Educating Ministers of Character

Approaching the Curricula for Common Awards

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide a secure foundation in both theology and the psychology of learning for the educational goals and methods described in the 'Preface' and 'Proposal' for the Common Awards and in particular for their relationship to the world of Higher Education. According to the 'Preface' the Common Awards are both 'in the world' of contemporary HE but not 'of that world' (2). This bold statement is fleshed out by the claim that the epistemology that will underpin CA is 'wider and deeper' than that which informs much of HE. Whereas the epistemology of contemporary HE can appear to divide theory and practice into separate categories that of CA will maintain a more holistic approach, integrating theory and practice and seeking the kind of knowledge that, 'shapes the emotions, hones virtue and fuels passion after the pattern of Christ.' The Preface goes on to state that the methodologies of theological reflection will be an important facet of the kind of learning envisaged. In offering a pattern of education that 'reasserts the necessary unity of faith and learning, of knowledge and divine revelation, of the pursuit of truth and the nurturing of virtue,' the claim is made that this constitutes a return to the Christian roots of education.

These are bold claims, and even bolder is the attempt to instantiate such claims in the practice of over twenty institutions bound by common goals and common curricula. But what are the epistemological foundations of such claims? How is knowledge being defined? And if it can be satisfactorily defined, what are the appropriate educational methodologies that flow from this approach to knowledge and learning? The conclusion of this paper, based on extensive research in the fields of epistemology and psychology of learning, is that the kind of knowledge broadly indicated in the Preface can indeed be satisfactorily defined and that it does, in fact, underpin a wider and more satisfactory approach to learning than much contemporary HE practice. In this respect, it has the potential, as the Preface and Proposal imply, to form a distinctly Christian contribution to the understanding of learning and formation.

Education and character

A recent report from the University of Birmingham under the auspices of the organisation 'Learning for Life' begins an exploration of the way higher education institutions tend to focus on intellectual attainment and the mastery of specific transferable skills to the neglect of qualities of character. The research summarised in the report provides a telling illustration of the 'disquieting suggestion' with which Alasdair MacIntyre begins *After Virtue*, namely the impoverishment of our culture by the loss of an agreed framework within which to think and talk about questions of character and virtue (1985, 2). Asked about the concept of 'character', a selection of students, all of whom had performed well at A-level,

became incoherent and confused. They showed some ability to recognise and describe the qualities of good character but also a constant tendency to confuse character with personality, leadership ability or the 'soft skills' of interpersonal relations. Friendship was routinely confused with friendliness, 'good business practice' seen by some as more important than good character, and qualities like self-control, courage and justice almost entirely absent from the responses. The students did recognise that personal values function to define both character and personal goals and translate into moral imperatives; and significantly, they also recognised the importance of specific role models such as parents and teachers in the learning of values. But taken as a whole their answers demonstrate the absence of a conceptual framework within which such observations make sense (Arthur, Wilson and Godfrey, 22-48).

The call and education of men and women to become ministers in God's church requires them to recognise, develop, inhabit, teach and model qualities of Christian character. The Church is called to embody a shared orientation to life and pattern of relationships based on the example of Christ. The mission of God, from which the Church derives its existence and purpose, is an overflow of the loving relating of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Church's *telos*, and the measure of its maturity, is found in its conformity to the loving example of Christ. Without that love at its heart, any attempt to respond to God's call to mission can result only in anxious activism. Its ministers must therefore be first and foremost men and women who live and teach the love of God through the quality of lives moulded by the Holy Spirit.

As Dan Hardy concludes in an article on local ministry, a collaborative pattern of ministry called for by the mission of God, 'will call for new conceptions of theological education and formation, not simply forms of the old adapted for wider use' (2006, 147). And Stephen Pickard remarks at the outset of his major study of the Church's developing theology of ordained ministry, 'To exercise ministry in a collaborative manner requires spiritual maturity' (2008, 1). This places the development of ministerial character, with the growth in virtue that entails, at the heart of the curriculum: not merely an outcome of the 'hidden curriculum' embodied in the ethos and practices of the training institution but an integral part of its approach to teaching and learning. And this task takes place against the background of a culture, and in particular an education system, which to a significant extent lacks the facility to discern and promote the formation of qualities of character.

Linked with the development of character, and an integral part of it, is reflective practice: the ability to make wise decisions in the complexities of life. Donald Schon begins his book, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* thus:

> In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of this situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large ... while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner must choose. Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve

relatively unimportant problems according to prevailing standards of rigor, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems and non-rigorous enquiry? (1987, 3)

Implicit in this quotation is a contrast between the world of higher education, in which problem-solving proceeds according to explicit criteria as students are taught to master the conventions of a given discipline, and that of 'real life' where situations are rarely so clear-cut. Implicit also is the question of how to bridge the gap: how to make the rigorous learning of the high ground relevant and accessible in the swamp of messy but important problems.

