yet "losing" control is what he suggests as "a challenging but necessary paradox for mission leaders" who "attempt to constrain urban mission into a static and rationalistic formula" (Luscombe, "Where Cross the Crowded Streams of Life," 193).
Service Learning: Servanthood or Control?

A problem with "service learning" is that sometimes even in the name of service, we do injustice to the word “service” by trying to control rather than serve people. To approach the urban context as learners means to allow those whom we serve to evaluate our efforts. This “servant learner” approach is an alternative to the “servant leader” approach that still dominates theological education. The servant learner goes into a context with the goal of understanding the culture, needs, agendas, and issues of a community as an alternative to the traditional method of seeking to set the agenda before talking to the people of the community. It is the objective of the service learner to enter communities with a willingness to put oneself in the shoes of the stranger, and allow the stranger to critique oneself. Jesus first asked his disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" before asking them, "But who do you say that I am?" The external and internal critique is crucial in theological education.

Christians have often used the term "servanthood" as a guise for control and domination. However, during the Last Supper, in teaching that the greatest act of love is to lay down one's life for one's friend, Jesus stated, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends" (John 15:15). The final revolution beyond the reversal of servant and master is the possibility of becoming friends: "people who know, care, respect, struggle, love justice, and have a commitment to each other through time." A servant is at the mercy of the master and does not know what the master will do next, but a friend freely gives and freely

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receives in commitment of mutuality.\(^6\) In the words of a [man] (Tzotzil Indian) of Chiapas, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is somehow bound up with mine, then let us walk together."\(^7\)

An African American student, in her experiential learning journey, visited a Hispanic community and met a man there who toured her around, invited her to a meal, and introduced her to his grandfather. After her experience he thanked her. She asked him why he was thanking her! He responded that other students had come by from a nearby university with a similar assignment. But they did not come with a sincere willingness to learn about and experience the culture. But "since you ate our foods and even visited my grandfather," he said, "I want to thank you!" People who have been used and exploited very quickly discern whether people who journey into their neighborhoods are sincerely entering community or whether they are just going through the motions.

Parker Palmer refers to the pain that permeates education as “the pain of disconnection.” He says that “when institutional conditions create more combat than community, when the life of the mind alienates more than it connects, the heart goes out of things, and there is little left to sustain us.”\(^8\)

J. Krishnamurti has stated that the uneducated person is not the ignorant person, but the educated person is foolish when dependent solely "on books, on knowledge and on

\(^6\) Ibid., 179.
\(^7\) This quote comes from a Guatemala Refugee Ministries Illinois Conference United Church of Christ brochure entitled "GRM Mayan Ministries" and the source of the quote given is "Jose, a Tzotzil Indian of Chiapas."

\(^8\) Parker J. Palmer, To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), x.
authority" to gain understanding because such a person does not know oneself.\textsuperscript{9} The pursuit of knowledge through the gathering of information should ultimately lead to truths that lead to personal and societal transformation.

David Lempert urges that policy makers and ordinary citizens alike “must be able to communicate, empathize with, and understand the perspectives and needs of others who are different than themselves--be they geographically removed, from another racial or religious background, of a different socioeconomic class . . . , or in a different institutional setting.”\textsuperscript{10}

Theological education can only be grounded in the reality of the lives of ordinary people in the wholeness of their lives. Physical, social, political, and economic spheres are interwoven and inseparable. Christianity is neither a culture nor a bureaucratic institution, but "a personal message, which encounters persons, not superficially but concretely in life-situations."\textsuperscript{11} Therefore, it discovers people as they are within their cultural settings. Theological education, a theological and sociological undertaking, is "an inseparable union of the divine and the dusty."\textsuperscript{12}

A Methodist report on cities refers to a spirituality of pilgrimage in urban settings that is different from the middle-class concept of personal 'journeys' but which enters into "the trials of the alien, the dispossessed, the migrant. Cities themselves are on a journey.

