

Contextual pastoral education for responsible citizenship in a complex South Africa

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Universities' teaching and learning strategies aim to prepare students for life and the workplace by creating a culture of innovation to solve real-life problems, so that they can participate constructively in society and lead fulfilling professional and personal lives. In order to reach this goal, teaching and learning must have at least three paradigms, namely pedagogical, cognitive and pragmatic or instrumentalist. A pragmatic paradigm presupposes practical, experiential teaching and learning. This paper explores interactive means within the pragmatic paradigm that can be included in the pastoral modules of theology education. The epistemology is from a practical theological perspective.

Contribution: The contribution of this article is that experiential role-play activities can have a positive impact in the pedagogy of pastoral care and counselling. The insight of this article links with the developmental goals for effective theological education in South Africa.

Keywords: practical theology; pastoral education; pastoral care; pastoral counselling; experiential teaching and learning; role-play activity.

Introduction

For many, it is a privilege to study at university and something that cannot be taken for granted. Many young South Africans do not get this opportunity because of socio-economic impediments. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), tertiary attainment in South Africa is the lowest across all OECD and partner countries (OECD 2019). On a positive note, the report shows that more adults are attaining upper secondary education in South Africa than they were a decade ago. The percentage of young adults (aged 25–34) without secondary education decreased from 27% in 2008 to 18% in 2018, but South Africa is still facing unprecedented unemployment statistics as nearly three in every five young adults are unable to find work (Centre for Development and Enterprise [CDE] 2021).

Paul Romer, winner of the 2018 Nobel Prize for Economics, speaking to a South African audience at a CDE conference held in November 2020 said, 'If you can't solve the problem of getting the majority of young people into work, it may not matter what other problems you solve'. For the last 3 years, the CDE has conducted extensive research related to young adults (aged 15–34) who are classified as not being in employment, education or training. They refer to this group as NEETs and currently there are 9.1 million¹ young people who fall into this category. At the same conference, South Africa's Finance Minister Enoch Godogwana has emphasised the importance of getting the youth into 'better skills development programmes'.

A report provided by Statistics South Africa (SAST 2017) shows a steady increase in enrolments at higher education institutions over the past two decades. From the year 2000 to 2016, the number of registered students almost doubled. The Classification of Educational Subject Matter (CESM) category division shows that only 1.1% of all the enrolments at universities and technical colleges are for philosophy, religion and theology education. Breakdown statistics (Stats SA 2019), according to population groups, show that in the field of philosophy, religion and theology, 38.4 black Africans, 7% Coloured, 5.6% Asian and 49% white students were enrolled at universities, while the statistics at technical colleges indicated a different picture with 89% black Africans, 5.3% Coloured, 0.8% Asian and 4.8% white students. The gender ratio is 64% male and 36% female. At this stage, no research is available to understand why so many black Africans prefer to study philosophy, religion and theology at technical colleges rather than universities. Nevertheless, these statistics give a good indication of the profile of students at theology faculties in South Africa.

¹The 9.1 million young South Africans who now fall into the NEET category, constitute 44 percent of the 20.6 million in this age group (CDE 2021).

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The purpose of higher education is to support students in a personal, as well as academically and socially transformative way. The author is a lecturer at a university in South Africa and their teaching and learning strategy aims to prepare students for life and the workplace by creating a culture of innovation to solve real-life problems, so that they may participate constructively in society and lead fulfilling professional and private lives. In order to reach this goal, teaching and learning must have at least three paradigms, namely pedagogical, cognitive and pragmatic or instrumentalist. The latter paradigm presupposes practical, experiential teaching and learning with the aim of better skills development.

Our revised teaching and learning strategy is embedded in an organisational culture with a strong transformational focus. In the wake of the *#Fees Must Fall* student protests of the previous decade, the university has an urgent imperative to deconstruct institutional racism, including the subject matter being taught, as well as the diversity and inclusiveness of its teaching staff. Furthermore, it is committed to an ethical conduct of care and a value-based collective identity that promotes integration, participation and collaboration. The university aspires towards a culture of innovation, as well as joint and individual accountability, robust engagement and academic integrity. In addition, it is committed to an integrated quality assurance system for teaching and learning, which incorporates continued curriculum relevance and responsiveness, as well as reflection on teaching practices. This strategy is a clear indication that lecturers must move away from the well-known 'banking system of education' to which Brazilian educator Paulo Freire referred to, to a more interactive mode of pedagogical engagement.