One response is to attempt to tidy up the messiness of daily life. Joseph Dunne (2011, 15-17) deplores the tendency to organise and regulate even people-centred practices such as nursing and social work according to the dictates of 'technical rationality'. According to Dunne, this involves the 'disembedding of the knowledge implicit in the skilful performance of characteristic tasks' in order to abstract what is essential and encapsulate it in generalizable and explicit formulae. Little value and no trust are placed in the practitioner's acquired tacit understanding of her task and role. In any given situation she has nothing to do but to apply the appropriate formula without the need for any discernment or insight specific to the particulars of the situation. Control, efficiency and accountability seem to be assured by eliminating the requirement of discretion or judgement. 'The ideal,' concludes Dunne, is a '"practitioner-proof" mode of practice.'

Chaplains in the health service may recognise in this description overtones of the scenario in which they are continually required to justify their place in the organisation according to criteria that bear little or no relationship to the human situations they encounter on a day to day basis. It is relatively easy to discern in the drive for 'technical rationality' a deep social malaise: a flight from person to person interaction and mutual responsibility sustained by ruthless suppression of the very criteria of judgement that would enable those involved to recognise the situation in this way. The point Dunne makes, however, is that this approach to practice is premised on a specific understanding of *knowledge itself*: only the disembedded and the rational is allowed to count as 'knowledge' and the legitimacy of situation specific judgement is denied. Theological educators can at least be expected to recognise and seek to avoid this malaise. But there arises a deeper question equally relevant to ministry as to any people-centred practice: how to grasp the *kind of knowledge* that equips and sustains the genuinely reflective practitioner. And, following from this, what kind of knowledge is embodied in the virtues of Christian character that uphold the practice of ministry and how does the teaching-learning process contribute to the development of this knowledge?

As an alternative to technical rationality Dunne offers the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* as the foundation of a distinctive 'professional wisdom' (2011, 17-25). According to Aristotle *phronesis* is a third kind of knowing alongside *episteme*, that is objective or 'scientific' knowledge, and *techne*, skill or craft knowledge. In our culture, the idea of *phronesis* is unfamiliar and difficult to grasp. In contrast to the other two ways of knowing, it has not spawned related English terms, like 'technical' or 'epistemological'. The word *phronesis* itself resists a precise rendering into English and has been translated variously as practical wisdom, prudence and intelligence (Briers and Ralphs 2009, 480).

But even without being able to define it precisely, for many of those writing in the field of professional education the concept of *phronesis* seems to point to a vital and elusive quality of the competent practitioner. *Phronesis* seems to include both an intellectual and an ethical component. In the context of leadership John Adair sums it up as 'intelligence' + 'experience' + 'goodness' (Adair 2005, 54-5). For Hans-Georg Gadamer it is an intellectual virtue but at the same time more than intellectual. It is linked to the *sensus communis*, the wisdom held corporately in society often simply called 'common sense'. It is orientated to a life that reflects the values of a given community (1985, 22).

Something that appears to define the concept more closely is the dynamic and flexible relationship in *phronesis* between the general and the particular such that neither predominates. 'Practical wisdom' includes the ability to intuit the relationship between the features of a particular situation and a general rule and then to respond flexibly in the light of the rule but as the situation demands. It begins to look like a set of rules, acquired on the basis of experience, for the way general rules are to be applied. In the words of Joseph Dunne, 'To be practically wise or a person of good judgement is to be able to recognise situations, cases or problems as perhaps standard or typical – that is to say, of a type that has been met previously and for which there is already an established and well-rehearsed rule, recipe or formula – or as deviating from the standard and conventional, and in either case, to be capable of dealing with them adequately and appropriately' (2011, 17). Briers and Ralphs quote Richard Bernstein as follows: '*Phronesis* is a form of reasoning and knowledge that involves a distinctive mediation between the universal and the particular. This mediation is not accomplished by any appeal to technical rules or method … or by the subsumption of a pregiven determinate universal to a particular case. The 'intellectual virtue' of *phronesis* is a form of reasoning yielding a type of ethical know-how in which what is universal and what is particular are co-determined'(2009, 481). Here an explicit link is made between the capacity to exercise sound judgement in the messy but important human situations encountered in Schon's 'swamp' and 'a type of ethical know-how', which we may be justified in connecting with the exercise of good character. And Dunne is one of a number of writers who recognise the relevance of virtue ethics to the concept of professional wisdom. In fact, for some 'professional wisdom' comes close to being a virtue ethic for a given field of practice (Vokey and Kerr 2011; Campbell 2011; Carr 2011).

As long ago as 1987 the influential report, *Education for the Church's Ministry*, referred to Edward Farley's recovery of the ancient meaning of 'theology' as *habitus*, a 'cognitive disposition and orientation of the soul'; 'a *practical*, not theoretical, habit having the primary character of wisdom' (1983, 35). The report proposed that the goal of ministerial education be seen as the acquisition of 'the wisdom and godly habit of life which are engendered by God's self-presentation in the world and by his grace in the Christian' along with the understanding of 'how they are to be exercised in and through the corporate ministry of the Church of England and for the world' (1987, 46). It continues: 'Theological education should therefore seek to form the ordinand in this wisdom and godly habit of life as a virtue bestowed by the grace of God' (1987, 47). More recently the Hind report asked that the Church of England's training institutions seek to enable their students to appropriate theology as 'inhabited wisdom' and calls this a 'guiding principle' of ministerial education

(2003,45) The Church's expectations for its ordinands are therefore completely in line with an approach to professional education which sees the heart of training as the acquisition of a certain *type* of knowing: practical rather than simply theoretical, value-based, arising from consistent ethical qualities while remaining responsive to the specifics of situations. Theology as *habitus* constitutes a virtue ethic specific to Christian discipleship and ministry.

