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Pedagogies of Context and Position - Thinking Like a Dean

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Sometimes, when someone takes on a new administrative role in an organization I say, "Welcome to the other side of the desk." Going from a staff or teaching position to that of administration will change the way one looks at things. This is merely the result of changing one's position in the

system. That move demands a different way of functioning within the system with different priorities that come with the job. When a faculty member becomes a dean it does not take long before one may hear someone say, "You know, you've changed since becoming dean" (intended as a compliment or criticism!).

There are what I believe to be pedagogies of context and position that shape our frames of references, perceptions, and ways of knowing. That is, one's context and position in an organization shapes the way one thinks. The dynamics of these pedagogies have to do with the epidemiologies of practice. For example, these pedagogies are iterative (they involve patterns of thinking and practice) and heuristic (they involve perpetual problem solving). These two dynamics alone, over time, shape our ability to "think like a dean."

Pedagogies of Context

We tend to under appreciate and underestimate the power of context in learning. So much so

that I often find myself reminding theological educators "Seminaries are very good at the formation of seminarians; churches form clergy." In a recent conversation I once again heard the sentiment that we need to keep our students in seminary longer to better prepare them for ministry. What may tend to be unrealized is that keeping students longer in a context that keeps them in the role of "student," dependent on others for expertise, and experiencing themselves as novices rather than leaders, merely reinforces their formation as students. To put it bluntly, you learn to do what you do, and not something else. If you want to learn how to pastor a church, then you need to actually pastor a church, not study about pastoring a church.

The situated context of a theological school frames the "character" of both the office and person of the dean. The theological imperatives of an institution whose mission is in support of the Church and the particular corporate ethos of a theological faculty whose cognates are slanted toward the preparation for the formation of clergy require practices in the function of the dean that shapes both the dean and the organization. To put it another way, the context of a theological school calls out dimensions of the work of the dean in the theological school unique in higher education.

Pedagogies of Position

Deans occupy a unique position in theological schools. They learn to think more globally, strategically, and administratively than others in the organization. Their position is that of a Second Chair leader, meaning that while they hold relatively little authority, their sphere of influence can be broad and significant. While the position of dean is that of chief academic administrator they quickly learn that logical and necessary attention to policies, procedures, and protocols can only influence the system so far. Effective deans, then, learn the pedagogy of relationships of their particular organizational cultures that help to actually bring about change. Few in the organization, aside from the dean, are in the position to tap into those facets of influence.

It is necessary to embrace that while theological school deans do much of the same administrative and leadership functions as all other deans, in the context of a confessional educational body serving the Church, living out, modeling, and practicing religious ways of being and relating becomes a necessity. Having a theological framework that informs practice, decisions (not only what is decided, but how one goes about it), and function. Demonstrating love, extending grace, being redemptive in relationships, are as critical to the health, vitality and effectiveness of the position and work of dean as is administrative competence.

How to think like a dean

It takes about three years to learn the job of dean, and about four years to achieve competence. Eventually, the pedagogy of context and position will help us think like a dean. What might that look like? Below are some examples.

- You learn to appreciate that your priority is the welfare of the organization and not

particularly that of individuals in the organization

- You are aware that you sit at the tension point of numerous anxious triangle (the faculty-the president-the board)
- Your priorities of focus change. For me, it is "The curriculum first, the needs of the student second, personal preferences, predilections and peccadilloes third" (previously it may have been, my scholarship, my teaching, my students).
- You get clear that you are responsible for your own functioning and not that of others.
- You also must live into the reality that your functioning is not dependent on other people's functioning. (Just because your faculty does not want to practice curriculum assessment does not mean you can stop making it happen)
- You get clear that what people want and what people need are not always equivalent. Give people what they need.
- You become aware that theological education is situated in the field of higher education. You need to think like an educator as well as a theologian (or historian, or Bible scholar, or pastoral counselor)
- You begin to appreciate that the deanship is its own vocation. Too many of us spend a lot of time fretting about not being perceived as scholars in our fields. On this job, something has to give, or, as my mother reminded her children, "You can have anything you want, but you can't have everything you want." While you are dean, invest in the scholarship of the deanship.
- You become aware that a part of the job is fighting against inertia in order to make progress. Rare are the faculty and program leaders who characteristically demonstrate initiative in developing, refining, improving, or enhancing the curriculum or programs. Those perspectives and initiatives seem to be "assigned" to the dean. Unless you initiate and push for progress, it likely will not happen.

Doing the work of the dean changes the way one thinks about theological education, teaching and learning, students and faculty. So, when someone tells you, "You've changed since you became dean," just say, "Yes, thank you for noticing."

<https://wabash.center/2012/04/pedagogies-of-context-and-position-thinking-like-a-dean/>