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# INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE: AN EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

## ABSTRACT

*As an introduction to this volume on the theme “Integrating theory and practice: An educational challenge”, this article unfolds various aspects of the relationship between and the integration of theory and practice. In conversation with Paulo Freire, Clemens Sedmak, Thomas Groome, as well as John Biggs and Catherine Tang, pertinent issues in relation to “theory” and “practice/praxis” are explored. This is done in the form of fictive conversations with research students and self-critical reflections of a supervisor. The article emphasises the embodied integration of theory and practice in the lives of theological researchers, teachers and supervisors. With this, the article intends to set the agenda for the Supplementum and provoke inspiring conversations.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In some ways, it is self-evident that we view the relation between theory and practice in terms of the celebration of 20 years’ collaboration between The Gesellschaft für Bildung und Forschung in Europa (GBFE)<sup>1</sup> and the University of South Africa (UNISA). In its recently revised mission statement, the GBFE defines its educational philosophy with the phrase: “Doing theology in context”. This explicit emphasis on

1 The Gesellschaft für Bildung und Forschung in Europa (GBFE) is a European network of thirteen (theological) institutions in Denmark, Germany, Norway, Russia and Switzerland.

the act of “doing theology” in concrete “contexts” is, not least, a fruit of the partnership with a university that is located in a different cultural, social and political context, and that emphasises contextual and empirical theologies (Dreyer 2004; Kritzinger 2011a; 2011b).

It is now my task to unfold the complexity behind the terms “theory” and “practice/praxis” and to identify key issues that need to be addressed. I will do this in the format of a self-critical reflection as teacher, supervisor and examiner who has been on the journey of learning how to relate theory and praxis/practice in theological education for 40 years. My intention is to address both faculty and students through a narrative of a fictional conversation with students, alternating with reflections as teacher, supervisor and examiner.

## 2. INTERACTION ONE WITH STUDENTS

Let us imagine: Four students are attending a seminar, which I am offering to persons at the beginning of their journey towards a Master’s dissertation or a Doctoral thesis with the GBFE and UNISA (or any other university). Let us assume that their names are Andi, Betty, Charlie and Debbie.

In the first meeting about their first research ideas, it is already obvious that they all are committed to the integration of theory and practice. Let us also assume that all four want to write on aspects of Christian worship.

Andi wants to gain a biblical theology of worship, which he then intends to apply in the church where he recently assumed the position of a youth pastor.

Betty leads the worship music team in her church, and she is sometimes confused and discouraged by the observation that it seems impossible to please all participants with the selection of worship songs. She even speculates that some people do not attend worship services if specific music teams are leading the singing. Betty wants to find out how worship needs to be performed so that people love to come to church.

Charlie grew up in a Catholic family, with minimal contact with the church. Of course, he experienced Christmas and Easter services in a Catholic parish, and he is familiar with the Catholic liturgy. Later, his spiritual journey was shaped by a charismatic church. He is currently working for a Christian Student Movement and realises that people have very different experiences and expectations in terms of spirituality and worship. Charlie wants to understand the historical traditions behind all these variations of Christian spirituality and worship.

Debbie studied theology in the classical format of higher education in Germany – five years full time! Three years for the Bachelor degree and two years for the Master’s degree: Biblical Studies (including Hebrew and Greek), Church History, Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology – the entire traditional fourfold curriculum (Farley 1983:99-149). After a few years as youth pastor and a short-term mission assignment in Africa, she is currently working at a Bible College, where she will teach a module on worship. Looking back at her educational experience, she realises that she accumulated a great deal of knowledge in her years at the higher education institution, but she did not feel qualified to plan, prepare and lead worship services either in her church in Germany or in Africa. In her research, she wants to find out how she can provide better education to her students, integrating theory and practice.

### 3. REFLECTION ONE: PUTTING THEORY AND PRACTICE/PRAxis IN RELATION

We realise that these four research interests represent four typical and fairly distinct approaches to the relationship and the integration of theory and practice.