Rowan Williams catches something of what this might mean in these words: 'A theologically educated person is someone who has acquired the skill of reading and interpreting the world in the context and framework of Christian belief and Christian worship ... not someone who simply knows a great deal about the Bible or history of doctrine but somebody who is able to engage in some quite risky and innovative interpretation and ... to recognize holy lives' (2004). Significantly, the Archbishop describes the type of knowing required of the minister as a 'skill', not so much something to be stored as to be used. The skill consists of interpretation: this type of knowing is not so much a 'knowing about' as a knowing *through*. It is the skill of deploying a previously acquired framework of understanding so as to recognize the significant and important in a given situation and discern how best to respond. As Dunne puts it, 'Professional wisdom brings an attunement to the fabric of a particular field of practice – a tutored attunement … that enables good practitioners intuitively, perhaps even effortlessly, to home in on what is salient and needful' (2011, 24). And finally, Williams sees one outcome of this way of knowing as being the ability to 'discern holy lives', to recognize qualities of character embodied in the practice of others, which brings us back full circle to the way in which the students in the Birmingham study learned what they knew of good character – from significant others.

But is this type of knowing, practical, hermeneutical and value based, some distinct and mysterious mode of knowing entirely different from the more familiar 'standard' approaches to knowledge pursued in schools and universities? Does it therefore lie outside the capacity of a training institution to plan its methods of teaching and learning with theological *habitus* as its goal? On the contrary: what I hope to show, by drawing on my own research (2004), is that in fact *all* knowing is a 'knowing through'; all knowing is practical; all knowing is hermeneutical; all knowing incorporates values; and all learning takes place within communities of practice and embodies the shared goals of those communities. The pursuit of knowledge as *episteme*, detached, objective and aimed at control, and with it the exaltation of technical rationality, serves only to obscure this essential truth. In fact, *episteme* is an abstraction from practical, situated knowing, as technical rationality consists of the disembedding of standard practices from their location in interpersonal exchange. The rigour of Schon's 'high, hard ground' serves the useful purpose of introducing students to specific ways of thinking and honing a limited range of cognitive skills, but in order to be fruitful it must be 're-embedded' as a component of *phronesis,* which is practical, corporate, value-laden and consists largely of tacit expertise.

The way we know things

Just after World War II Jerome Bruner and Leo Postman recruited 28 students from Harvard and Radcliffe Universities for an experiment in perception (1949). The experiment made use

of a piece of equipment called a tachistoscope, capable of projecting an image for small fractions of a second. The images used were ordinary playing cards and students were exposed to these several times in flashes of gradually increasing duration until they recognized the card. Among the cards Bruner and Postman had included some 'trick' cards, such as a black 3 of hearts or red 6 of spades. Unsurprisingly, it took the students much longer – that is more exposures of longer duration – to recognize these cards for what they were.

Most interesting, however, were the various ways the students tried to make sense of the anomalous cards. Some displayed a 'dominance' reaction, confidently identifying the card by one of its features and ignoring the other. So a red 6 of spades might be identified as 'the 6 of spades' or 'the 6 of hearts' depending on whether the students responded to shape or colour. Another type of failure was the compromise reaction. Students would say the card looked purple, or brown, or had black shapes on a reddish card. Some experienced disruption: complete failure to recognize the card. One even declared he had forgotten what playing cards looked like. Finally there occurred what Bruner and Postman called the 'My God!' reaction, when students suddenly recognized the trick card for what it really was. Unsurprisingly, once this took place, they were much quicker at recognizing subsequent anomalous cards.

The playing card experiment is just one of many that demonstrate the influence of prior learning on perception. It is not difficult to see what was happening to the students. They all came to the experiment with a well-developed expectation for what playing cards look like based on previous experience. To use the term developed in cognitive science in the 1970s, they had a 'schema' for playing cards. This schema enabled them to recognize ordinary cards extremely quickly and with no difficulty. But it also actively hindered them from recognizing the unusual cards, which did not fall within their established expectations. In some cases their perceptions were governed by the schema, in others the schema was disrupted by the anomalous data presented to their senses. But in the end the schema proved capable of modification in response to experience and, once modified, the resulting, more adequate schema allowed them to cope with the experimental conditions.

It is also not too difficult to see that what the schema enabled was a skilful performance. The students' knowledge of playing cards did not take the form simply of a store of information waiting to be referred to. It formed an active expectation capable of both directing and responding to perception. And significantly, the boundaries of their playing-card schemas appeared to be 'fuzzy' rather than rigid. Although primed to expect playing-cards, their knowledge enabled them to respond not only to playing cards but also to playing card-like objects.