My research question for this article is as follows: What interactive means within the pragmatic or instrumentalist paradigm can be included in pastoral modules of theology education to contribute to responsible citizenship? As a lecturer, my aim is to reflect on the inclusion of interactive, experiential learning activities in the curriculum. The article begins with a discussion about the importance of connecting the curriculum with context and then expounds on interactive, experiential learning. This is followed by an example of a participative, experiential learning activity and a conclusion on excellence in theological education through a pedagogy of hope and care.

Connecting curriculum with context

While the pedagogical and cognitive paradigms in teaching and learning are internal by nature and linked to the central aim of a specific institution, the pragmatic or instrumentalist paradigm is responsive to external goals. These external goals could be socio-political, economic or environmental in nature. The point of departure of the pragmatic paradigm concerns the practical role that universities should play in preparing students to become responsible and skilled collaborators and engaged members of their communities. The world is constantly changing and the COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect indication that we live in an unpredictable world.

Educational institutions are therefore under increasing pressure to ensure that their curriculum is relevant to the local and global communities they serve (Das 2015:1).

Lecturers of pastoral modules must reflect on what it means to prepare students to become responsible and skilled collaborators and engaged members of society. Does it mean that the students must only be able to [*do*] pastoral work in their communities or does it mean that they must not only be able to do pastoral work, but also to enable and equip others to mature in Christ, so that they will also be able to contribute to society and the kingdom of God? If the latter is the lecturer's understanding of their own role as an educator, they will understand that an 'evaluation of the effectiveness of the curriculum does not end with the student successfully graduating, but on the graduate's progress to equip' (Das 2015:2) others to whom they minister. The questions of contextual relevance are becoming increasingly important. Reddie (2018:1) states in this regard that Christian education should be contextual, liberative and relevant to the needs and realities of students. Being able to develop contextual theology is critical in ensuring the relevance of the revealed Word of God in a specific context (Das 2015:3).

Bevans (2016:1) explains that contextual theology is an attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context and a recognition of the validity of the present existential human experience. The term 'contextual theology' was adopted by the World Council of Churches and the Lausanne Movement in the 1970s (Bergmann & Vähäkangas 2021:1). Bergmann and Vähäkangas (2021:2) define contextual theology as theology that takes the current cultural context into consideration in hermeneutical aspects of Christianity. Contextual theology therefore places and celebrates the context at the centre of the praxis of theology.

Bergmann and Vähäkangas (2021:2) describe two types of contextual theology, namely:

- that which is driven by the search for identity
- that which is related to the demands for social change.

In a certain sense, both these types of contextual theology are present in my reflection on connecting the pastoral curriculum to the context. They are equally relevant for my students. The search for identity asks for a repositioning of my role as lecturer from a more instructional pedagogy to a more active, student-centred pedagogy. As a lecturer, the author becomes a transformative intellectual who attends to the needs of students in a holistic way. My students' search for identity also requires a repositioning to become actively involved in self-directive learning. The challenge is that contact class presentations must add value to the learning process and cannot follow the normal route of lecturing the study material. Students must come prepared to classes by working through the study material to be able to take part in interactive learning exercises. The demand for social change speaks for itself, as Ango and Ruturo (2020) note:

The type of education that will transform Africa includes inspiring students to live for greater purposes, combining

academic and community-mindedness and engaging both the intellect and spirit of students. Moreover, teachers should attend to the all-round needs of students – mental, spiritual and vocational – and focus more on learning than on just passing on information. (p. 143)

Bevans (2016:2) emphasises the importance of cultural exegesis and social analysis during the interpretative process of certain pericopes. Das (2015:4) refers to cultural exegesis also as domain specificity, as a reader does not react on what they read on its logical merits, but rather based on the surrounding framework and the link with the reader's social-emotional system. Theology and context are fundamentally interrelated. For many decades, it was believed that theology consists of a body of truth that was not only unchangeable in the way it was articulated but was complete in and of itself (Das 2015:4). Osmer (2011:8) refers to this as the wound of reason made by modern science. Theologians must move away from this absolute, unchangeable set of truths and grapple with the relevance of our faith in an ever-changing, complex and pluralistic world. As early as the first half of the previous century, Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1963) reflects on the attitude that is required in a community of faith when he writes:

Theology is an act of repentant humility ... this act exists in the fact that in theology, the church seeks again and again to examine itself critically as it asks itself what it means and implies to be a church among men. (p. 44)

While truth is universal, theology is contextual (Das 2015:6) because it influences how we live out our faith and spirituality. Attaining the right balance in contextual theology remains a constant challenge and scholars like Richard Niebuhr (1951), Paul Heibert (1994) and Thomas Finger (2004) all emphasise the relation between theology (God) and cultural context (nature). Finger (2004:96) concludes, 'Theology is always in dialogue with its cultural context [...] including the academic sphere'.