\textsuperscript{10} David H. Lempert, \textit{Escape from the Ivory Tower}, 75.
\textsuperscript{11} Laurenti Magesa quoted in Norman E. Thomas, ed., \textit{Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity}, 212.
They evolve over time, parts decay and others regenerate."¹³ Theological education is likewise a journey, a journey into community.

Some people on the periphery have identified themselves as "oxen who know nothing."¹⁴ Others have concluded, based on how they have been treated or what they have been told, that their harsh fates are somehow deserved due to God's will or their own personal inadequacies. After a Bolivian Indian woman's eyes were opened through Bible study in a Christian base community she marveled, "Do you mean that nowhere in that Book does it say we have to starve?"¹⁵ Victims tend to blame themselves while leaving systems off the hook.

People cannot be viewed apart from the webs in which they are woven, i.e. the social systems, structures, and relationships. Therefore, experiential learning not only opens up direct encounters with people and encourages community organization,¹⁶ but also allows the student to enter into the inter-locking systems to which all are bound. These systems are complex webs of good and evil. Students will learn that people need release from unjust systems as much as they need to partner with systems and local agencies that are just and compassionate in their service to individuals and communities.

**Truth as Encounter**

We are people only when we are in community. We live in perpetual community among family, friends, colleagues, and strangers. Longstanding Western tradition, however, considers truth to be an objective concept that is understood and analyzed apart from

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¹⁴ Ibid.
¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Community organization refers to people of a particular community who organize around an issue and take charge of their situation.
community. In reality, the word "truth" is derived from "troth" and refers to a personal and intimate relationship. Truth is a courtship with another person, an intimate encounter. Truth is not merely presented, but also represented to others. We do not merely recount the truth to others so that they may be aware of it; we relate the truth to others so that they might be captivated by it.17

Several times I required students in my classes to travel with me to "skid row" in Los Angeles to interact with homeless people. In every case some students strongly protested. I responded, "You will want to go again." It was amazing that when they related to these people face-to-face and discovered their humanity, they could no longer de-humanize them. In fact, their protests turned into pleas, "Can we go again?" They watched a baby in a homeless family eating one of the sandwiches they gave out and wept at their first hand discovery that these are real people with real needs. They saw homeless people in community, encouraging and helping one another out and were moved by their sense of compassion. They had for some brief moments experienced community with others rather than over others.

Soren Kierkegaard, in Attack "Upon Christendom" stated,

... sermons should not be preached in churches. It harms Christianity in a high degree and alters its very nature, that it is brought into an artistic remoteness from reality, instead of being heard in the midst of real life, and that precisely for the sake of the conflict (the collision). For all this talk about quiet, about quiet places and quiet hours, as the right element for Christianity, is absurd. So then sermons should not be preached in churches but in the street, in the midst of life, of the reality of daily life, weekday life (viii).

Education, as well, should take place in the midst of real life.

Suburbanites in an Urban Educational Facility

I once taught in a church-based, graduate school of mission and quickly discovered that the concept of mission was one of having exotic adventures in distant countries. So I took my class on a walk to observe the neighborhood. We walked outside of our church classroom met and rounded the corner. A man observed us from his yard and demanded, “What are you doing here?” My students turned their heads toward me, their professor. I replied to the man, “We are with the church around the corner and we are observing our local community.” The man immediately began to express his feelings in the tone of, let me tell you something:

Your church people park in front of our driveways and sometimes we have to call the police to get out of our own homes. If we have a birthday party in our home, our guests have to park eight blocks away because your cars take up every parking space. On Sundays, you direct traffic on our streets. You walk right past us without saying “Hello.” You drive expensive cars and wear three piece suits. If you are so rich, why don’t you buy some property and build a parking lot?

The neighbor continued: “You don’t even give us eye contact when you walk past us. You never bother to come to our community meetings. You do not care about this neighborhood!”