The word schema was first used by Sir Frederic Bartlett in his ground-breaking study, *Remembering,* published in 1932. Bartlett's work on memory demonstrates all the same features as Bruner and Postman's on perception, namely that memory is responsive to expectation. A picture of a notice by a gate with writing too small to decipher was nevertheless positively remembered as saying 'Trespassers Will be Prosecuted'. A pattern of lines labelled 'An Airoplaxe' was remembered as 'An Aeroplane' by all except the one

subject for whom the lines had not suggested the shape of an aeroplane. 'A great amount of what is said to be perceived,' Bartlett concluded, 'is in fact inferred' (1932, 33). Even more important, he concluded that in all perception there is an 'effort after meaning': that perception is a purposeful activity in which we are constantly locating ourselves in our surroundings by searching for meaning.

Our schemas, whether for playing cards, notices or aeroplanes, form sections of our 'tacit knowledge', the stored knowledge based on previous experience, which we use to interpret the present. Together they form a 'model' or picture of the world 'in our heads', which we are constantly comparing with the 'real' world of experience. But the way knowledge is organized 'in our heads' is not like the 'explicit' knowledge we can describe and give an account of in speech and writing. Tacit knowledge is not like an encyclopaedia sitting on a shelf or on the memory drive of our computers, passively waiting to be accessed. It is 'actively organised' to create a flexible set of expectations giving us a 'readiness to respond'. In other words, we are automatically geared to learn: we need and want to make sense of our surroundings and learning is a constant process of interpretation and reinterpretation of all we experience. Whereas 'explicit knowledge' consists of a more or less static 'knowing about', a snap-shot of a particular moment in the learning process, tacit knowledge is an active and continually updated 'knowing through': the deployment of existing knowledge to present experience (Anderson 1995; Bruner 1951; Bruning, Shraw and Ronning 1995; Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Minsky 1975; Neisser 1976; Norman, Gentner and Stevens 1976; Rumelhart and Ortony 1977; Rumelhart and Norman 1978).

If we ask what tacit knowledge is like – exactly how the knowledge in our heads is organized – the closest we can get is that it is like patterns. Among the best illustrations of this feature is an experiment by Chase and Simon (1973) using chess problems. In their first trial they presented a series of chess games, all in mid-game, to chess masters, experienced players below the rank of master, and beginners, asking each to reconstruct the games from memory. The masters were twice as good at reconstructing the games as the experienced players who, in their turn, were twice as good as the beginners. In the second trial they presented a series of meaningless arrangements of the pieces. This time the masters were actually *worse* at reconstructing the games than either of the other two groups. Chase and Simon suggested that expertise in chess consists in the ability to store and name the various configurations of pieces thrown up in the course of a typical game along with a flexible repertoire of responses to each standard situation. At least two significant implications follow. First, tacit knowledge does not consist of concepts or propositions: these, although figuring prominently in 'explicit' knowledge, the way knowledge is described and codified, are not of the essence of tacit knowledge.[1]And second, we are back in the territory of the people-oriented professions, in which expert practitioners recognize both standard situations and deviations from them and are able to respond flexibly to the particulars of

[1] This is recognised by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason.* According to Kant, the application of concepts to experience requires the use of 'schemas' which can themselves be neither concepts nor images but which mediate between images and concepts. In other words, their function is to mediate between the general and the particular. 'This schematism of our understanding, in its application to appearances and their mere form,' he wrote, 'is an art concealed in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover.' (1929, 182-3)

each given situation. Whether in the case of chess, medical diagnosis, responding to a class of students or conducting a funeral, the relevant schemas of tacit knowledge attune the practitioner to the situation, uniting the general and the particular and enabling intelligent flexible response.

Thomas Kuhn suggests that the relationship between schemas, each consisting of a configuration of standard patterns, is one of likeness or analogy.[2] He discovered that physics students were able to progress from one standard problem to another by perceiving a likeness between problems new to them and familiar problems they had already learned how to solve (1969, 189). He went on to suggest that progress in science takes place as researchers recognize the likenesses between the new situation they are investigating for the first time and related situations already covered by existing theory. Major developments in science take place when the scientific community learns to see situations in entirely new ways, which prove more adequate to the known experimental data. This is his theory of 'paradigm change' in which a paradigm consists of a pattern or model for interpreting a given area of experience. He further theorized that the paradigm shared by a particular scientific community consists in fact of a set of standard examples, which he labelled 'exemplars' (1974). These exemplars suggest how the scientists might interpret the particular sets of data with which they are working. In other words, as in Dunne's account of *phronesis*, a scientific paradigm attunes the scientists to what is salient in a given situation and suggests the most profitable avenues for further research.

Using a schema to interpret a situation is, then, the selection of a pattern that seems to fit the situation. For most of our experience this is a lightning-quick, subconscious but intelligent performance allowing us to make sense of and respond flexibly to the situations we encounter day by day. In some cases, however, the selection of an appropriate schema is more problematic. These include all new learning, where the student often has to be guided to find the right analogy in his experience, whether the meaning of a passage of Scripture, the doctrine of the church, the way to conduct a piece of liturgy or the best approach to a bereaved family. Interpersonal situations in particular throw up potential problems through the selection of inappropriate schemas. One of the recognized barriers to adult education is the student's previous experience of school, either because it predisposes them to expect a particular style of teaching and learning or because the new situation brings back unpleasant recollections of the former, similar one: perhaps of failure and humiliation. Similarly with the experience of going to church: many people will look back on experiences of isolation and uncertainty which make them reluctant to engage again. And while some people approach new situations expecting success and acceptance, others fear failure and rejection. Knowing how to select the most appropriate schema for a given situation and how to work with it is a key element in the skill of the reflective practitioner.

