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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



"The Dean and the Educational Fundamentals"

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At a recent consultation with a school I once again encountered the dilemma faced by school leaders who lack a background in the field of education. This school has been in existence for ten years, well past the “make it or break it” point for a private school. They were at a point in their institutional development where they had the luxury of taking a breath and addressing educational issues that had been long ignored in the flying-by-the-seat-of-our-pants phase. They had a new director and a new assistant director who were eager to see the school step up to a new level as an educational institution, but both lacked formal training in the field of education or educational administration. I was struck by the parallels in that scenario with several theological schools who are not yet in their institutional maturity stage. Certainly that has been the case in my own context as a young seminary only twenty years old and experiencing the “growing pains” of leaving institutional adolescence.

My consultation with the school included the faculty, a dedicated and committed group of folks, who also were up to the challenge of taking their school to the next level. What became apparent during the process was how difficult it was for these well-intentioned folks to “think educationally” about their school enterprise. When dealing with questions about mission and vision the teachers’ vision was narrow and focused on their subject areas and their classrooms. They were not able to “think educationally” globally enough to embrace the more fundamental institutional educational concerns. This situation seems akin to someone who lacks a background in music theory being unable to appreciate or “understand” a composition or performance beyond a certain level. Or, it’s like the limitations faced by someone not trained

as an engineer in solving certain problems. When you don't have the language or the basic concepts you don't know how to frame the right questions. Inevitably, what happens is that people go with what they know, frame the issue or problem from that perspective, and then try to address the problem by means that do not actually solve the problem.

Educational issues must be addressed through educational categories. If the problems are educational then the questions asked must be educational ones, using educational concepts, and the solutions tried must be educational ones. The administrators at the school were caught between the pragmatic realities of the institutional infrastructure and organization and lacked the language and tools to "think educationally" about the mission of the school. In other words, neither group was able to ask the educational questions that would help them make educational decisions about the direction they wanted to go with the curriculum, or the programs they wanted to offer. The best they could do was articulate general comments (we want to be the best school in the area; we want to be known as a quality school that attracts quality students; we want to prepare our students for life and work in the 21st century, and we want to set our students on fire (that last, presumably a metaphor and not literally). Here are some of the basic educational questions that can yield educational answers to addressing educational concerns:

- What philosophy of education will inform our school's enterprise? (e.g., Perennialism, Constructivism)
- What principles of learning should we use? (e.g., Discovery learning, direct instruction)
- What should be the major sources of knowledge? (e.g., textbooks, experience, experimentation, teacher's authority and expertise)
- What model of learning will we use? (e.g., specialized or generalized?)
- What guiding metaphors will we use for the curriculum? (e.g., Kindergarten, factory, community, schooling)
- What curricular approach will we use? (e.g., curriculum as praxis, product, or process?)
- What curricular design model will we use for the curriculum? (e.g., Dick & Carey, Gerlach-Ely, Hannafin Peck, Kemp, Knirk & Gustafson, Tripp & Bichelmeyer, Indiana, etc.)
- How will we assess that our students have learned? (e.g., standardized tests, norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, developmental, mastery, understanding, application, demonstration)

These questions consist of the "fundamentals" of any educational enterprise. Deans who lead theological schools must provide informed educational expertise to their institutions. Working at reaching clarity and consensus about these "fundamentals" will lead to effectiveness in teaching and learning.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2012/06/the-dean-and-the-educational-fundamentals/>