

What Are We Learning? A Critical Question for Theological Institutions in a Time of Disruption

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“You talk about coming out of the pandemic, but we are very much in the middle of it”: Those words, spoken by a friend in Latin America, stand as a stark reminder that the COVID-19 crisis has not only impacted the world but continues to do so. Theological education in particular has not escaped the crisis. In a matter of weeks, schools around the globe faced all-encompassing challenges (Hunter 2020). Early in the pandemic, Crouch, Keilhacker, and Blanchard (2020) speculated that the pandemic would not be a simple storm to weather, nor a season to endure, but an ice age. Their metaphor implies that the crisis will not only last a long time but leave behind a reshaped landscape. While vaccines will ease quarantines, travel restrictions, and mask mandates, the impact of the coronavirus will be felt for years.

The pandemic, however, did not occur in a vacuum. For many schools, COVID compounded preexisting economic, political, and social challenges. Furthermore, it came as theological education faced increasing pressures due to the Church’s changing needs. Students have become increasingly diverse in age, background preparation (i.e., biblical knowledge), and vocational goals. More students exploring mid- and second-career theological formation have led to higher course enrollments but not necessarily more degree completions. For schools, this has meant a growing convergence of formal and non-formal training. Schools continue to wrestle with sustainable funding models, particularly as tuition usually cannot cover the full cost of education.

In many cases, the pandemic accelerated changes already underway in response to these issues. The need to survive intensified pressures on school leaders to find immediate solutions. Schools continue to respond with creativity to these needs. From providing humanitarian relief to shifts in course delivery, institutions continue to adjust their activities to meet the demands of this crisis.

However, in addition to what schools are *doing* in response to the current

situation, the question arises, “What are schools *learning* during this critical time?” Applying aspects of adult learning theory and organizational leadership, institutions might discover that the crisis not only leads to innovative activity but may also lead to transformative learning for the institutions themselves. As they reflect on the crisis, theological schools may emerge with new paradigms for accomplishing their missions to form students for service in the Church and society.

From Disruption to Transformation

Jack Mezirow (1991) coined the term “disorienting dilemma” in his theory of transformative learning. New ideas that challenge long-accepted assumptions lead to disequilibrium for the learner as the old ways of understanding cannot adequately account for new data. Perspective transformation occurs when learners successfully navigate a period of assessment, explore new actions, learn new skills, and ultimately integrate these new roles and ideas into their lives. (See Mezirow’s *10 Phases of Transformative Learning* (1991, 168-169).)

Though developed to describe individual learning, the paradigm of transformative learning may lead to new insights for theological schools. The most notable disruption from the pandemic came as traditional residential education largely ceased for months. The rapid adjustment to – and success in – online endeavors raises new questions about how theological education can best be done.¹ Schools that once thought of online learning as a distant opportunity, often fraught with faculty resistance, have had no choice but to try new delivery modes.

Illustrating the pandemic’s catalytic force, one school in the Middle East has completely redesigned its degree program. It discontinued residential education in favor of online teaching combined with short on-campus modules. The changed approach represents not only a transformation of delivery modes but a pivot to a different student profile. Rather than recruit students who must leave their contexts for two or three years of residential training, this program allows pastors to receive training while continuing to serve locally. This institution seems to be in the middle of Mezirow’s phases: they encountered events that led them to question their assumptions (in this case, about whether residential training is best for pastors in their context); and they are now trying new activities, seeking new skills for their faculty, and believing that they are on a beneficial new pathway. Their redesigned program will lead to even deeper discussions about the nature and structure of their faculty and the use of their facilities. As it develops, their new program represents a reimagined approach to education for pastors in the Middle East and North Africa. Overall, the school’s decision to shift from a residential model came after years of discussion, but the pandemic’s disruption

1 Many schools have reported success in their new modes of education during the pandemic. For most schools that did not already have online offerings, this stage has focused on moving lectures to Zoom or Google Meets, sometimes supplemented with low-bandwidth solutions such as WhatsApp groups and threaded discussions. Much work needs to be done, but schools seem satisfied with their initial efforts.

catalyzed the final move.

In addition, some schools have found that online education has actually deepened relationships with students. At one Latin American school, because students have web cameras on, professors have suddenly gained a window into their homes. Such insight drives new questions about how faculty teach, support, and mentor – in this case, how faculty care for students who are sharing small spaces with multi-generational families and who must negotiate with family members who are also studying or working from home. This school has entered a new phase of reflecting on how they serve students who make considerable sacrifices to study.

From Institutional Survival to Institutional Learning

After this season of intense action, the time has come for institutional reflection. School leaders often focus on the teaching portion of the teaching/learning activity. However, in the midst of such rapid changes, it may be time to lean more heavily into self-reflection so that institutions become what Peter Senge calls “learning organizations.” According to Senge, a learning organization is one where “people continuously expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together” (1990, 7).

Despite an educational mission, many schools do not engage well in self-reflection or internal learning. Contributing factors include historical institutional structures that lead to curriculum fragmentation and disconnects among people – subjects remain rigidly separated; faculty and staff operate separately; teachers often have unidirectional relationships with students. This fragmentation ultimately keeps schools from learning (O’Neil 1995, 22).

A learning organization approach can help remedy this problem, as education is ultimately an integrative process. Learning organizations that intentionally seek input from faculty, staff, and students will reap greater success because of richer knowledge and collaborative approaches to challenges. One school in Latin America has built a culture of such collective dialogue over many years. Normally, their faculty meet in person twice a year to evaluate courses, review syllabi, and plan the next term. Their collective practice of adaptation helped them survive the initial COVID crisis. However, as the pandemic has continued, they have not been able to meet together. They know that these times of in-person interaction have a special, necessary richness of dialogue and creativity that cannot be replicated online. Having missed these sessions several times now, they have much to review, and they hope to reopen by year end. However, if infections continue to surge, they will be forced to find new ways to collaborate online.

Applying the principles of his research at corporations to schools, Senge wrote

that in the midst of change, “the galvanizing hope is a school that learns” (2000, 10). The COVID pandemic has accelerated the pace of change that schools already encountered. Schools that not only survive but learn through crisis will be better positioned to serve the Church.

Conclusion

In many ways, the questions prompted by the pandemic have been building for some time. However, the pandemic’s ubiquitous disruption has magnified these questions about how theological schools can thrive and bless the Church. Schools have adjusted in order to survive, but to move from activity to learning will require self-reflection. Three questions may help guide institutions as they move toward transformative learning:

1. What assumptions about theological education has the pandemic challenged? Perhaps including the roles of students and faculty (both as individuals and as collectives), approaches to formation and mentoring, organizational stability, etc.?
2. What do your practices (especially changes or innovations) tell you about your mission? How do you integrate new practices (and new meaning-making) for the future?
3. How are you creating spaces for reflection among your colleagues so that organizational learning can happen?

By discussing these questions as a community, schools may find effective ways to integrate new ideas and address the needs of changing educational landscapes in service to the Church.

This issues features articles that address some of the common challenges facing all theological schools – such as fundraising and information management – that have been heightened by this crisis. Furthermore, it includes examples of context-specific engagement, practical examinations of learning modes (including online learning), and book reviews that remind us that we are in a time of change, disruption, and opportunity.

References

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