- Andi’s project represents what can be called the “theory-application-model”. He first wants to establish a sound biblical theology of worship and then he intends to apply it to his context. In this model, truth is a propositional statement based on the Bible and disconnected from a particular context.
- Betty is interested in what can be called a “pragmatic” theory, which emerges from the observation of current practices. The truth is, in this case, what works in practice (Berliner 2007:xi).
- Charlie wants to explore past theories and practices, in order to better understand current realities. He wants to seek truth as an accurate description and proper interpretation of past realities.
- Debbie’s concerns are educational – how can theory and practice be integrated in the teaching-learning process?

At this point, they are not aware of the fact that they will encounter another dimension of the theory-practice relationship as they move into their projects. How will they integrate theory and practice in the actual conduct of their research? This is the difference between research and writing “about” and “from within”? Later, I need to discuss this aspect with

them, but first, we have to focus on the definition of terms.<sup>2</sup> Let us go back to our first meeting with the students.

#### 4. INTERACTION TWO WITH STUDENTS

In the first draft of the research idea, all four students use the terms “theory” and “praxis”. I ask them: “What do you mean by theory and praxis?” and “Why do you write ‘praxis’ and not ‘practice’?” They all seem slightly confused. Is it not clear what theory and praxis mean? What should be the difference between “practice” and “praxis”?

I tell them about a personal experience from my years of study, almost 40 years ago. At the Mennonite University in the USA, where I studied for a Master’s degree, we had a New Testament professor from Latin America, Columbia. Some would categorise him as an evangelically minded liberation theologian.<sup>3</sup> I took a course on the *Gospel of John* with him. The syllabus we received prior to the course was very meagre compared to the standard module descriptors. Later he told us:

How can I write a module descriptor before I have listened to you? Your experiences will influence what we are going to do in this course.

In the first session, he also told us that we will not have lectures for the first two weeks of the semester. We should spend the time allocated to this course with two assignments. First, take time for several visits downtown. Hang around at the Greyhound station. Take a sleeping bag and sleep one night in the park with the homeless people. Talk to them. Listen to their stories. Mind your feelings. Reflect your experience. Secondly, as you reflect on these experiences, start reading the *Gospel of John*. Take notes of your observations – on the street and in the biblical text – and bring your reflections back to class in three weeks’ time. I can state that this changed my understanding of theory and practice/praxis.

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2 At this point, I also refer to the chapter “Integrating theory and practice in theological education” in my book *Understanding and developing theological education* (2016: 199-268).

3 This strand of Liberation Theology is often associated with René Padilla, Samuel Escobar, Orlando Costas, Emilio Nunez, and Sidney Rooy, all of them leading theologians in the *Fraternidad Teologica Latinoamericana* FTL (see Helfenstein 1991: 29). For a constructive critical assessment of Liberation Theology from a European evangelical perspective, see the two doctoral dissertations by Helfenstein (1991) and Kirk (1979).

I asked the students: “What does this experience tell us about theory and practice/praxis?” We have a good discussion without rapidly coming to proper definitions. Finally, I suggest an assignment.

Go and read Paulo Freire’s booklet *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Observe carefully how he defines theory and practice/praxis. Ask yourselves: What might this mean for my research project? We will talk about it in our next meeting.

## 5. REFLECTION TWO: EXPERIENCES AS SUPERVISOR

As I reflect on all the students I supervised over the past 20 years or so – for the GBFE/UNISA and for other universities – I realise that all of them wanted to write a thesis or dissertation that is of practical relevance.<sup>4</sup>

I also examined the titles and abstracts of roughly 250 Master’s dissertations and Doctoral theses submitted to UNISA through the GBFE between 1999 and 2019. The vast majority (roughly 75%) of these indicate, already in the title, an explicit interest in practical relevance. If we distinguish between research problems based on experience and observation of practice, and those based on previous theories (theoretical or basic research problems, see Terrell 2016: 5-6), we observe that – maybe with a few exceptions – all 250 dissertations/theses are inspired by observations in practice. It is fair to conclude that, in virtually all instances, the students wanted to conduct research that is relevant for their practice.

