Digital Pedagogy: Allowing Theology Students to Become Theological Educators

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In a previous post on this blog, I reflected on a common misperception among students preparing for ordained ministry and other leadership roles in Christian community: that studying theology in a formal sense is not of obvious utility in pursuing and exercising one's larger vocation. I offered several reasons why that might be the case. And I described an assignment I had developed and used for the first time as a result of participating in the Wabash Center's Teaching with Digital Media workshop. This project entailed making and sharing memes on theological themes and then reflecting on what was learned through that exercise. The goal was to give them a concrete experience of selecting specific theological concepts to communicate to a specific audience in order to elicit specific formational outcomes. The assignment required students to do small-scale, but active, public theologizing and employ techniques of metacognition to help them perceive more clearly the need for solid theological grounding as part of their formation and, by extension, for the formation they will be responsible for in others.

For this semester, I created an assignment that amplified that intention by requiring them to offer a bit of formal theological instruction in a more direct and standard mode, but still in a digital form.

The prompt for the assignment was this:

Imagine that you are the rector of a program-sized parish. In substantive conversation with at least five readings assigned [in the previous unit], create a 5–7 minute presentation to teach your clergy staff about how one's eschatological imagination can be a resource when engaging those of other faiths or of no faith. Create a TED-style talk, a narrated PowerPoint, a VoiceThread, or a video of another kind that your staff can view on their own time. It must include video, sound other than just your voice, and still images. Think carefully about what it is you want them to know and tailor the use of the technology to ensure that it is communicated to them clearly. Focus on the theology at the heart of your teaching. Ground your theology in the sources and be sure you let your hearers know when ideas are not your own, especially if you quote anyone's writing.

Students were given a deadline by which these presentations needed to be complete. I then posted them as separate threads in a Moodle forum open to the class. There was then a second deadline by which each student was "required to have watched all of the presentations and to have made substantive comments of a theological and/or pedagogical nature on at least three of them." Finally, there was a third and final deadline by which students were "required to have replied thoughtfully to all comments made" on their work.

I then viewed all the presentations and read through the discussions, and I assessed the projects based on a previously provided rubric of seven criteria, each with four levels: above standards, meets standards, near standards, and below standards. The seven criteria (with the maximum number of points earnable for each indicated in parentheses) were: use of sources (30), original and critical thinking (15), structure of presentation (15), pedagogy, meaning the clarity and achievement of the presenter's learning outcomes (10), required elements (10), comments on peers' presentations (10), and responses to peers' comments (10).

Interestingly, students were less intimidated by this assignment than by the meme assignment. Presumably, this has to do with the medium: all students have experienced an instructional presentation online, but not all are familiar with the syntax and culture of meme-making.

During the Wabash workshop, we were encouraged to assign multimedia projects of this kind with very short time durations. Nearly universally, however, students bemoaned not having enough time to communicate all they wanted to say, wishing they had been able to provide more nuance in their presentations. I was surprised, but gratified, by this. Next year, I will increase the time limit, but I will also warn them that more time means a greater temptation to wander too far from the central idea the presentation is meant to communicate and that they must diligently maintain that focus throughout.

The extent to which most students readily grasped the importance of providing ongoing theological formation for their clergy staff was highly gratifying. They attended to that task with rich creativity, substantive theology, and an inviting personal presence. As teachers-to-be, I think it was useful for them to see themselves and their colleagues in this role.

Students were eager to discuss pedagogy in the forum, but a little less forthcoming about their specific theological choices. As the one evaluating and providing feedback on their approaches to the theological formation of others, I would like to know more about that and I will ask for more detail about that in the future.

Overall, the use of digital media in connection with this assignment appears to have ignited the imaginations of the students to think about doing theological formation in the milieu they are most likely to do this in their careers: the parish. Education in formal theology in the seminary is meant to equip students for bringing the riches of the theological heritage and discipline to bear in the work of ministry. This assignment seems to have contributed well to that outcome.

https://wabash.center/2020/05/digital-pedagogy-allowing-theology-students-to-become-theological-educators/