

Learning How to Learn: Theological Reflection at Cuddesdon

Abstract: Theological educators involved in the teaching of theological reflection (TR) frequently report mystification on the part of students and failure to apply their training in ministry. Experience at Ripon college, Cuddesdon, however, suggests that this may not inevitably be the case. David Heywood gives an account of the way TR is taught at Cuddesdon and reflects on the issues to arise.

Key words: theological reflection; theological education; Christian mission and ministry; adult learning

A recent number of the *Journal of Adult Theological Education* was devoted to the theme of practical theology and in particular a consideration of methods of teaching and learning that give priority to the skills of reflection.¹ In one of the articles Graeme Smith reports on his experience at St Michael's College Cardiff of teaching theological reflection (TR) using enquiry-based learning. Smith encountered a range of problems familiar to many in the field, which were partly overcome by the method he used. He reports the overwhelming majority of the students as finding it difficult to grasp what TR actually is,² a finding that echoes the research reported by Pattison, Thompson and Green in 2003, who found that most of the ministers they interviewed saw TR as 'a technical term that is essentially mystifying, alienating and non-specific'.³ Should the students grasp what TR is, their next problem is learning how to do it; and among those who do master the process few go on to make TR part of their regular practice. As Janet Henderson writes in relation to the pastoral cycle, 'Theological students would be hard pressed to end their courses without exposure to it, yet many leave unconvinced by its value and puzzled as to the true nature of the theological reflection it requires.'⁴ These familiar problems were summed up by Pattison, Thompson and Green to the effect that, 'While professional theological educators see TR as the jewel in their disciplinary crown, a good number of their students regard this activity as an irritating and inhibiting pebble in the ministerial shoe, to be discarded as quickly as possible once pre-ordination training is completed.'⁵

¹ *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 5.1, 2008.

² Graeme Smith, 'Something That Can Be Learnt but Not Taught: Teaching Theological Reflection through Enquiry-Based Learning', *JATE* 5.1, p. 25

³ Stephen Pattison, Judith Thompson and John Green, 'Theological Reflection for the Real World: Time to Think Again,' *British Journal of Theological Education* 13.2, 2003, p. 123

⁴ Janet Henderson, 'What is Wrong with Pastoral Theology?', *British Journal of Theological Education* 13.2, 2003, p. 110

⁵ Pattison, Thompson and Green, *op.cit.*, p.127

At Cuddesdon we have been teaching TR to residential students only for the past three years, but the results we are seeing contrast markedly with these frequently reported findings. Typically, students progress from bewilderment about TR to firm commitment over a period of up to six months. They use it successfully in reflection on their practical placements, occasionally remark unprompted on its potential for future ministry and one small group voluntarily inserted an extra weekly session of group reflection into their timetable. Two of our most recent leavers have run courses on TR in their parishes and report encouraging responses. It therefore seemed worthwhile to share what we do and reflect on the way this may illuminate what TR actually is and where it fits in the educational process. The article focuses on students in residential training for Anglican ministry, typically following a two-year course.

When I arrived as Director of Pastoral Studies I suffered from the major disadvantage shared with most of my contemporaries of having been in full-time ministry in the Church of England for twenty years without ever having used TR as a formal process. On the other hand I had the advantage of having led a course written by Roger James for the Lichfield Diocesan Local Ministry training scheme entitled 'Design for Learning', which introduced candidates for local ministry to the methods of TR. I brought with me the course 'Twenty-Four/Seven' compiled by Roger James, Robert Daborn and Elizabeth Jordan, through which the same candidates enable small groups in their churches to reflect on work- and life-based situations. I also had behind me my thirty year old training as a secondary school-teacher and my doctoral research on the way people learn.⁶ After three years I am still working on integrating the insights that emerged from that work with my experience of teaching and – finally – practising TR.

Perhaps because of the bias I brought with me, we set out with the understanding that TR is the key to learning from experience. We present it to the students as a tool to enable them to make the most of their practical placements and to be able to apply the considerable amount of academic learning they are to receive to ministry. Early on I use the quotation from Ballard and Pritchard: '[TR] is simply the art of making theology connect with life and ministry so that gospel truth comes alive.'⁷ This, of course, involves commitment to a certain view of learning, an 'adult education' rather than 'academic' approach, which takes seriously the importance of reflection in the learning process, the need to integrate new learning with existing experience and understanding, and to be able to grasp how newly acquired concepts work out in practice. It means that TR is firmly located in the curriculum as part of 'learning how to learn'.