So how are schemas selected – and how can the educator guide the student in the selection of appropriate schemas that promote new learning? They are selected by analogy, by the perception of similarity between one situation and another. And this provokes the key

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[2] The idea that the 'logic of discovery' might be analogical in character had already been suggested by Norbert Russell Hanson in 1959 (see Hanson 1961).

question: similar in respect to what? What is it that influences the mind, whether consciously or unconsciously, in the perception of similarity between present situations and previous experience? And in what form do we find the 'rules for the deployment of rules' necessary for the formation of situation-specific judgements? Here the answer suggested by research takes us into the field of affect and value: it is 'salience'. We choose between schemas on the basis of what we judge to be most important. It is possible to illustrate this from several fields of research.

The Sudoku puzzles presented for entertainment in many newspapers commonly use numbers. But each puzzle would work equally well if it were to be solved using letters, shapes or colours – and books of Sudoku puzzles are available using musical notes. This distinction between the logical form of a problem and the symbols used in solving it was the basis of the work done by Richard Odom and his fellow-workers in the 1970s on 'perceptual salience'. First testing children to find out which of a range of variables, such as colour, shape, letters and numbers, they responded to most readily, he then set them logically identical puzzles using the full range of variables and found that children consistently did better in the tests when they were using the variables that were more salient for them. Odom even devised a problem that most adults get wrong while most children get right because it contains a sentence that signals that it is to be solved on the basis of probability – something that is salient for most adults, who understand and are familiar with it, but much less so for children. In the problem using probability gives the wrong answer, thus catching most of the adults out! (Odom and Guzman 1970; Odom and Corbin 1973; Odom, Astor and Cunningham 1975; Odom, Cunningham and Astor 1975)

Experiments on 'selective attention' show that we are capable of filtering out most of the conversation in a noisy room in order to devote attention to the person we are actually conversing with. But as soon as someone mentions something important to us – perhaps our name or that of our favourite football team – our attention is diverted. Not only does this show that we are, in fact, hearing but ignoring almost all of the extraneous conversation, it also suggests something much more important: that our perception is guided by judgements of importance. The schemas of our tacit knowledge, through which we are actively and continually searching our surroundings, include judgements of subjective value (Moray and Fitter 1973; Neisser 1976, 79-80; Barber and Legge 1976, 77-90).

A third illustration is the way in which the behaviour predicted by cognitive dissonance theory mirrors Aristotle's description of practical reasoning. McIntyre discerns four essential elements in Aristotle's approach: the agent's wants and goals, which form the context for his reasoning; a major premise in the form that something is a practical good; a minor premise asserting that a particular pattern of behaviour contributes to the good; and the resulting action (1985, 161-2). Cognitive dissonance theory asserts that human beings experience a drive to reduce dissonance by aligning their actions with their perceptions of value. The perceptions, 'I am a smoker,' (minor premise) and 'Smoking is damaging to health,' (major premise) cause dissonance if the context takes the form of a perception, 'I am a rational person who desires to maximise my health.' In such a situation there is a wide variety of ways by which a person might construct the situation subjectively in order to reduce the dissonance inherent in a straightforward application of practical reasoning. They might give

up smoking (thus removing the minor premise) or take steps to minimise the subjective importance of the major premise, such as by convincing themselves of the lack of reliability of the scientific evidence or by ignoring the research as far as possible. Or they might incorporate into their perception of the context a group of friends and colleagues who also smoke, suggesting that such behaviour really is rational, or by giving high value to the right of the individual to make choices about their own life. All these perceptions take the form of tacit knowledge expressed in schemas (Festinger 1957; Greenwald and Ronis 1978; Aronson 1999).

Since values are part and parcel of the way we perceive, construct and interpret the world character is integral to the way we know things. First, character is the outcome of experience: the way in which our prior learning is encoded in schemas which involve judgements of relative value about situations we have encountered in the past. And second, character is expressed in a disposition to interpret and respond to the world in a certain way. Thus reflective practice is an expression of character and a suite of curricula aimed at the formation of reflective practitioners implies methods of teaching, learning and assessment that take account of and include judgements about qualities of character.

And finally, practical wisdom, as we saw in an earlier section, is an expression of the values held in common by a particular community so it is hardly surprising that research clearly shows that we learn *together* in communities of practice, be they in the family, school, University or workplace. Even the natural world is culturally defined: we learn to recognise trees, birds, houses and cars from other people. Eskimos, it is said, have 15 different words for snow and can tell the difference between each type, whereas those of us in less snowy climates make do with 'snow'. And if even the natural world is culturally constructed how much more is this true of the interpersonal, social world, which does not involve an independently existing physical reality? Thus in Britain attitudes to authority have changed appreciably over the past 50 years or so with the result that there are now significant generational difference between those who learned attitudes to authority in the 1950s and those who grew up in the 1960s, 1970s and subsequent periods, while the country as a whole has also changed as the attitudes of younger people have spread unevenly down the generations.