Das (2015:18) proposes that lecturers of pastoral modules ask themselves six questions in planning the curriculum that will help them to intentionally connect the module content with the context, namely:

- Content: What is the content of the training?
- Purpose: Why is this training being conducted?
- Method: How is this training being conducted?
- Ethos: What values and spirituality permeate the training?
- Context: Where is the training conducted?
- People: How does the faith of those involved define the education?

The goal of this article is not to focus on the first two important aspects, namely content or purpose. Instead, the authors goal is to focus on the last four aspects for radical, liberative Christian education and especially the method and inclusion of interactive, experiential learning as a fundamental part of contextual theological training. A discussion of the content based on epistemological orientation is beyond the scope of the current discussion, but is nevertheless fundamental to

the forming, informing and reforming of students. The educational method is a vehicle to move between forming, informing and transforming, with the goal of identity formation and social change, and in the process new knowledge and theories emerge. Orthodoxy is part of the content – the epistemological, historical orientation and arguments of what constitutes a correct understanding of God and ortho-praxis is part of the method in training students the *how* and *what* it means to be part of the body of Christ in a certain cultural context.

Interactive experiential learning

Lecturers must remember that interactive, experiential learning through the inclusion of certain activities is for a purpose and not an end in itself (Das 2015:41). The process of learning is just as important as its ultimate destination. As Reddie (2018:1) states, an important goal of theological training is the Christian formation of students which can be achieved through experiential learning. The training creates a framework for the re-interpretation of the Christian faith to facilitate the transformation of students. Likewise, the classroom becomes a socio-constructed safe space in which 'all the participants promise to engage with the "other" in a fashion that affirms mutuality, cooperation and a shared commitment to the production of new knowledge' (Reddie 2018:6).

Shockley (1995:333), a scholar interested in black liberative theology, describes the educational foundation in an African-orientated pastoral education as praxis-learning. In other words, it is interactive reflection towards the actual transformation of an actual situation. The author agrees that praxis-learning is important in pastoral training in the context of South African universities. Freire (2004) speaks to this:

Within the Word we find two dimensions, reflection and action in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed ... the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. (p. 10)

Pastoral theology is not a 'cold' science. As they interact with the content, students are confronted with various dimensions of their own humanity and lecturers must create a safe space where they can engage with these reactions.

Reddie (2018:6) describes experiential learning as performative actions that operate within informal workshops (in other words, the socio-constructed safe space of the classroom). It is here that students can reflect critically on their own embodied subjectivity about themselves and their engagement with others as Christian disciples within a given cultural context.

Lecturers can be creative in choosing the activities according to the theme of a study unit. Examples of these activities are drama, art, music, dance and role-play. The only criterion for choosing an activity is that it must be a vehicle that will help the students to assimilate the content knowledge, not only at a cognitive level, but holistically. Lecturers must reflect on activities that will support forming, informing and transforming on all levels in a particular community and society.

Another possibility is that students can participate in different roles in the same activity. Changing roles within the same context helps students observe a particular problem from a number of different angles. Reddie (2018:6–7) argues that changing roles challenges students to ‘decide how they will inhabit particular spaces and places in order to assess in what ways are they playing out learned pathologies’. The changing of roles in a safe place can, for instance, be a constructive way for white and black students to discuss the hurts of apartheid and to experience reconciliation. During these activities, students are confronted with their feelings, emotions and pain and they can find healing through the activities. The mentioning of apartheid emphasises the geographical aspect, as where we live co-creates our identity (Lombaard 2013:774).

The benefit of interactive, experiential learning activities is that the students are constantly challenged about their own subjective assumptions influencing their understanding of normative aspects. Reddie (2018:7) explains that the purpose of the *modus operandi* is to offer students new models of being Christian in a particular context; the purpose ‘lies in the belief that internalised change can be a conduit for externally verified changes in behaviour and practice’.

Contextual pastoral education helps students to be responsible citizens of the 21st century in a world that has an increasingly post-Christian orientation. Bergmann and Vähäkangas (2021) speak about ‘doing theology’ and explain that the:

[C]hallenge to interact as a Christian believer within other religious traditions, as well as the challenge to respond to the inter- and transcultural processes of globalisation have offered significant impulses toward the deepening and development of cultural theologies. (p. 3)

Du Plessis (2021a) elaborates on the paradigm shifts of the past century in pastoral theology and discussed several key concepts. These paradigm shifts are related to contextual pastoral training for lecturers to plan their interactive activities. They included communal caregiving, narrative pastoral theology, cultural experiences, empowering real-life experiences, existential realities, soulfulness, systems of care, plurality, as well as multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary approaches. ‘The formulation of “general” pastoral guidelines – as if one size fits all – is something of the past and only contributes to the irrelevant formation of theories’ (Du Plessis 2021a:8). The key aspect for contextual pastoral education is relevance for a certain specific context.