Thus it may be significant that we teach our students TR at the beginning of their course and start the teaching before they attend a single lecture. Moreover, the work we do on TR begins with a study of how people learn. Our students have been out of formal learning for periods varying from one or two years to twenty or more. With the support of colleagues I take a considerable portion of the college's induction week to help them orient themselves to a period of intensive training by reflecting on their previous

⁶ reference to my work on learning

⁷ Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, SPCK 1996, p.118.

experience of learning. In an exercise I also inherited from Roger James, I ask them to choose an example of something significant they recently learned and to trace the process by which they learned it. The new learning might be new information, a new skill, a new understanding or perspective, a new sensibility (such as appreciating Mozart's music) or a new insight, such as about oneself, other people or God. After the students share their experience in small groups, we compile a whole group survey of the factors involved in our learning, enabling us to place the frequency of 'being told something by someone else' (for our most recent year group, the second most common response) alongside other factors and situations such as 'reading a book', 'discussion group', 'role play or simulation exercise', 'observation of someone else' (the commonest for our most recent group), trying to solve a problem, doing something unfamiliar, a casual conversation, and – last but not least – 'reflecting on experience' (third most mentioned for our last group). By the end of this first session I hope the students will be able to describe the most important factors in their own and others' learning; the breadth of possible learning experiences; and how theological training fits into the whole spectrum of adult learning.

My objective in the next session is to help students recognise that everyone comes to learning with an existing understanding of the area to be covered. I ask them to draw a picture – diagrammatic, symbolic or representational – that represents their idea of the church. Giving these aspirants to serious theological education something as simultaneously banal and yet demanding as this makes them potentially quite vulnerable and requires a little 'jolly along', but they are all new and relatively docile so we usually manage to surmount this hurdle! It is the next stage of the exercise that makes the point: I ask them to share their pictures in groups of three and explain them, thus demonstrating at one go that we all picture the church in different ways but that the different pictures are recognisably of the same church that we all experience: that is to say, we all have an 'ordinary theology' of the church and all our learning begins with a 'pre-concept' or existing understanding. From here we ask what happens when our ordinary theology meets experience of the church in the form of a service or PCC meeting, reading about the latest clerical scandal or speech from one of the Archbishops, or listening to a formal lecture, and hopefully the students recognise that learning is a process of search and interpretation. From here it is a short step to Kolb's learning cycle as a rough and ready description of what learning entails.

Having looked at the learning cycle we are in a position to assess our own learning style, and the next session is an exercise based on the Honey and Mumford questionnaire (it costs between £5 and £6 each to equip the students with a booklet of their own).⁸ A useful feature of this booklet, apart from the information it gives on learning styles, is the section illustrating the various ways of short-circuiting the learning cycle, one of which is to move straight from experience to conclusion without stopping to reflect. This, of course, is what we all do most of the time. With the scale and variety of demands upon us it is essential to be able to 'sum up a situation' quickly – that is, to

⁸ Peter Honey and Alan Mumford, *The Learning Styles Questionnaire 80-item version*, Peter Honey Publications 2006

provide an instant interpretation based on prior experience – in order to respond. The value of reflection is that it requires us to slow the action down, put our immediate interpretation on hold and take as much time as necessary to examine that situation from as many points of view as possible. To all this TR adds the conscious intention to draw on the resources of theological tradition before arriving at a conclusion. It is thus in a real and direct way, ‘learning how to learn’, using a formal process to educate the natural sub-conscious processes of reflection that we all use to manage our lives. Or to put it another way, learning TR is like sports coaching: taking apart the tennis shot or golf swing and focusing on the parts so that in the context of the game the shot may be more effective.

In session four the students are told about their practical placements and introduced to the discipline of journaling, and the stage is set for their initiation into the mysteries of TR. For this I use a passage from a book entitled *From Strangers to Neighbours*. It is a story about a Liverpool vicar who was called to the home of a woman who wanted him to baptize her little girl. The woman was a former prostitute and drug addict who, for the sake of her daughter, had decided to try to put her life straight. Unfortunately, her neighbours had decided that her increased prosperity must be due to her having become a drug pusher and had called the police. The drug squad had visited and torn her home apart. Sitting on the wreckage of her furniture the woman had asked the vicar to baptize her daughter not as a sign of explicit Christian faith but as the only way she knew of marking her determination to go on doing the best she could for her. The story ends with the vicar’s comment, ‘I’m not sure that the theology would have meant anything to her but, being well-versed in Scripture, the line that was going through my head was, “You are not far from the kingdom of God”’.⁹