People convey the way they think and feel in manifold ways through gesture, phraseology and tone of voice and most people have the facility for picking up and accurately interpreting these signals. Thus attitudes and constellations of value are effectively passed on from generation to generation in families and conveyed through the 'hidden curriculum' or shared mores of institutions such as workplaces, churches, colleges and courses. Our default method of learning is to pick up schemas or ways of thinking from others through interpretation of their speech and behaviour. We also learn from one another in formal situations, students picking up from their teachers or supervisors ways of understanding subjects and situations. Soviet psychologist of learning Lev Vygotsky (1962; 1978) coined the term 'zone of proximal development' as a way of describing one person's readiness to learn from another. Following Vygotsky's lead, experiments by James Wertsch (1979) and his colleagues have demonstrated the way in which schemas of understanding are passed on from person to person in the zone of proximal development. Outside this zone in one

direction lies the area in which we are quite capable of learning unaided. In the other lie the concepts and experience we are unlikely to be able to learn at all since the present state of our knowledge does not contain the schemas we would require to make sense of the new experience. Between these two lies an area where we are capable of learning as long as someone else comes alongside to help, providing 'scaffolding' to enable us to grow in our understanding. According to this way of portraying the learning situation all effective formal learning takes place in the zone of proximal development. It involves the teacher, as a facilitator of learning, becoming aware of the prior understanding of the students and structuring the learning in such a way as to enable them to incorporate the new concept into the existing structure of their understanding.

Recognition of an inescapably corporate element in learning and knowing suggests that in any given situation the most important knowledge is not the possession of an individual but the shared tacit knowledge of the community. This suggests that the tendency of higher education to focus exclusively on individual learning may, in fact, be counterproductive: not only does it omit reference to the tacit knowledge held in common by the community but may actually desensitise practitioners to its existence. In contrast, the judgement exercised by the reflective practitioner in response to the complex and important problems of everyday life depends on and needs to take account of the shared construction of the situation by all those involved. As Etienne Wenger writes, 'Our knowledge is always too big, too rich, too ancient and too connected for us to be the source of it individually' (1998, 141). The skill of the practitioner will be to inhabit this shared construction; to bring it to consciousness for all those others involved; to analyse and reflect on this shared construction, calling on the shared wisdom of the group; and to propose appropriate actions or ways of re-constructing the situation more fruitfully. In this process the reflexivity of the practitioner, her ability to listen with appropriate empathy and humility, to challenge or propose potential courses of action, her grasp of the human values inherent in the situation and her ability to instantiate these in the particulars of the problem, all involve well-integrated, tried and tested qualities of character.

Implications for Common Awards

To educate for character and skilful reflective practice is, therefore, to educate for *tacit* knowledge since tacit knowledge is operant knowledge, the knowledge *through which* we interpret the world and decide how to respond intelligently. As Rowan Williams expressed it, the goal of ministerial formation is not that students end up knowing a great deal 'about the Bible or history of doctrine' and able to reproduce this knowledge in essays. It is that they learn to interpret the world through the lens of Christian faith and respond habitually to situations in a way that expresses Christian character. To educate for character, however, is nothing more than to gear methods of teaching and learning to the ways in which people *actually learn* in informal as well as formal situations. In brief this can be summed up in three words: *reflection* on *experience* in *community*. These three constants, expressed through manifold methods of teaching, learning and assessment, enable the integration of all the new insights encountered during training with the existing learning expressed in tacit knowledge

in a way that pays full attention to the wisdom of the Christian community, past and present.

In the light of his study of the learning that takes place in communities of practice, Etienne Wenger draws an instructive comparison with the methods of teaching and learning typically employed in institutions of HE. 'If we believe,' he writes,

> 'that knowledge consists of pieces of information explicitly stored in the brain, then it makes sense to package this information in well-designed units, to assemble prospective recipients in a classroom where they are perfectly still and isolated from any distraction, and to deliver this information to them as succinctly and articulately as possible … But if we believe that knowledge stored in explicit ways is only a small part of knowing … then the traditional format does not look so productive. What does look promising are inventive ways of involving students in meaningful practices, of providing access to resources that enhance that participation … and of involving them in actions, discussion, and reflections that make a difference to the communities they value.'(1998, 9-10)

Wenger puts his finger on the weakness of the traditional academic approach to teaching: despite its much-vaunted pursuit of high standards it fails to examine that most basic of questions for any academic institution: what knowledge actually is. Wenger's definition of knowledge is 'competence with respect to valued enterprises': the skill of competent performance in one's chosen field (1998, 4). The explicit and rigorous knowledge of the academy may appear to fulfil this criterion: it is precisely what is required in the context of this highly valued enterprise. But this kind of knowledge, highly valued as it may be, is only a 'snap-shot', an abstraction from the real process of learning.