At the same time, students are struggling with the philosophical and epistemological issues underlying the popular notions of theory and practice. The words “theory/theoretical” and “praxis/practice/practical” are fairly often used in rather colloquial ways. It is thus fundamental to discuss, with students, the terms “theory” and “practice/praxis” and their interrelatedness, as well as the underlying philosophical and epistemological issues.

With this question in mind, we now proceed to the third interaction with the four students and listen to their opinion after reading Paulo Freire.

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<sup>4</sup> In technical terms, they are all “reflective practitioners” seeking further academic studies relating to their professional or ministerial practice. On the concept of “reflective practitioner”, see O’Reilly *et al.* (1999).

## 6. INTERACTION THREE WITH STUDENTS

Andi starts the conversation by confessing that he almost refused to read the book. When he mentioned, to the senior pastor of his evangelical church, that he had to read Paulo Freire, his pastor commented critically: “This is Marxist! Do you really have to read that?”. Andi’s statement immediately launched a controversial discussion on the question as to whether we can learn something from a Marxist educator, who is one of the key figures of Latin American liberation movements. After a while, I intervene and we postpone the answer until the next session when we have read some additional texts. We agree to concentrate on the following question: Do we understand what Freire is saying regarding the concepts “theory” and “practice” or “praxis”?

Betty points to Freire’s (2005:51) definition of “praxis” as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it”. She confesses that she does not yet fully understand Freire’s definition and its implications. However, one thing seems to be clear in this definition – “praxis” is more than action; it also includes reflection.

Debbie adds:

And what about ‘transformation’? I think, he wants to say that proper ‘praxis’, including reflection and action, has an intention, a purpose, a goal: the transformation of the world.

Charlie has a few more statements from Freire in his notes, which he now summarises:

The discovery of the realities of this world ‘cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis’ (Freire 2005: 65). And later Freire adds: ‘[R]eflection – true reflection – leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection’ (Freire 2005: 66).

Charlie adds, “You see, only reflection which leads to action and only action which is reflected constitute true ‘praxis’, according to Freire.” And listen to this:

In chapter 3, Freire talks about the word and he states: ‘There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world’ (Freire 2005: 87).

Charlie asks: “Do you understand that?”

Betty tries to explain:

For Freire, a word which does not intend action is empty 'verbalism'. He says: Such a word 'is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating 'blah'. It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action' (Freire 2005: 87).

Silence!

After a while, Andi reflects:

What would that mean for my research project? I don't want to invest time for useless 'verbalism' ... blah, blah! I like the phrase: '[T]o speak a true word is to transform the world', and the formulation 'commitment to transform'. How can my dissertation not just talk about practices but become praxis? Where is my commitment to transform? – I have to think about that.

Debby confirms and points to a summary statement in Chapter 4 of Freire's book:

[H]uman activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action. It cannot [...] be reduced to either verbalism or activism (Freire 2005: 125).

I bring the discussion to a close by asking:

Do you now understand why I asked you at the beginning about the difference between 'practice' and 'praxis'? 'Practices' performed as individual actions are not the same as 'praxis' as a way of being, which includes action and reflection with a commitment to transform the world. Let us reflect further on the consequences of this distinction.

At the end of the session, we try to articulate issues that need further clarification, and we come up with four questions:

- How should we assess Freire's view of praxis from a biblical point of view?
- What is the philosophical background of Freire's pedagogy of liberation?

- What are the consequences of this understanding of “praxis” for our research projects?
- What are the consequences for theological education?

While I was listening to the conversation, I started selecting suitable texts from my repository of documents. I now suggest the following reading assignments.

For Andi, I have two texts by Clemens Sedmak on “Jesus as a theologian” (1999: 54-74; 2000: 108-129). In addition, I suggest two chapters from Thomas Groome’s *Christian religious education*. Betty can read Chapter 7 on a biblical “way of knowing” (1980: 139-151) and Charlie will read Chapter 8 on the philosophical roots of a “praxis way of knowing” (1980: 149-183). Debbie, who is interested in the educational dimension of the topic, will read a chapter in John Biggs and Catherine Tang’s *Teaching for quality learning at university*, in order to understand the concepts of “declarative” and “functioning” knowledge (2011:81-94).