We thanked him for his helpful feedback and continued the walk, observing graffiti on apartment walls, homes that had been gutted, with only hollow basements remaining. The neighborhood was deteriorating right before our eyes. Yet the church had responded to its neighborhood by building high walls around its perimeters and posting a guard at the door. It chose to be a fortress of fear in the midst of a deteriorating neighborhood. The church as a sacred escape site was too spiritual to be any earthly good.
Walter Wink has observed that people who may be somewhat free of racial prejudice and may have friends with those on the margins may still unintentionally support unjust structures that dominate one racial group over another.\textsuperscript{18} Sadly, this is true of many theological institutions in urban settings.

Participation of the student learner begins with listening long to the narratives of the community. It is not program-centered, but people-centered. Every narrative has an impact on the narratives of others. There is an intersection of narratives between the learner and community. The fingerprints of God are found in the story of people in the community. Therefore, it is a humbling and necessary experience to pause from our own narratives and immerse ourselves in the narratives of others.\textsuperscript{19} Conversation was a key aspect of Jesus' ministry. He was often depicted at a meal, coming from a meal, or going to a meal. Conversation thus becomes "a model and metaphor for dealing inclusively with theological diversity, and a concrete way of doing ministry and theological education."\textsuperscript{20} As theological education opens up new vistas of flexibility through conversation and discourse, it will regain its spiritual foundations, sense of community, and ability to contextualize cognitive concepts.

**Experiential Education as Community Organization**

Theological education must never adopt the accepted patterns of disengaged truth prevalent in higher education, nor the accepted patterns of disengaged ministry prevalent in the institutionalized church. Robert Linthicum confirms that “Only a man or woman

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 138-139.
who allows his or her heart to be broken with the pain and the plight of the hurting poor
and/or the hurting powerful of the city belongs in ministry there. . . .”21 The typical church
or theological school responds to its community by determining the needs, the problems,
and the solutions of its neighborhood community. It then implements a new program for
the community—all without listening to the voices of the community.22 Such a scheme in
all likelihood is predetermined to fail because

the ownership of the problem, the solution, and the program to implement
that solution lies in the church—not in the people. It is the church’s
program. The people of the community have no ownership in it. They
may attend it and participate in it, but they will always be spectators and
clients, never participants and goal-owners.23

Thus we need to view the community through its own eyes. Listening to the survival
strategy of the community validates the community members and reminds them that they
have the local understanding, the abilities, and networking that is valuable and
foundational for the process of community organizing.24

The biblical notion of networking assumes that all people, “however uneducated,
exploited, and beaten down by life, have a greater capacity to understand and act upon
their situation than the most highly informed or sympathetic outsider. Every human being,
no matter how deprived, is created in the image of God” and is as capable as the most well
educated, self-motivated person to determine his or her future.25

20 Robert Banks, Reenvisioning Theological Education, 181. Augustine stressed the role of conversation
in nurturing Christians and in cultivating community education while Luther supplemented formal
lectures with conversations during meals, as found in the collection entitled “Table Talk” (Ibid., 181).
22 Ibid., 203.
23 Ibid.
24 Bryant L. Myers, Walking with the Poor, 141.
25 Linthicum, City of God, City of Satan, 198.
Some of my students have utilized the image of a robot to depict their own learning and living behavior that is dictated by preprogrammed paths. A major role of theological education should be to deprogram students from mere traditional, mechanistic forms of learning and reprogram them into an organic learning mode through the journey into living community beyond the classroom.

Jesus did not journey into the world with preprogrammed methods. He responded to people differently according to their unique needs and contexts, as revealed in his dialogues with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the expert in the law, the rich ruler, Zacchaeus, and so forth. However, most ministries in the city “make the same fateful error of taking a programmatic approach, over and over again.” Such an approach is arrogant, insensitive and destructive. But to be a partner in the community involves the breaking down of barriers of fear, mistrust, and dominance. The task of neighborhood ministry is not the task of a hero, but the task of people willing to sacrifice themselves for others. When outreach into a community is merely an extension of a church or educational program, the people of the community will “always be spectators and clients, never participants and goal-owners.”