First, it is vital to take account of students' existing experience. No one comes to formation for ministry without a prior knowledge of Christian faith, the prior knowledge they are used to living out of and using to interpret the world of experience. In the words of Jeff Astley (2002) they already possess an 'ordinary theology', the theology of the person who lacks formal training. No one comes to ministerial formation needing to learn theology for the first time: the task is to help them refine the theology they already possess. A course on ecclesiology therefore needs to engage with students' existing experience and beliefs about the Church; a course on salvation with students' existing perceptions of what is wrong in the human condition and the solutions required. 'One of the most frustrating things in ordination training,' wrote Michael Williams after sixteen years' experience, 'is seeing students pass through a two or three year programme of studies where they enjoy the debate, relish new ideas, learn new skills, but after six months into ordained ministry they revert to the same set of beliefs and ministerial practices that they had on day one of the course.' (1996, 22) But this result is only too typical of courses where new ideas and new skills are taught without reference to students' previous experience or where they are not helped to integrate them into the existing tacit structure of their understanding. In each case 'formal' theology, the theology of the classroom, needs to become 'operant' or 'enacted theology': the theology ordinands actually practise in their lives. Otherwise, the structures of theology offered in the classroom form a schema of their own in tacit knowledge, unrelated

to habitual practice. Each module, therefore, requires exercises, both formative and summative, requiring students to integrate new knowledge with past experience. Equally valuable is the 'summative reflection' required by some portfolio-based assessment, which requires students to place their learning in the context of their discipleship and ministry.

Another implication of the vital importance of engaging with existing experience is that learning takes time. The passing over of information with little time allowed for processing is barren and may even be counter-productive. This means a limit on the amount of new content likely to be fruitful. Courses rich in content may look impressive judged by the standards of the traditional academic approach but actually fail students for whom the goal is reflective practice. One aspect of the subject area thoroughly digested so that knowledge of it becomes a skill for interpreting and responding to the world may be more valuable than half a dozen sitting idly in a student's folder.

It is equally important that learning incorporates practice and the opportunity to reflect on practice. Role plays, case studies and simulations are far more effective at uncovering the value dimensions of any particular area of learning than are talks and discussions. Opportunities for students to do something, such as prepare or preach a sermon, present a seminar, visit a patient in hospital, plan and conduct a service, and then receive feedback from tutors and peers present by far the most productive learning activities. Even the chance to apply new learning by means of a classroom exercise may be a better use of time than lengthening the lecture to include more content. Formative and summative assessment need to include tasks requiring application and reflection such as the integrative elements suggested in the Proposal for Common Awards. And a portfolio approach in which students are asked to reflect on their learning as part of the final assessment is more productive still.

Assessment must also take into account that reflective practice involves a broader range of cognitive skills than traditional academic theology. In relation to David Kolb's learning cycle the 'high, hard ground' of academic rigour typically challenges the student in just two phases the cycle, those of 'abstract conceptualization' and, to some extent, 'reflective observation'. Kolb identified four modes of learning, one for each element of the cycle, which he christened 'apprehension', 'intention', comprehension' and 'extension', using terms drawn from his sources, chiefly Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget (1984, 39-43). Unfortunately Kolb did not attempt to describe these modes of learning and knowledge but was content merely to define them in relation to one another, which leaves the task to those of us engaged on the formation of curricula for learning intended to equip the Church's ministers as reflective practitioners: men and women who habitually and confidently learn from experience.

The mode of learning appropriate to the 'concrete experience' phase of Kolb's cycle, might be described as 'attentive receptivity', that ability to listen to another, to the situation, and to God which lies at the heart of all ministry. This is the ability to pay attention to the particulars of a situation, putting aside presuppositions and postponing conclusions, in order to discern the way the situation appears to those involved. It may be the equivalent of noticing the shape of a leaf, the texture of bark and play of light and shade without imposing the concept 'this is a tree'. Kolb correctly discerns that what he calls 'apprehension', the

ability to grasp concrete experience, is in dialectical tension with 'comprehension', the ability to conceptualise that experience. That the ability to cope with this dialectic is a deep-rooted capacity of the human mind is clear from the playing card experiment, in which the students required the flexibility both to categorise the standard playing cards and to recognise the non-standard cards for what they were. But in the 'swampy lowlands' of real-life situations, attentive receptivity also requires qualities of character: the patience to wait until the shape of a problem becomes clear, the courage to risk challenge or change, temperateness in order to resist being swayed by first impressions (Dunne 2011, 18-19).

The minister is also required to instantiate her theological concepts: to recognise specific instances as examples of theology in practice. She needs the facility to apply theology to practice: to recognise which passages of the Bible might speak to the complex ethical problem faced by a member of her congregation; or what aspect of Christ's life and teaching, passion and resurrection might speak to a particular decision of the PCC or church meeting. She needs also to recognise those occasions when a particular experience challenges her received theological understanding and know how to respond in such a situation. Here again courage and humility, empathy and patience will form part of her equipment.

All this suggests that theological reflection (TR) forms the core of the curriculum. TR deliberately pauses the learning cycle, requiring students to analyse their habitual response to particular situations. It provides an opportunity to try out several different 'lenses' through which to approach a given situation. It introduces Scripture, tradition and theology and asks students to use these as the lens through which to interpret the world. It brings to bear the wisdom of the Christian community, both past and present. It involves the exercise of judgement and creativity. It requires the student to suggest ways in which the insights gained through reflection might be expressed in practice. It thus plays a direct role in forming the *habitus* of the student, encouraging her to convert theological knowledge into wisdom for living. Pursued corporately it brings the wisdom of others to bear, sometimes correcting, frequently offering a range of creative possibilities.