I ask each participant to present their findings in our next session.

## 7. REFLECTION THREE: FOUNDATIONAL ISSUES

What will all this mean for faculty and supervisors? Let me frame a self-critical question: How do I master these philosophical, epistemological and methodological issues in such a way that I am competent to guide my students safely through the abysses of research and writing? This requires acquaintance with various methodologies and their philosophical and epistemological foundations.

As researchers and supervisors committed to performing our task in the framework of a Christian world view, we also need to assess methodologies and their underlying philosophies from a biblical point of view. In research seminars, I often refer to the Austrian Catholic theologian and philosopher, Clemens Sedmak, who proposes seven statements for a theological epistemology:

1. Theological epistemology has to be distinguished from philosophical epistemology, but it relies on the tools of philosophical theories of knowledge.
2. Theological epistemology has to address a set of rules that guide theological construction of theories and take them into account.
3. Theological epistemology cannot take place without explicit reference to the concept of revelation and with this to a theology of revelation.



4. Theological epistemology is in principle and inherently epistemologically limited.<sup>5</sup>
5. Theological knowledge production is integrated in local contexts.
6. Theological knowledge production follows the principle of 'diversity of methods'.
7. Theological knowledge production cannot happen disconnected from the praxis of faith (Sedmak 2000: 171-193; my translation, BO).

I will not critically review these seven statements. My point is, as supervisors and researchers engage in enquiry that takes practice as point of departure, employing methods of empirical research, they have to clarify what Sedmak calls "a set of rules" that will guide them. These guiding principles have to be reflected theologically. Sedmak's set of principles may provide a valuable point of departure for such reflections.

We now proceed to the fourth interaction with the students, where we discuss theological issues.

## 8. INTERACTION FOUR WITH STUDENTS

Andi reports from his readings of Sedmak on the topic "Jesus as theologian". First, Andi was amazed that Sedmak portrays Jesus as theologian. Sedmak (1999: 55) explicitly asks: "How is Jesus doing theology?". And he comes up with twelve characteristics. Andi summarises Sedmak's statements by referring to an interesting duality. He observed that Sedmak points to a twofold commitment of Jesus. On the one hand, he is committed to God (his Father) and to the tradition of Israel. He theologises out of a personal relationship with God and out of a deep knowledge of Scripture. On the other hand, he is committed to people in their particular contexts, with their specific needs. Andi quotes Sedmak (1999: 60): "Jesus does theology 'as if people mattered'" and confesses:

In Sedmak's portrait of Jesus as theologian I see many similarities with Freire's pedagogy. There is a constant interplay between tradition and the present situation, reflection and action, the normative and the situative. However, beyond Freire, the goal of transformation is not limited to liberation, emancipation and freedom, the goal of transformation is defined by Jesus' message of God's kingdom. Over all, states Sedmak, theology serves God and human beings; it empowers people to act in the Spirit of God in their

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5 Sedmak refers to the "mystery of God" that exceeds human detectability. From this point of view, he critiques the notion of infallibility.

particular situations in history. According to Sedmak, this is how theory and practice are integrated in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Betty reports from her reading of Thomas Groome's *Christian religious education*, especially Chapter 7 on the biblical "way of knowing". She quotes a few statements from Groome on the Hebrew term *yada* (knowing). *Yada* is knowing "more by the heart than by the mind" and "not by standing back from in order to look at, but by active and intentional engagement in lived experience". It involves a "response of the total person", an "entering into relationship with", ultimately "obedience to God's will" (Groome 1980: 141-142). In summary, Groome (1980: 149-159) claims, the biblical way of knowing can be called a "praxis epistemology", which includes a relational, a reflective and an experiential dimension.

