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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

Avoiding Triviality

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In *Toward a Theory of Instruction,* educator Jerome Bruner insists that a theory of development must be linked both to a theory of knowledge and to a theory of instruction, "or be doomed to triviality." (Toward a Theory of Instruction, Jerome Bruner, Boston: Harvard University Press, 1974, 192 pages, ISBN 9780674897014, 21).

I've long felt that this is partly the reason why so much of what passes for religious education and religious studies are at best benign, and at worst, risk a tendency to trivialize faith and religion.

Being "interesting" may provide enough impetus to keep people coming back to participate in religious education and religious studies for a while, or to keep students engaged during a course, but ultimately, there are more "interesting" things in the world to capture and hold our attention if entertainment is our vehicle for retaining people's participation in learning.

An effective education program (1) must give rigorous attention to the developmental dynamics and processes of its subjects (learners), including motivation (which is based on "need" and not "interest"), (2) must hold to an epistemological philosophy of *how learners learn,* and, (3) must apply and practice a theory of learning related to *how to teach,* be it instruction, nurture, training, demonstration, tutorial, apprenticeship, etc.

Bruner suggests that mental growth "is in very considerable measure dependent on growth from the outside in—a mastering of [the ways] that are embodied in the culture and that are

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passed on in a contingent dialogue by agents of the culture." (Bruner, 21). He claims that this is the case when language and the symbolic systems of the culture are involved.

Can we say the same about faith formation and development for ministerial and religious studies students? Perhaps it's helpful to consider that while faith is a universal human potential, it is dependent on growth from the outside in "a mastering of the ways the practices of faith are embodied in the faith community's culture that are passed on, as Bruner says, "in a contingent dialogue by agents of the culture."

That strikes me as a more helpful and promising start at understanding how faith develops than fuzzy devotional notions, individualistic or "magical thinking" related to how faith comes about and develops. Worse still, the temptation to make learning entertaining and interesting.

Further, Bruner's statement that "much of the growth starts out by our turning around on our own traces and recoding in new forms, with the aid of adult tutors, what we have been doing or seeing, then going on to new modes of organization with the new products that have been formed by these recodings" (Bruner, 21) suggests three things.

First, the necessity of a core curriculum structured in a spiral or holographic framework. This allows for intentionality in creating opportunity for re-tracing and "recoding in new forms" the fundamental concepts of faith (this may be a good rationale for the power of the observance of liturgical cycles in worship and educational programming).

Second, it highlights the necessity of mediating relationships for growth in understanding—teachers, mentors, guides, spiritual friends.

Third, the constructivist understanding of epistemology (knowing) through which the learner creates knowledge, insight, and meaning through the experiences of faith and relationships. Or, as Bruner puts it, "the heart of the educational process consists of providing aids and dialogues for translating experience into more powerful systems of notation and ordering." (Bruner, 21).

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