Stopping the quotation before the Bible verse, I ask the students what passages of Scripture come to mind for them. In three years, no one has yet come up with the same verse as the original vicar! Instead they suggest an interesting variety of passages and, after narrowing these down to the most commonly suggested ones, I ask the students to work in groups to decide what the message of the suggested passage is, what light it throws on the Liverpool story and what kind of response to the woman’s request it suggests. Here, in a simple exercise, we are bringing together most of the important features of TR: an incident that challenges a response; the resources of Christian tradition used in such a way as to provide a framework in which to interpret the situation and to discern what God may be doing, and perhaps too to throw new light on the Scriptural passage suggested and lead to a deeper understanding of the possibilities of ministry or even of faith itself; an intuitive leap, in which a passage from Scripture is chosen for its perceived relevance to a given event or situation and the process of reflection unfolds what that intuition may be saying; the presence of a group bringing different perspectives and working together towards a shared understanding; the presence, we trust and pray, of the Holy Spirit, guiding the process of reflection; and finally the risk of faith, the realisation that there is no guarantee of getting the response

⁹ David Evans and Mike Fearon, *From Strangers to Neighbours*, Hodder and Stoughton 1998, p.135

'right', that it may be much safer and easier to play by the rules but that this is not what ministry calls for.

Induction week is followed by four further weekly sessions of introduction during which the students work through formal methods of TR either singly or in groups and we debrief the exercises together in full group. We begin with a simple method: critical incident analysis, using the Grove booklet by Charles Chadwick and Phillip Tovey,¹⁰ and progress to a much more complex one, the Education for Ministry model from Killen and de Beer.¹¹ The contrast between the two enables us to discern how different methods work for different people and for different purposes. Some are more attuned to the focus on images and feelings in the Killen and de Beer method, some less so. Some methods, such as the pastoral cycle, work better to help resolve specific situations in ministry, others to develop a wisdom or 'habitus' for ministry and life.

We then divide into seminar groups of between 6 and 9, which will meet twelve times over the next term and a half. The groups are given a variety of formal methods of TR, most taken from the Lichfield Twenty-Four/Seven course with the addition of the pastoral cycle and the Education for Ministry method. Each week one student brings a story or incident either from their previous life and work or their pastoral placement and another leads the group following the outline they have been given, one of their tasks prior to the seminar having been to choose the method of reflection they judge most appropriate to the story offered. During the last ten minutes of each session, with the aid of the tutor, the group does a 'reflection on the reflection', analysing the process for its strengths and weaknesses. Depending on their academic programme, most of the students will have to write up at least one of these seminars, at which they either led or provided the story, and add their own reflections on the process; or else they can present an individual reflection using any method they choose.

Experience of these assessed pieces of work suggests that the students are grasping the purpose of TR and understand how to use it to reflect on concrete ministry situations. They are further backed up by a series of placement reflection exercises requiring them to discern the 'espoused' theology of a given situation, such as a hospital ward or project for the homeless, or to choose an issue relevant to the mission of the church and provide resources for reflection on it. The area we may be weak on, and about which it is difficult to acquire reliable data after only three years, is whether students who show facility in and commitment to TR during their college course go on to practise it in ministry.

My presentation of TR as a key element in a process of 'learning to learn' raises several important issues, of which I would like to highlight four in particular. The first concerns *the relation of TR to the learning cycle*. The title of Kolb's book, *Experiential Learning*, prompts the question whether there is any other kind of learning. My own position is that Kolb's learning cycle is capable of greater precision: in particular, it needs to take into account the influence of a person's prior concept on the process of their learning

¹⁰ Charles Chadwick and Phillip Tovey, *Growing in Ministry Using Critical Incident Analysis*, Grove 2000.

¹¹ Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, Crossroad 1994.

and to incorporate reflection more flexibly into every stage. Nevertheless it remains a sufficiently good rough and ready description of what learning actually entails. Moreover, any method of TR will echo the learning cycle. It may give greater priority to emotion, as does for example the Education for Ministry method; it may prescribe the reflection or analysis phase in more detail, as for example does the pastoral cycle; but any given method goes all round the cycle, usually though not exclusively beginning with 'experience' and leading to 'action'. The reason for the frequent finding that academic learning mystifies TR is, then, that the academic style of learning majors on just two elements of the learning cycle, reflection and concept formation. As the adult educator knows, without the opportunity to relate new learning to prior experience and to explore the practical outcome of new concepts, academic education may come to represent what Paolo Friere called the 'banking' concept.¹² To learn TR at the outset of a course of training for ministry is thus truly to learn how to learn: how to take the Bible, Christian doctrine, history of the church and so on and relate it to practice.