Betty is also fascinated by how Groome interprets the narrative of the journey to Emmaus (The Holy Bible [1978], Luke 24:13-35) as paradigmatic for a biblical "way of knowing" (Groome 1980: 135-136). We discuss Groome's interpretation of this story and realise that the process does not begin with a lecture by Jesus, but with a conversation about live experiences and actions. The first action of Jesus is listening to the two disciples and asking questions, which help them think more deeply about their experiences and actions. Only then comes the "teaching", which takes the form of narrating the story of God's actions in history and his vision for life that centres in the resurrection of Christ. Now the two disciples are invited to bring their story and vision in dialogue with God's story and vision. This enables them to live a transformed conduct of life and to become agents of hope and transformation.

Betty shows the group how Groome transfers these insights into a pedagogy for Christian religious education. It includes five steps or phases – Groome (1980:207-208) calls them "movements":

1. Present action: "The participants are invited to name their own activity" and experience (in relation to a certain topic).
2. Critical reflection: "They are invited to reflect on why they do what they do, and what the likely or intended consequences of their actions are."
3. Story and vision: "The educator makes present to the group the Christian community Story [Bible and tradition] concerning the topic at hand and the faith response it invites."
4. Dialectic between the Story and stories: "The participants are invited to appropriate the Story to their lives in a dialectic with their own stories."

5. Dialectic between Vision and visions: “There is an opportunity to choose a personal faith response for the future.”

Again, the “way of knowing” is an action-reflection process that ultimately leads to transformation.

Betty also explains to the group how, according to Groome, the Christian church lost this biblical “way of knowing” as an action-reflection process. Groome shows how the “catechetical model” became the predominant model for Christian religious education throughout history. This means that the cognitive reception of propositional truth statements is the starting point of religious learning. Only in a second step, it is expected that this knowledge will be applied to life and put into practice. Groome (1980:145-149) argues that this is the dominant heritage of Christian education, but not the “way of knowing” we learn from the biblical story.

This observation causes Charlie to intervene, pointing to the understanding of theory and practice in Greek philosophy, discussed by Groome (1980:153-157) in Chapter 8 of his book. After his presentation, we focus only on two aspects. First, the Greek term *praxis*, as used by Aristotle, does not refer to individual actions, the way we use it in the sense of “making” something. For this kind of action, Aristotle would use the term *poiesis*. The term *praxis*, however, refers to the entire conduct of life as “reflective engagement in a social situation” (Groome 1980: 153). This means that, for Aristotle, *praxis* means the way I live my life as an ethically responsible person in society. *Praxis* refers to a life shaped by attitudes and values, virtues and character. Secondly, the term “*poiesis*” refers to productive actions requiring appropriate skills and competences.

The discussion clearly shows the following. If we want to use the term “*praxis*” in the Aristotelian way, then it means more than simply the skills and competences for leadership, for conducting worship services, for preparing a sermon or for the competent performance as a counsellor. “*Praxis*” refers to our very being, our habits, which, in turn, shape everything we are and do. From this point of view, the dichotomy of theory and *praxis* is redundant – theorising is part of *praxis* and not the prerequisite thereof.

Charlie reflects:

Maybe our traditional term ‘practice’ or ‘practices’ corresponds to the Greek *poiesis*, referring to particular productive and performative activities, requiring certain skills and competences, while the more recent English term ‘praxis’ picks up the Greek notion of *praxis*, referring to the entire life lived responsibly in society.

There is much more to be reflected on in view of the research projects of the four students. However, we have to move on. We skip what Groome (1980: 157-169) writes on Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, on the British empiricists and the continental rationalists, on Hegel and Marx – and I ask Charlie to explain to the group Jürgen Habermas' (1980:169-175) concept of “the constitutive interest of the knowing subject”. This will be extremely relevant for the research projects of the four students. Charlie explains:

Habermas is convinced that the researcher brings a deep personal interest to his or her research which will influence the outcome of the research – and quite often, we are not aware of these underlying motivations.

Charlie admits that this made him think about his own research idea. Earlier, he said that he wants to understand the historical traditions behind all the variations of Christian spirituality and worship. But why is he interested in this “understanding”? What is his deeper concern? What does he “really” want to find out? Is there some kind of “hidden agenda”? Is there anything he wants to prove or disprove? Or to change? Or to argue? Does his research idea reflect his personal spiritual search? Or his concern for the church, for mission or for society?