Proposed example of an experiential learning activity

This part of the article focuses on an example of an experiential learning activity which the author did for third-year pastoral students. Ethical clearance for the learning activity was granted by our faculty’s research ethical committee.² The aim of the pastoral module was to prepare students to deal with complex

².Ethics application clearance number: NWU-00868-22-S6.

real-life problems and to develop effective pastoral counselling strategies for ministering in their congregations and communities. The module’s objectives were that the student should be able to display a comprehensive, systematic, in-depth understanding of specific pastoral guidance, utilise critical analysis, synthesis and independent evaluation in specific pastoral guidance, with due allowance for ethical guidelines, exhibit the ability to help those dealing with complex, real-life problems, and be able to apply the knowledge in a multi-cultural context. The module plan had two divisions: firstly, theoretical aspects regarding important pastoral principles and secondly, the application of pastoral principles in complex life situations. The discussion of pastoral principles included themes, such as the contextualisation of pastoral counselling, pastoral counsellors as agents of hope and compassion and the role of prayer, sin, guilt and forgiveness in pastoral counselling.

In my planning for this activity, the author came across an old box filled with family photos. Inside was a photo of three young sisters, two nicely dressed and ready for their first day of Sunday School and the other – looking rather sullen – standing at a distance from them. The photo was taken by their mother (Figure 1).

The context for the activity was an informal class setting. It was a safe place to reflect on the created scenario and to voice feelings, emotions and beliefs. The activity took the form of imaginary role-play. Through the role-play, the students had the opportunity to be ‘passionately present’ in the situation. Four students were elected as the three sisters and the mother. The role-play was repeated four times and each student had the opportunity to play all three characters in the photo, as well as the mother. After each role-play, the students had to answer a short questionnaire, which was discussed at the end of the session. The author was able to act as a transformative intellectual who facilitated the discussion



FIGURE 1: Family photo of three sisters for role-play activity.

and led the students in self-directive learning. In this way, they could apply theoretical principles in a constructed event. By being allowed to play different roles in the activity, students were able to reflect on their own pastoral strategy to minister to each of the participants and decide what their evaluation of the problem was. It was interesting to see the change in the students' behaviour in each of the role-plays. There was a definite increase in the seriousness of their involvement and their level of compassion for the different characters.

The first question the author asked the students was: What do you think is the person's experience in this moment? All four students described the emotional experiences of the characters as similar, although one student showed more empathy towards the youngest sister. They also described the internal conflict on the part of the mother and the rejection that the youngest sister felt.

The second question was: What do you think is the underlying message or feeling that the person still carries with her in her adult life? It was interesting to see how the students projected the underlying inner narrative of the different characters. They had empathy with the mother who found herself in a difficult situation, and although three of them were a bit frustrated with the stubbornness of the youngest sister, one showed more affection towards her.

The third question was: Have you experienced any spiritual or emotional stimulus during the role-play? All the students were able to identify certain experiences in their own lives that were triggered by at least one of the characters. It was also interesting to see which of the characters the students identified with the most. The student who showed more affection towards the youngest child was, for instance, the older sister of twin siblings and therefore felt responsible for them.

The fourth and fifth questions were: What pastoral strategy could you use to help the person during the incident and to help them as an adult? The students only gave some general advice and not really a pastoral strategy, but they were able to identify certain important themes for a pastoral strategy.

This was the first experiential learning activity the author has ever attempted, and it made the author realise how important they are. Although the students were able to identify the emotions at play and possible consequences of the moment, as well as certain themes for a pastoral strategy, they were unsuccessful in planning a complete pastoral strategy for each of the characters.

The process convinced the author that by including interactive, experiential learning activities at an undergraduate level, students should be able to bridge the gap between theory and praxis (Du Plessis 2020:1). These activities will also help students to deal with their own subjective emotional and spiritual pain in order to be able to [do] pastoral work and to enable and equip others to mature in Christ, so that they will also be able to contribute to society and the kingdom of God.