A second issue concerns *the primacy of practical knowledge*. Over the past twenty years practical knowledge has been gradually enhancing its status throughout the academy; and in theology in particular its profile has been raised by the progress of practical theology from 'helpful hints for ministers' to a discipline in its own right. But practical knowledge is not yet recognised as more fundamental and more basic than theoretical knowledge. It is well known that Michael Polanyi wrote, 'We know more than we can tell,'¹³ but less well known that he also wrote, 'While tacit knowledge can be possessed by itself, explicit knowledge must rely on being tacitly understood or applied. Hence all knowledge is either tacit or else rooted in tacit knowledge.'¹⁴ In other words, all theoretical knowledge rests on and emerges from tacit knowledge, which is practical. His work is full of examples, from following a recipe to riding a bicycle to conducting a scientific experiment, to illustrate that 'practical know-how' is the foundational level of knowledge. My own research suggests that what we think of as 'knowledge' is actively organised in our minds and consists of a readiness to respond to situations; in other words, that knowing is a skill. Theory is necessary but can take us only so far: wisdom lies in applying what we know.

This leads to the further question: *What is theology?* In 1987 the Church of England working party's report *Education for the Church's Ministry*, which set the direction for theological training, took up and built upon Edward Farley's central insight that, rather than a branch of theoretical knowledge divided into sub-disciplines, theology was to be understood as a 'habitus' or wisdom for living.¹⁵ Both Farley and the working party came down firmly in favour of theology as spectacles for interpreting the world rather

¹² Paolo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin edition 1996, p.52-62.

¹³ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1967, p.4

¹⁴ Polanyi, 'The Logic of Tacit Inference', *Philosophy* 41, 1966, p.7, reprinted in *Knowing and Being*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1969, p.144

¹⁵ Edward Farley, *Theologia*, Fortress Press 1983. Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry occasional paper 22, *Education for the Church's Ministry*, 1987.

than simply 'knowledge about'. Two quotations I use with the students help to make this point, the first from Laurie Green, the second from Rowan Williams:

The clear message was that if I managed to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest all these volumes then I too would be able to sit in smoke-filled studies and debate the various theological arguments and points of view that were being propounded there. This, they told me, was what 'doing theology' meant. But it seemed to me that they expected me to engage only in the study of other people's theology - to 'read' theology but not to 'do' it.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

In other words, theology is an action/reflection process. We see this, for example, in the practise of Jesus, who invited his hearers to use their observations of nature and their own personal experience as raw material for understanding the nature of God. We see it in Paul, who in addressing the pressing pastoral issues of his churches not only goes back to first principles and seeks to apply these in practice, but allows the situation to suggest which principles are of greatest relevance. We see it too in the early church, where the process by which the doctrines of the Trinity and of the two natures in Christ were formulated consisted in the attempt adequately to express what had been found to be true in Christian experience. In recent years the Church of England has invited its members to engage in an action/reflection process, a period of reception for the ordination of women as priests. As a church we took an action we believed to be justified and were asked to engage in reflection on the resulting experience before deciding whether the action represented a faithful interpretation of Christian tradition. The outcome is that most engaged in the process have concluded that it does so and that women's ordination enriches the church's ministry. It is noteworthy is that many who disagree choose a style of theology in which experience is allowed no influence but rather deduction from the tradition is applied in a single direction. The lack of any significant comment on this aspect of the debate serves to illustrate how far we still have to go in recognising that 'what theology really is' is currently in question.