All the others are nodding. Exactly – this is something they want to reflect on in connection with their projects.

Charlie adds:

If Habermas is correct, these deeper interests, concerns and agendas may influence our entire research projects from the formulation of the research problem through the selection of the methodology, up to the interpretation of the data and the conclusions.

Charlie refers to another point Groome (1980:170) takes from Habermas:

In this very concept ‘knowledge constitutive interest’ theory and praxis are integrated. From the outset, the entire research project is rooted in ‘praxis’, in my experiences, concerns and interests, and these are rooted in culture and context. As objective and academic I intend to be, I always start in ‘praxis’ because I am designing and performing the research as a living and acting being – and this is per definition ‘praxis’. I cannot escape ‘praxis’ into a theoretical, objective, a-historical sphere. I can only reflect critically on my deeper ‘knowledge-constitutive interests’ – and I do this in dialogue with existing theories and traditions and with people who represent these existing theories and traditions.

At this point, I suggest that the students carefully study the three main “knowledge-constitutive interests” identified by Habermas. We do not have the time to discuss them in the seminar. But they may help the students identify their own deeper interests, concerns and agendas. In the research proposals, they need to reveal and reflect their “knowledge-constitutive interest” and how this may influence their study.

In the seminar, we now turn to Debbie’s reading assignment. She looked at the terms “declarative knowledge” and “functioning knowledge”, as defined by John Biggs and Catherine Tang in their book, *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Debbie has prepared two quotations, which give us the precise definitions. Biggs and Tang (2011: 81-82) call the first type of knowledge “declarative knowledge”, and they define it as follows:

Declarative knowledge refers to knowing about things, but because it is expressed in symbol systems, usually verbal, it is also called propositional knowledge or content knowledge. Declarative knowledge is public knowledge, subject to rules of evidence that make it verifiable, replicable and logically consistent; it is in libraries and textbooks and on the Internet; it is what teachers ‘declare’ in lectures. The learner’s role is to receive the content by ... reception learning, where the learner’s role is to internalize that pre-existing knowledge meaningfully.

Secondly, they speak of “functioning knowledge”:

Functioning knowledge is knowledge that informs action, where the performance is underpinned by understanding. The learner does not only receive pre-existing knowledge but is actively involved in putting knowledge to work; if declarative knowledge is steered internally to the learner, as it were, functioning knowledge travels externally. Functioning knowledge is what professionals are concerned with; they use theory to inform their decisions on what to do in their professional context, be it solving problems, designing buildings, planning teaching or performing surgery. Functioning knowledge requires a solid foundation of declarative knowledge, but that is not to say that the declarative knowledge must be in place first. In problem-based learning, for example, functioning knowledge and theoretical or declarative knowledge are constructed simultaneously (Biggs & Tang 2011: 82).

After a moment of silent reflection, Andi admits:

So far, I always thought theories are theories, and knowledge is knowledge – and they stand opposite to praxis or practice. Now I learn that there are various types of theories and knowledge. And

furthermore, they do not stand isolated from and in opposition to praxis/practice, they are related and connected in different ways with praxis/practice.

Charlie adds:

In a certain way it is stupid to call a lecture 'too theoretical'. It depends on which kind of theory it transmits. And what I do with this theory – which previous knowledge and experiences I bring to this lecture. And how I construct my 'functioning' or 'applied' theory as I listen to the lecture and reflect my life and work.

Again, we draw the conclusion that theory and praxis/practice are not two separate entities that we somehow have to relate and integrate. This is exactly the point of the pedagogy proposed by Biggs and Tang. Students construct their own functioning knowledge or applied theories in constant interaction between the declarative knowledge of theories and traditions, on the one hand, and their own life experiences and professional challenges, on the other. The good educator will facilitate the learning in this constant interaction between existing theories and the realities of students' lives. The didactical consequences go beyond what we can discuss in this seminar. However, Debbie listened attentively, because she wants to write on the integration of theory and praxis in theological education. She will certainly read the entire book carefully.

