



## Teaching Practical Theology in Higher Education Conference: A Report

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End page: 54

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[Return to vol. 6 no. 2 index page](#)

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The ***Teaching Practical Theology in Higher Education*** conference was instigated by the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, and co-organised with the Network of Adult Theological Educators (NoATE) and the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology (BIAPT). It took place at Oxford Brookes on March 1st-2nd 2007, and attracted over 40 participants from a broad range of practitioner and academic backgrounds. This generated lively and informed discussion on a broad range of issues associated with practical theology, both within the sessions and during informal discussion. The event benefited from preliminary papers being posted onto the PRS website.

The number of students studying practical theology has grown phenomenally over the last twenty years with the expansion of higher education and the wider distribution of theological education. The proliferation of Masters level programmes in the UK addressing applied, contextual, practical and ministerial concerns are signs of its vitality and relevance. Increasingly the churches are working with universities in order to accredit or validate programmes taught through theological colleges and courses, local churches, diocesan and other structures. This greater interest from the

churches has had an impact on higher education with universities beginning to embrace the subject, but in a much broader sense than clergy training. This expansion within the UK context has also meant that higher degrees in practical theology are now more in evidence. This is illustrated by the greater number of research students in the field, the growth of Doctor of Ministry programmes and the launch in 2006 of a collaborative Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology (the development of which is detailed in *With all this energy and expansion, it was considered timely to consider the area of teaching and learning within the field.* The event was considered to fit with the Subject Centre's remit to support the development and recognition of good teaching practice in PRS. Its significance was not only to present an opportunity for practical theology practitioners and academics to meet and discuss issues, but to present findings to the wider academic community. The following report is drawn in part from the paper proposals.

In the evening of March 1st, a keynote paper was provided by Professor Ruard Ganzevoort (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam/Kampen Theological University) on 'Teaching that matters. A course on trauma and theology.' This described experiences in an international MA programme in practical theology and a post academic course, organised around the topic of trauma and theology. In these programmes, pastoral theological and psychological theories are brought together with practical experiences and personal reflection. The paper discussed the theological (and educational) presuppositions and consequences involved in developing the curriculum. It developed an exploration of the challenges chaplains have to use theology in a practical way, and discussed approaches towards teaching trauma theory, intimate partner violence, and transcultural violence. The programme attracts international students, and connects with central theological themes, such as discussions on evil and guilt, and suffering as punishment. This presentation generated a lively discussion, with questions on the construction of the disciplinary area, the impact of the applications of the term 'victim' and 'survivor', approaches to counselling students on the programme, and methods towards the application of theology as therapy.

There was a variety of workshops and other papers during the conference. For example, Graeme Smith's (St Michael's College, Llandaff) paper, written with Manon Parry, was entitled 'Something that can be learnt but not taught: teaching Theological Reflection through Enquiry Based Learning'. It examined the experience of teaching theological reflection to a group of final year ordinands at a residential summer school. Using Enquiry Based Learning as a pedagogical vehicle, the students were challenged to describe and reconsider their understandings of 'theological reflection'.

Zoe Bennett (Anglia Ruskin University/Cambridge Theological Federation) and Elaine Graham (Manchester) provided a paper on 'The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: an idea whose time has come?'.<sup>1</sup> This paper traced the development of this 'professional doctorate', which was developed under the auspices of the British and Irish Association of Practical Theology, and enrolled its first intake in September 2006.<sup>2</sup> The programme combines sustained reflection on candidates' own professional or voluntary work with a structured, portfolio-based method of assessment. In its emphasis on 'enquiry-based learning' - or practice-based research - and in intentionally modelling patterns of practical theological reflection, the programme is designed to furnish participants with opportunities to deepen their understanding of the theological dimensions of their own practice, thereby enhancing their personal and professional understanding and competence. The programme also seeks to nurture a research environment tailor-made to part-time, professionally based candidates, often based in secular rather than ecclesial work contexts. Three universities validated the Professional Doctorate in its first year: Anglia Ruskin University, the University of Manchester, and the University of Wales, Lampeter. This initiative offers the field of Practical Theology new empirical areas of research and a new generation of practice-based researchers; by enabling further sustained exploration of the relationship between theological traditions and the practice of ministry; and by offering new possibilities for adult theological education via the adoption of a range of enquiry-based learning and action-research techniques. The Professional Doctorate is in part a product of a Subject Centre funded project, which explored approaches towards collaboration and delivery of content. Questions emerged in the presentation on the definition and nature of theology as 'action research', the approaches towards a viva in the Professional Doctorate, the roles of students in professional contexts, the nature of a 'contribution to knowledge' in a practice-based doctorate, and the insider/outsider debate. In terms of the wider academic community, it was noted that aspects of the pedagogy associated with the Professional

Doctorate in Practical Theology could be transferred outside of the theology and religious studies sector, for example with interest expressed by performance arts. It was suggested that the doctorate offered institutions improved retention and completion rates, based on new means of reflection and research models.

