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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Using Conversation in Teaching and Learning

Israel Galindo, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

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When I talk to people about dialogical learning, they often reply, "Yes, we have great discussions in my class." But discussion and dialogue, as learning methods, are different things. And then there's conversation.

Conversation too can be a sound learning method in formal theological education. *Conversation Theory*, developed by Gordon Pask, originated from his work in cybernetics and attempts to explain learning in both living organisms and machines. Pask's fundamental idea was that learning occurs through conversations about a subject matter make knowledge explicit.

Conversations can be conducted at a number of different levels: natural language (general discussion), object languages (for discussing the subject matter), and metalanguages (for talking about learning/language).

In order for conversation to facilitate learning, Pask argued that the subject matter you are teaching should be represented in the form of entailment structures, that is, showing the relationship between two sentences where the truth of one (A) requires the truth of the other (B). The critical method of learning when using conversation theory is "teachback" in which one person teaches another what they have learned. According to Pask there are two different types of learning strategies in conversation: serialists who progress through an entailment structure in a sequential fashion (as in a story narrative structure), and holists who look for higher order relations.

The suitability of Conversation theory to theological education is self-evident.

Conversation theory, for example, is applicable in a formal theological education context as a process for learning in supervised ministry. Through directed conversations students learn from their experience, and from peers, as they interact to make explicit what they are learning in their ministerial contexts.

Conversation theory is a suitable process for the integration of concepts learned in the academic context (the classroom with a subject-matter focus) and their praxis in the supervision context. Conversation theory can be applied to solicit deeper and explicit learning from an immersion experience in a different cultural context.

The three pedagogical principles in conversation theory are:

1. To learn a subject matter, students must learn the relationships among the concepts.
2. Explicit explanation or manipulation of the subject matter facilitates understanding (e.g., use of teachback technique).
3. Individuals differ in their preferred manner of learning relationships (serialists versus holists).

One advantage of the online asynchronous learning environment is that the conversation "slows down," and this allows the instructor time for analysis of student responses and fosters more intentional pedagogical responses that promote deeper dialogue and conversation.

To learn more about conversation theory, see Gordon Pask, *Conversation, Cognition, and Learning* (New York: Elsevier, 1975).

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