I ask the four students one final question. For the final session, I want them to reflect on what all of this means for their research ideas.

## **9. REFLECTION FOUR: INTEGRATION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE LIVES OF THE RESEARCHERS**

While the students are reflecting on this question, we can focus on one additional aspect of our topic. It is perhaps the most powerful dimension of the integration of theory and practice, of reflection and action – the integration of thinking and doing, reflecting and acting in the person of the researcher, teacher and supervisor. If "praxis" is the responsible conduct of life – including all dimensions of being and doing – then "praxis" means the embodied integration of theory and practice in the lives of theologians.

Most recently, this has been put forward again by Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun (2019: 115-147) (in the respective chapter with Justin Crisp) in their manifesto for the renewal of theology. However, this is not a new insight and the references in the footnotes of Volf and

Coasmun's book document a rich tradition emphasising the embodied integration of thinking and acting in the lives of theologians. This means that theorising and practising, as well as integrating the two, is not simply some kind of technical activity by an individual disconnected from his/her very being. This brings a moral dimension to our topic.

Consequently, our conversation on the integration of theory and practice/praxis needs to include aspects of moral formation, ethics, values, and the cultivation of virtues and character (Oxenham 2019). The moral integrity of the researcher, teacher and supervisor is more than simply a "nice-to-have" addition to a *per se* neutral and technical performance of research, writing and teaching. Virtue and character have a decisive epistemic impact. The cultivation of "intellectual virtues" affects the quality of the truth revealed through the research (Murphy 1998; Wood 1998). As we reflect on the integration of theory and practice, we should be aware of the fact that it will not suffice to research and write, talk and reflect with some kind of methodological correctness *about* theory and practice as mere objects of investigation. In the sense of the term "praxis" as life-embracing reality, we actually integrate theory and practice in our lives and in the way in which we conduct this conference as a "social practice" (Murphy 1998: 5-10).

UNISA and the GBFE highly emphasise research ethics. Under the title "academic integrity", we normally focus on issues of plagiarism and empirical research "involving human participants" (UNISA 2017). In fact, the scope of the preamble of UNISA's "Policy on research ethics" (UNISA 2016) is much broader. It states that the academic work at UNISA is "guided by integrity, accountability and rigour in research", that UNISA is

promoting an institutional ethos that is conducive to systematic knowledge development, critical discourse, intellectual curiosity, tolerance and a diversity of views within a framework of academic freedom.

UNISA is committed to provide "an environment for researchers in which they are autonomous, yet ethical in their research practice", and to "enable[e] researchers to maintain ethically responsible research practice" (UNISA 2016: 1).

This emphasis on integrity in academic research is in line with the global discussion on ethics in higher education. In 2015, the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), together with UNISA, convened the 26<sup>th</sup> ICDE World Conference: Growing Capacities for Sustainable Distance E-learning Provision. Ethics in Higher Education was a significant aspect of this conference (Singh & Stükelberger 2017:

13-14). In his presentation, Christoph Stückelberger, founder of globethics.net, identified the following 11 key virtues that make up the desired integrity in higher education: “honesty, compassion, care, transparency, accountability, reliability, respect, humility, courage, gratitude and generosity” (Stückelberger 2017: 42). This is praxis embodied in the lives and work of faculty and students. These are the standards we all are challenged to attain.

Now, let us go back to the four students once more and listen to their reflection on the research topics, in light of what we have discussed in the seminars.

## 10. INTERACTION FIVE WITH STUDENTS

As we examine the four research ideas again, I propose to address three issues:

1. First, we examine the methodological aspects. All four students need to understand research designs that help them put the action-reflection process into practice. We note the history of the see-judge-act cycle and its application to Practical Theology by Rolf Zerfass.<sup>6</sup> Green’s *Let’s do theology* (2009/2018) gives the students a helpful and practical introduction to the four activities: “experiencing”, “exploring”, “reflecting” and “responding”. He also explains the idea of the “spiral” that moves beyond the metaphor of the cycle, emphasising the ongoing development of theories and practices. Some students may find it helpful to apply Osmer’s “Four tasks of Practical Theology” (2008) to their research project. We immediately realise that these methodological insights open up new possibilities for all four projects. Andi realises that it would not be good practice to develop his argument entirely top-down from biblical studies to a practical theory of worship. For Betty, it is now clear that it will not suffice to conduct an empirical study and generate an emerging theory. Somehow, she has to bring the Bible as normative text of the Christian faith into her research design. The historical project of Charlie will need to move beyond the description of historical realities. He needs to find ways to interact with the Bible and theology, on the one hand, and with current realities, on the other. For Debbie, it has become clear that the integration of theory and practice in educational processes cannot merely focus on the balance of, and

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<sup>6</sup> In the German-speaking context, we do this by reading Klein’s *Erkenntnis und Methode in der Praktischen Theologie* (2005: 53-94).



the interplay between theory and skills. She needs to reflect on how students can learn to theologise in the action-reflection process.

2. Secondly, we talk again about the “knowledge-constitutive interest” and reflect on what it means for their research projects, so that they become aware of the fact that they are not researching subjects standing outside and above their topics and their research objects, but that they are an integral part of the project as persons with all their experiences, concerns and hopes. In a very open conversation, we reflect on Andi’s concern for worship practices, which are in accord with a biblical understanding of worship. Andi is able to articulate some of his fears and concerns with regard to some current developments in Christian worship that he is observing. It also becomes clear that he already has rather firm convictions concerning a “biblical” view of worship, and he honestly confesses that he actually wants to prove that his view is correct. Betty shares her deep desire to create and lead worship services that are attractive, relevant and meaningful for her generation. She suffers when she sees how young adults turn away from the church, because they cannot connect with outdated forms of liturgies. Charlie talks again about his personal spiritual journey from a remote experience of Catholic liturgy to charismatic experiences, and he goes beyond what he told us earlier, talking about his time in a small Baptist congregation in a rural area and his visits to Taizé. He frankly states: “I am confused and I want to find out what is behind all these traditions of spirituality and worship.” This was a good moment to talk about the implicit expectations regarding the results of the intended research project. Would a historical study provide the clarifications he is hoping for? Or may it even add to the confusion? How can he bring his own agenda to this research in a constructive way, without being driven only by his personal concerns and hopes? Finally, we listen to Debbie and her disappointment with her experience of traditional top-heavy theological education. We feel the disappointment and even anger. Now she wants to tell them that there are better ways of doing theological education – and it seems clear that “better ways” for her means more practical ways. Debbie realises that her deep frustration with what she experienced in theological education may influence her study and she wants to reflect on this more carefully.
3. Finally, this personal and open conversation gives me an opportunity to address my final concern. The integration of theory and practice is not simply a craft to be learned, in order to write a good dissertation or thesis; it is – in the original sense of the Greek *praxis* – a way of life. I talk with the group about the fact that the integration of theory

and practice – in its deepest sense – does not take place “out there” in the production of a dissertation or thesis, but in their entire lives. I encourage them to reflect on the following two questions. How can this project become an integral part of their lives, in such a way that they will be transformed towards greater maturity? How can their lives become part of the research project in such a way that their experiences and reflections contribute to the transformation of church and society toward God’s vision of life?

## 11. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

To sum up, I return to the topic of this conference. It is hoped that it became clear that our engagement with the integration of theory and practice in theology-related research and education is not merely an intellectual exercise, some kind of academic experiment, trying to find conceptual solutions and work out appropriate techniques to integrate thinking and acting. To be sure, we need rigorous biblical studies, an in-depth understanding of philosophical and epistemological issues, as well as the mastery of appropriate research skills. But this will not suffice. The real “praxis test” for this conference and for our work as educators, supervisors and students will be the following: Will we be able to embody what we are talking about? Will we make it to integrate the topic with our own lives? Will we be able to develop an action-reflection process that has transformative power on our own lives and on our professional work as researchers, teachers and supervisors – ultimately on church and society?

From this perspective, I invite you to read the contributions of this collection of presentations on the theme “Integrating theory and praxis in theological education”.

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