Finally, TR touches on another vitally important issue for the church's life and mission: *the overwhelming desire both within the church and among those who avoid it for a faith that relates to experience*. In their account of what are conventionally known as 'fresh expressions' or 'emerging church', Chris Stoddard and Nick Cuthbert quote a member of the Sanctus 1 community in Manchester: 'It's a church where difficult questions about God, faith, life and the world can be asked without receiving trite answers. The chance to reflect upon and wrestle with issues of life and faith in God's presence rather than

¹⁶ Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology*, Mowbray 1990, p.3

¹⁷ Rowan Williams, CEPACS lecture, Birmingham 3 November 2004, www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1048 (accessed July 2008)

simply being told what to believe and to do, is sometimes challenging, but also hugely liberating and inspiring. It's wonderful to be part of a community where God and the world, sacred and secular, aren't boxed up neatly and separately but rather where life and faith are integrated, where God is recognised to be present and active in our lives and in all of creation.¹⁸ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger quote Ben Edson, one of the leaders of this community: 'We try to create bridges that span the secular/sacred divide ... We use secular music in worship as well as film and literature. I hope there are points of connection between people's everyday lives and their faith'. A criticism increasingly directed against the traditional church is that we have forgotten how to be 'spiritual', by which is meant seeking to equip people with a spirituality for everyday life.¹⁹ Gibbs and Bolger themselves comment: 'During the period of modernity, the church accepted its diminished role at the margins. The church embraced the idea that its proper role was as spiritual chaplain to society. The church no longer addressed all of reality, just cordoned off the realm of the "spiritual"'. Since the 1960s, however, a variety of new spiritualities has arisen outside Christianity seeking to bridge this very divide, such that, 'The end result of this increasing isolation is that a spiritual culture now surrounds a secular church.'²⁰

'Central to the portrayal of ordinary theology,' writes Jeff Astley, 'is the paradoxical claim that it is both fundamentally *secular* and also deeply *religious and spiritual*. It is secular in the sense of being grounded in our exercise of the ordinary roles of everyday life ... It is religious as a form of theology that keeps close to the religious impulses and especially to the spirituality that drives people and heals them ... The personal and 'subjective' tone of ordinary theology is an indication are here *doing* theology first hand ...'²¹ Drawing on Karl Barth, Astley argues that the more academic forms of theology could not exist without the 'irregular dogmatics' represented by ordinary theology. He might have added that Emil Brunner also argued that all science, philosophy and theology represent both a deepening and distortion of the *sensus communis* expressed by the 'characteristic wisdom of the man in the street'.²² In this respect Barth and Brunner anticipate Polanyi's insight that theory is grounded in practical know-how. Astley writes that he remains puzzled by the church's failure to recognise the blindingly obvious fact that everyone does 'ordinary theology'.²³ And yet, writes Stephen Pattison, 'My own experience of working with students suggests that a traditional theological education may indeed inoculate students against being able to analyse experience and

¹⁸ Chris Stoddard and Nick Cuthbert, *Church on the Edge*, Authentic 2006, p. 175-6.

¹⁹ See for example John Drane, *The McDonaldisation of the Church*, Darton, Longman and Todd 2000 and *Do Christians Know How to Be Spiritual?*, DLT 2005.

²⁰ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, SPCK 2006, p. 67, 71-2.

²¹ Jeff Astley, 'In Defence of 'Ordinary Theology'', *British Journal of Theological Education* 13.1, 2002 p.27

²² Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, Lutterworth 1939, p.46-7.

²³ Astley, *op.cit.*, p.28

to explore creatively the gaps and connections between contemporary reality and the Christian tradition.²⁴

The existence of 'ordinary theology' not only within but outside the church – anyone who asks the question, 'Why does a God of love allow so much suffering?' is doing TR – and the increasing desire in an age of renewed spirituality for a faith that connects with ordinary life suggest that TR is a necessary tool for both ministry and mission and may profitably be taught as such. And thus we open up a host of other issues that may also be related to TR – the structures of authority we experience in the church, the methods of teaching and learning, our grasp of the dynamics of the mission of God – which may more profitably be left to another article. It will suffice to say at this point that introducing our students to TR at the beginning of their course and helping them to relate it to the way people learn also plays its part in helping them to grasp the centrality of mission in the life of the church and the practice of ministry.

In conclusion, then, I would like to suggest that in the teaching of TR it is not just the 'what' that is taught but also the 'how', the 'where' and the 'why' that are important. My gut instinct, arising from my own prior experience, has been to introduce it early, as a tool for enabling students to learn from experience. So taught, the presence of TR in such a prominent place in the curriculum raises questions about the way theology is done, the connection between the ordinary theology students bring with them as lay Christians and the academic theology they are taught in college. My hope is that by raising these questions it will also play its part in equipping them for their role in the mission of God.

²⁴ Stephen Pattison, 'Some Straw for the Bricks: A Basic Introduction to Theological Reflection', *Contact* 99.2, 1989, p.7