Excellence in theological education through a pedagogy of hope and care

Former president Nelson Mandela expressed his vision for South Africa's future when he said, 'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world' (Ango & Rutoro 2020:144). Ango and Rutoro (2020:144) write that 'education shapes students, who then shape the world beyond the classroom'. As lecturers, we are in the privileged position to be able to shape our students. Du Plessis (2021b:233) argues that 'skills-based education depends on transferring hard and soft skills'. Interactive, experiential learning activities create opportunities in which students can develop their skills. Learners are not passive recipients in their learning experience and module outcomes must make provision for the inclusion of alternative teaching and learning methods, while at the same time dealing with the heterogeneous challenges of our society.

In their research, lecturers must embark in participative, action-orientated research or community-based research to conduct empirical studies of different challenges in the community. The findings of their own research can become themes for discussion and reflection in the classroom, and learning activities can be based on these real-life struggles that communities experience.

Freire (2004:1) writes that the 'educational practice of a progressive option will never be anything but an adventure of unveiling'. Finding and unveiling the truth is also the will of God (1 Tm 2:3-4). Teaching and learning through discussion and reflection on real-life struggles will always help students to discover the truth and give them hope in an uncertain, ever-changing world. Hope, an essential requirement for human existence, demands an anchoring in practice and in this way, the module content becomes practical and does not stay abstract. Freire (2004) elaborates further on this idea:

As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness. That is why there is no hope in sheer hopefulness. The helped-for is not attained by dint of raw hoping. Just to hope is to hope in vain ... Hence the need for a kind of education in hope. Hope, as it happens, is so important for our existence, individual and social, that we must take every care not to experience it in a mistaken form, and thereby allow it to slip towards hopelessness and despair. Hopelessness and despair are both the consequence and the cause of inaction and immobilism. (p. 2)

Hope is future orientated. Curriculum transformation and renewal is necessary for a pedagogy of hope and care. Being part of a broader network of learning activities is an important aspect of transformation and renewal. Hardy (2016) raises an important point when he asks:

How do we know that we haven't been wasting our time and resources in our educational efforts, especially given that the primary impact of our training comes from the intangibles of our training environment and from relationships? (p. 179)

Our teaching and learning strategy visualises graduates who are highly knowledgeable professionals ready for their future workplace. Furthermore, graduates must be innovative, critical thinkers, principled leaders, effective communicators, skilled collaborators and responsible and engaged members of society.³ Taking this visualisation into consideration, we realise that the overall value of good training and learning is not easily quantifiable. This is why continuous renewal with the aim to contextualise the curriculum is so important. Hardy (2016) remarks that lecturers are often discouraged with what they feel they cannot do, but especially in the case of theological training, evaluation of what we do and the results we get:

[M]ust begin by looking for the hand of God in our midst ... It takes courage and effort to build on the past to continue to be in a position to be used by God in the lives of our students. (p. 181)

A pedagogy of hope and care entails three basic types of curricula. The first is the invisible curriculum of what we teach whether we intended to or not (2016:96). This is especially true of the soft skills required for pastoral ministry as students will imitate lecturers' attitudes, behaviours and teaching methodologies. The second is the null curriculum that refers to what lecturers do not teach (Hardy 2016:96). This aspect relates to challenges that arise because of changing contexts and socio-economic-political circumstances. This implies a critical reading of reality and of the existential realities of students. It is also the reason why continuous renewal of the curriculum is so important. The third is the visible curriculum (Hardy 2016:97) and refers to the list of courses offered at the faculty. Lecturers must take care to balance the offering of foundational knowledge with the development of skills. Doing so will underscore the incorporation of experiential learning even more. Lecturers must reflect on soft and hard skills that are needed for ministry in their development of the curriculum, as well as the subject content of each module.

Conclusion

The article began by mentioning that studying at a tertiary institution is indeed a privilege, but as a lecturer, the author feels that it is also a privilege to teach at a university. Lecturers have a huge responsibility towards their institution, students and towards God. Lecturers play a vital role in the forming, reforming and transforming of their students and to a large degree, they determine whether students will fall in love with their subject or not. Madinbo (2020:339) makes an astonishing remark about teaching and lecturing by saying, 'If when I die, they say, "There is no one else like him," I will have failed!' As transformative intellectuals, lecturers must empower their students to be responsible citizens who work for a better future where the mistakes of the past are not repeated. In this way, they will not only do pastoral work, but be able to equip others to mature in Christ, so that they in turn will be able to contribute to society and the kingdom of God.

³'North-West University Teaching and Learning Strategy (2021–2025)', North-West University (website), accessed on 15 October 2021, <https://www.nwu.ac.za/sites/www.nwu.ac.za/files/files/i-governance-management/documents/T%26L-Strategy-2021-2025.pdf>.

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Competing interests

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Author's contributions

A.L.D.-P., is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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