In a recent article (2009) I reviewed some of the recent literature expressing frustration on the part of those committed to the place of TR in ministerial formation with the difficulties experienced by students in grasping the point of TR and how to apply it to ministry. My observation there was that TR is often introduced as an additional technique subsequent to the learning of formal theology and without attention to the broader range of cognitive skills required. My suggestion was that TR be introduced at an early stage in ministerial training and be understood not as an additional technique for those already qualified in formal theology but as *the way in which we learn theology* and an exemplar of *what it means to think about the world in theological terms.* Our understanding of the way in which TR 'works' is at a relatively early stage and the opportunity to arrive at a consensus on this among those engaged in ministerial formation would potentially be of great value. But its obvious relationship to sound pedagogical principles suggests that TR holds the key to effective theological and ministerial education. My suggestion is that the place of TR is *both* as a technique in itself through which students learn to reflect on their pastoral and ministerial experience *and* as the foundation of the whole curriculum, reflected in methods of teaching, learning and assessment.

The actual and potential contribution of TR to the education of the Church's ministers is manifold. In the first place it has a direct application to the 'messy' and often conflicted problems of the 'swamp' of real life. It helps to sensitise students to the theological dimensions of particular situations and provides practice in recognising their salient features. TR is the skill base for the vital capacity to discern the presence of God in a given situation. It does not replace the work of the Holy Spirit but enables the minister or, preferably, ministers to work in harmonious partnership with the Spirit. Second, the cycle of TR provides a structure within which the methods and insights of 'formal' theology, its more rigorous partner, can be appropriated and usefully applied in practice. It provides the key by which to apply the rigours of the academy to the swamp of messy, real-life situation. It converts the role of academic theology in ministry from dominating master to useful servant.

TR also functions potentially as a vital link between formal training for ministry and every other context in which learning for discipleship and ministry takes place. It both honours the 'ordinary theology' of congregations and believers untrained in formal theology and provides a key by which to connect that ordinary theology to the ministry of lay Christians. The practice of TR by the formally trained minister in the role described by Laurie Green as 'people's theologian' in her congregation and community has the potential to liberate and empower the ministry of the whole church (Green 2009, 134-6). TR and reflective practice generally are appropriate key elements at all stages of ministerial education. It therefore potentially provides the continuity required if education for discipleship, training for lay ministry, locally and nationally ordained ministry and continuing ministerial development are all to be brought under the umbrella of Common Awards.

In the words of Ballard and Pritchard, 'Theological reflection is … the art of making theology connect with life and ministry so that gospel truth comes alive' (1996, 118). Testimony to this comes in the words of a student's comment reported in an article by Jane Leach reviewing the theological reflection portfolio which comprises an element of the Cambridge BTh. In the case of this student the methods of theological reflection she had learned had become, 'An organic part of her ability to supervise herself and critique her own interpretations while on placement' (2010, 135). In the words of the student herself, 'When I consider my use of this method over the last three years, I am struck as to how much it has, almost without thinking, shaped my reflections and in turn my actions and thus the narrative of the communities in which I have been placed (*ibid).* The crucial words here are 'almost without thinking'. The methods of theological reflection she had learned had become her habitual way of relating life and theology. Theology had become an 'inhabited wisdom', the way she 'interpreted the world in the context and framework of Christian belief and worship'. She had become 'attuned' to recognising the salient features of any given situation and responding in a theologically grounded way.

And yet in the same article, Leach comments on the reluctance of at least some students to engage in a practice which seems to them to reduce the authorities from which their theology is derived, particularly the interpretation of Scripture, to the level of personal experience (2010, 161). In the words of Leona English, commenting on this part of the article, 'At the heart of this challenge to critical reflection is a core belief in the value of codified

knowledge, and a strict adherence to the clear division of roles and responsibilities between teacher as knower and student as recipient of teacher knowledge of theology, scripture and tradition' (2010, 207). The attempt to encourage students in a risky engagement with a deep level of learning – of using their theology to interpret live situations and critique their own practice – and thus to experience theology as inhabited wisdom, may be undermined by the easy accessibility and relatively less demanding approach to theology simply as intellectual pursuit.

Conclusion

As the Preface to Common Awards points out the ideal of much higher education expressed in 'disembedded' technical rationality and the acquisition of specific transferable skills is clearly inadequate as a means of training the Church's ministers. This task requires a focus on the type of knowledge required for reflective practice: *phronesis* or practical wisdom, the skills by which theology becomes a means of interpreting experience. Integral to the acquisition of theology as *phronesis* is the development of Christian character. In fact, as we have seen, a theological *habitus* might be defined as a virtue ethic for discipleship and ministry.

What I have attempted to show is that the means by which this is accomplished are not mysterious, although they do require a change in orientation. To equip students as competent reflective practitioners requires theological educators to work with the grain of the way people learn naturally. The change required is to cease to see formal theological understanding as complete in itself, but rather to see it as an element in the development of ministerial character. If theological understanding is to be 'disembedded', or isolated from the context of discipleship, this is solely for the purpose of ensuring that it is thoroughly understood. That thorough understanding becomes fruitful only when it is placed back in its proper context, that of discipleship and ministry.

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