Angie Pears' (Oxford Brookes) paper was 'Claiming the Right to Educate?: Insider/Outsider in Practical and Contextual Theology'. It examined the issues, challenges and possibilities facing a non-Christian, non-faith-based educator teaching Christian practitioners at postgraduate level in practical and contextual theology. It sought to explore and deconstruct the concept of the 'theologian' in an educational perspective, scrutinising the place of faith in the academic setting as a pre-requisite to engaging in meaningful theological discourse and reflection with the Christian practitioner. It drew on Pears' experiences as a tutor and course leader of an MA in Practical and Contextual Theology at Oxford Brookes, designed for Christian practitioners, and taught in distance learning mode. It asked whether an educator could really be an effective part of a community of learners whose faith and Christian practice is the focal point of their grounded theological studies at Master's level, when the educator herself does not share this faith commitment or practice? Pears noted that this perspective opens up discussion with students, and that the debate on 'theology' has to incorporate insiders and outsiders. It emphasised the potential of theology being applied as a 'resistance tool' by marginalised students, in facilitating a capacity to engage in discourse with 'traditional' theological backgrounds.

Martin Groves (Oxford Brookes) and Phillip Tovey (Diocese of Oxford) explored 'Portfolio, Partnership and Pedagogy in Practical Theology'. This paper offered reflections on the strengths and weakness of portfolio based pedagogy when used in the context of a partnership between a Higher Education institution and a faith community for the purposes of teaching practical theology. It was based on the experience of Oxford Brookes and the Diocese of Oxford in the Church of England in the development of such a project. The paper introduced the theories of the place of portfolio in relation to learning outcomes, assessment, teaching and learning, before exploring whether or not such educational tools meet the needs of secular universities and their faith based partners in the teaching of practical theology. The paper described innovative teaching practice in this area whilst drawing on six years of experience in the delivery and application of partnership and using portfolios for the assessment in the teaching of practical theology. The paper noted that the significance of portfolio based pedagogy in partnership went beyond the assessment of competence to offer a potential resolution of some of the theoretical issues about the location of practical theology in the contemporary educational environment.

Joan Cartledge and Michael Elliott (University of Wales, Lampeter) presented a workshop on 'Action Research as an Educational Tool in a Doctor of Ministry Programme'. It described the module 'Action Research for Ministry' at the University of Wales, Lampeter. The module is grounded in the transformative pedagogy of Paulo Freire and requires participation by the researched, not just the researcher. It utilises a 'double-loop' approach to theological reflection starting with practices and consequences before engaging with values embedded in the practices. The workshop incorporated case studies of projects undertaken by three students: one was a hospice chaplain studying the spiritual provision for patients; the second was a Free Church minister, who explored the dynamics of the preaching experience; the third student was involved in a church youth project.

Nicola Slee (Queen's Foundation, Birmingham) discussed 'Poetry as a Means of Theological Reflection.' This paper sought to consider how the reading and writing of poetry might offer one avenue towards the development of the art of theological reflection. It drew on a range of poetic texts and considered a range of writing exercises, and Slee suggested that the reading and writing of poetry can contribute to core skills and attitudes desirable for the practice of theological reflection, and offered an approach to how this might be achieved. This was more a workshop than a traditional paper, and participants listened to poems recorded by their authors, and then worked in groups on how this particular poem could enable the skills required in theological reflection. Both the fruitfulness and the difficulties of this method of working became apparent in the doing. Strong feelings were aroused by the poetry, and participants found it interestingly difficult to reflect on skills (for example of close observation, or of the identification of core symbols) rather than on the poems themselves.