Twenty-first century theological education is ripe for a radical paradigm shift. Traditionally reflecting dominant society, education has become a mechanical system producing mechanical people. Human beings are treated as objects of knowledge rather than subjects of moral behavior. Darwin, in his Autobiography, admitted that his mind had become “a kind of machine for grinding laws out of large colle

Contemporary education seems to be producing machines rather than people.
Contemporary Christian education ought to take heed, slow down, process, reflect, and discover how to put faith in God into practice. After all, "When education divorces self and world from their transcendent source, they become locked in an endless power struggle to create each other in their own image."28

Reflection and Evaluation

Success in education cannot occur solely through the passive study of facts and symbols.29 Cognitive learning must be supplemented by participatory learning that spurs personal growth. If we are to move into a new paradigm that validates experiential learning experiences, our methods of grading must be called into question.

Evaluation must be a three-way street: 1) The instructor evaluates the students for their participation in experiential learning; 2) The students evaluate themselves and the instructor; and 3) The urban community in which the students participated critiques the student and the program.

Evaluation in the experiential learning context must occur frequently since the future unfolds unpredictably and since the direction of community participation cannot be planned accurately over the long term. It is important for evaluation in the experiential learning context to be ongoing as the school moves from semester to semester. This assures genuine commitment from the school and that the community learning site is not being treated like the school's laboratory.

Furthermore, students should have the opportunity in the classroom to dynamically process new knowledge gained through their experiential learning in urban contexts.

26 Linthicum, City of God, City of Satan, 205.
27 Ibid., 203.
28 Parker J. Palmer, To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey, 12.
Effective methods include small group processing, re-enactment of urban experiences, skits, and presentations.

Evaluation is thus inside out and outside in, from the individual to the community, and from community to individual. Students gain breadth and depth of knowledge in the inward and outward rhythm of life. Encountering the "other" who has differing sets of experiences and values allows students to better critique their own inward journeys:

Unable to engage our interior lives, we are incapable of engaging the interior lives of other people. Not knowing ourselves, we are unable to reveal who we are before the face of another person. And we are unable to receive them in their personhood since we are out of touch with our own.30

Beginning the Experiential Learning Journey

Where do we begin in implementing experiential education in urban contexts? In my classes, I begin by discussing the complexities and ambiguities of life and death in the city. Then I ask students to draw pictures or write poems of their own perspectives of urban life. The underlying premise is that just as students are in the city, so the city is in them.31

The inward journey of creative exploration is the starting point of the experiential journey. The drawings and poems are then shared in small groups and in the larger classroom community. One of my students wrote the following poem:

Fatherless, childless, friendless
Falling into the ocean
Not finding but searching
ALONE
Hearts beating, eyes seeing
Hands moving
How can we live so distantly close?32

29David H. Lempert, *Escape from the Ivory Tower*, p. 3.
31This exercise and premise comes from my participation in urban seminars led by Kenneth L. Luscombe.
32This poem was written by Kimberly Pofahl in my Acts class at Azusa Pacific University, Spring 1996.
Then the students are sent out into urban settings--to neighborhoods, strip malls, shops, food courts, restaurants, parks, and city streets to explore urban life in all of its complexity. The student listens to the perspectives of ordinary people, becoming acquainted with their stories, perspectives, concerns, and views on the plight of urban life. No agenda is necessary. The people of the community articulate and identify their own issues and problems. The students begin to comprehend issues of the city and begin to care deeply about the people of the city. The rhythm of the journey in and out of the classroom begins. The student brings live urban issues into the classroom for processing. Biblical, theological, and sociological perspectives are woven into the classroom experience. Gradually the student expands the urban journey to visit religious centers, churches, social service agencies, shelters, organizations, political and economic institutions. By building and maintaining contacts, the student has become a network link between agencies and the common people.

The student has begun to discover the community leaders who really care and the issues that they care about. The student has also begun to learn which institutions and agencies are friends of the city, and which are enemies. Issues begin to arise and the potential for community organization begins. The student has become a partner in the community, not a servant leader, but a servant learner. 