John Horder (Moorlands College) presented a workshop on 'Taking church leavers seriously: a worked example of Practical Theology'. This explored the ways in which insights about faith, culture and church could be acquired through studying former members of churches rather than simply labelling them as people who have 'lost their faith'. The paper concentrated on the context of Evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, and on the issues arising for church leaders. Participants were invited to do the theological reflection themselves as part of the demonstration of a model (derived from Mowat and Swinton) and the ensuing discussion was enriched by the wide mix of contexts from which participants came.<sup>3</sup>

Pete Ward's (King's College London) paper 'The Eucharist and the Turn to Culture' took the Eucharist as a test case for developing a practical theology. The paper used methodologies drawn from cultural and media studies to read the Eucharist as Production, Text and Consumption. It argued that doctrine is performed in the Eucharist. The significance of the paper for practical theology and education is that the doctrinal is not bracketed out, rather the lived culture of faith and the theological canon are both recognised as read in relation to one another.

The title of Carla A. Grosch-Miller's (Southern Theological Education and Training Scheme (STETS), Salisbury) paper was 'Bounded by love: equipping a wholesome sexuality in ministry'. This discussed the issues surrounding sex and sexuality in the church, relating these to a perceived absence of knowledge (in some cases) of the science/psychology of sexuality and/or biblical sexual ethics. The paper proposed a role for higher education in helping to alleviate this situation, through development of a detailed curriculum for the training of ordinands and for continuing ministerial education. The curriculum incorporates sex education; the theology of sexuality and gender; sexuality and spirituality; power, vulnerability and boundaries in ministry; pastoral care good practice; the impact of clergy sexual misconduct; strategies for self-care and for promoting healthy congregations; and facilitating faithful conversation in conflict. A good conversation ensued in which suggestions for curriculum development were made.

Christopher Craig Brittain (Aberdeen) explored 'The concept of *habitus* in practical theology'. It summarised the reasons why many theologians emphasised the concept, and what function they understood it to have within theological education. Brittain noted: 'In the context of the modern university, and in the face of denominationalism among churches, over-emphasising the function of practice and habits risks giving insufficient critical attention to the limitations and blind spots that are part of local practice. Furthermore, it might be asked whether the concept of *habitus* offers sufficient resources to enable theology and communities to negotiate between communities of difference? If it is practice, not belief, which is to ground practical theology, then what does one do when practices collide?'. The connections between knowledge and goodness were focussed in the question, which fired participants' imagination?' can a good theology student be an evil genius?' Or what might it mean to establish *habitus* in a university context?

Alison Le Cornu (Oxford Brookes) discussed 'The Practice of Teaching Practical Theology: the Development and Use of Reusable Electronic Learning Objects'. As part of the development of Brookes' MA in Practical and Contextual Theology, which is studied entirely by distance learning, two new modules have been introduced which will make significant use of Reusable Electronic Learning Objects (RELOs). Brookes' work with RELOs began eighteen months ago, thanks to a grant from the Subject Centre.<sup>4</sup> The first grant was followed by a second, and the project has moved from the first stage of defining what a RELO is, to the second stage of how it can be used effectively in an higher education context. Key elements that were introduced included the ways in which electronic learning objects can be adapted for use in different disciplinary contexts, which clearly is an issue with relevance beyond the area of practical theology.

Feedback to the conference was positive. It was described by participants as a 'very stimulating and thought-provoking conference', 'great for networking', and 'very helpful for me to develop my own thinking'. The variety of papers included in the conference was positively received. There were several requests for follow-up events to focus in on specific themes introduced at the conference. It was seen to enhance networking amongst academics and practitioners, who would not necessarily meet in other conference contexts. The mix of subject areas was seen as valuable, with the role of the Subject Centre acting as an important catalyst for exploring these critical themes. Much

of the content related to academic discourse, not just in PRS but also in the wider academy. A collection of papers will be edited for a special edition of the Journal of Adult Theological Education. Practical theology was described as being at the 'cutting edge' of theology, and it was with this in mind that it is anticipated that a future related event on Teaching Practical Theology will be organised in order to explore some of the themes further, including assessment issues, and gender and sexuality.

## Endnotes

1 See Elaine Graham 'The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: an Idea whose Time has Come?' International Journal of Practical Theology Vol. 10, Issue 2, March 2007 pp.298-311

2 See 'Evaluating the Feasibility of a Cross-Institutional Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: A Report' in this edition of Discourse.

3 John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, 'Practical Theology and Qualitative Research', (London: SCM Press 2006)

4 See 'Reusable Electronic Learning Objects for Theology and Religious Studies' in this edition of Discourse.

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[Return to vol. 6 no. 2 index page](#)

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