The people of the community are the ones who will identify their own issues and take action on behalf of their own issues. This fits the model of Jesus who responded to

33 Students should be continually reminded of their roles as friends in the community. They are "no longer servants" i.e. caught up in relationships based on hierarchy. Friendship, unlike servanthood, is not based on obedience, but on love, and since "love is an end in itself, friends are relational and not task-oriented with each other" (Edward C. Zaragoza, No Longer Servants, but Friends: A Theology of Ordained Ministry (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon, 1999), 76.
people with inquiries, questions, and flexibility. By responding to people according to their personal needs, "Jesus allowed the other person to set the agenda. But Jesus always responded out of who he was and what he represented." He also listened to first-hand, self-evaluative reports from his disciples when they returned from their journeys (Luke 10:17; cf. 9:49).

Thus in the experiential learning process, the students not only discover the people and complexities of urban life, but they learn to evaluates themselves. This evokes issues to process in the classroom and serves to transform the process of theological education that traditionally allows little room for self-analysis, personal, moral, spiritual, and community development. The new paradigm makes room for mutual learning between teachers and students, students and students, and urban community people and students.

In the midst of the experiential learning process, the teacher cannot possibly succumb to the temptation of wallowing in trendy agendas and ideologies, but must creatively seek broader, even prophetic perspectives of the divine drama in relation to the human drama. This approach to teaching involves giving more of ourselves than is expected and relying less on ourselves through a profound faith in the presence of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit in Christian community. Just as the student learns to become friends in community, so does the teacher. Community is dynamically built into the classroom experience through processing and prayer. The teacher models the fusing of theory and practice that occurs through the inward and outward journeys of life, expressed

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35 Robert Banks, Reenvisioning Theological Education, 173,175.
in acting justly. Banks rightly declares that justice should mark the entire process and subject matter of theological education.\textsuperscript{36}

For justice to operate in its fullness, theological schools must and reflect diversity in their structure and procedures. This happens when faculty "teach in a praxis-based way, and develop accountability to specific ministry contexts for classroom education."\textsuperscript{37} The rhythm of journey in and out of the classroom allows spirituality, community and justice to embrace in the learning experience. Diversity is reflected through journeys into contexts where people's worldviews and faith suppositions differ from our own. Students begin to establish patterns for critically evaluating contemporary urban life through sociological, theological, and ethical lenses. Christian education begins to return to its foundation of balanced integration between theory and practice. Banks states that theory is formulated in the midst of practice. Our thinking should be embodied, experiential, and contextual, not abstract, objective, and universal. The principal characteristics of such praxis are accountability to minority groups, collaborative reflection, lives-in-relation as an epistemological starting point, cultural diversity, and shared commitment to the work of justice.\textsuperscript{38}

Through participatory learning and an orientation toward justice, we move beyond the headlines of the day and plant ourselves firmly in reality, addressing everyday issues in relation to where people carry out their lives of work and play.\textsuperscript{39} The ongoing commitment to neighboring urban communities creates a deep bond and partnership between the school and its context.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 30,42.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
Conclusion

As Christian education expands beyond the boundaries of the classroom to the world, students and faculty move beyond unhealthy relationships that isolate, abandon, or devalue. Transformative learning restores "just and right relationships with God, with self, with community, with the 'other,' and with the environment."^40

Jesus educated his disciples by sending them out on journeys, sometimes going with them, other times processing their experiences when they returned. Jesus’ classroom was the world. Theological students should likewise be allowed to journey outside of the confines of the classroom and interact with the world in all of its complexities.

Go to the people
Live among them
Learn from them
Love them
Start with what they know
Build on what they have:
But of the best leaders
When their task is done
The people will remark
"We have done it ourselves."^41

Contemporary higher education is in a perilous crisis. In its commitment to free floating thoughts and cognitive concepts, it is left unanchored and without concrete expression in the world. Seeking to ride the wings of technological progress, it often joins in the modern quest of going nowhere at great speed.^42 Christian educators are called to slow down, reflect, re-evaluate, and re-direct the educational journey back from where it began--along the boundary between the church and world. Theological education cannot

^40 Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 36.
justify itself based on what it has become, but must seek a new path based on what it might become. It must return to its true calling of educating Christians in their faith journeys through engagement and participation in the real world.