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Towards a Contextualized Theological Education Curriculum for Transformative Ministry

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Abstract

Over the centuries, the curriculum used by seminaries and other ministerial formation institutions has come under sharp focus and criticism. The role of the curriculum in helping the institutions realize their missional goals as these relate to the church has dominated the discussions between scholars and practitioners. Often, these discussions end up in harmony and a united view on what such a curriculum will look like, while in other cases, it has resulted in disharmony with each group leaving the table bruised and disappointed. In this address, we will continue the analysis looking at curriculum more as a product of science rather than a work of art. We will not look at curriculum from the perspective of those who implement it, but from the perspective of those who formulate it using curriculum theories and principles. To do this, we will start by examining keywords and expressions used in our topic to bring us all to the same conceptual understanding. We will examine the assumptions embedded in both uncontextualized and contextualized curricula as we move on to examining the theoretical foundations of contextualized curricula. We will further examine the benefits of a contextualized curriculum and end with a few tips on how to develop a contextualized curriculum. Throughout this paper, I will argue that an uncontextualized curriculum will not lead to transformative ministry, but the contextualized curriculum will. Notwithstanding, contextualized theological education as popularly understood may not also bring about transformative ministry. We need a missiological understanding of

contextualization and transmit that to theological education as we strive toward transformation.

Introduction

I was serving as Dean of one of our Bible Colleges in Sierra Leone in the late 1990s. This Bible college presented itself as one of the best training grounds for pastors in ministry. One day, in a board meeting to which I was invited, one board member unequivocally indicated that we were not doing our job and that the pastors we were training could not even share "the four spiritual laws. They preach sermons that are above the comprehension level of people, and they cannot perform simple pastoral functions effectively. You either give us the pastor that serves the needs of the church, or we consider removing our support from this college." I was shocked! We thought we were doing our best! But those remarks sent a strong message to us who were engaged in the science and art of curriculum development. You will agree with me that the attack against seminaries and other theological institutions is growing. Churches are becoming disinterested in what is happening in our seminaries. Some local churches are setting up their own training institutions as they believe that overall, seminaries have failed in their jobs. The question we were left with was "What type of curriculum do we need to design that will develop the competencies described by the irate board member?"

Definitions

In technical discussions like this, it is appropriate to have a mutual understanding of the words in use as an institution and the implications of these words in the quest for transformative theological education. The words in this paper that require mutual understanding will be ***contextualized*** and ***transformative*** as these are related to the curriculum of theological education.

Contextualize/Contextual/Contextualization

Contextualization relates to the Gospel, the Church, and Culture. Though the word entered missiological and theological discussions in the 1970s, the concept it construes dates to the Greco-Roman era in which the early Church contended with the integration of Greeks into

Christianity. The contention was whether one can be a believer without following the strict laws and practices of Judaism. This culminated in the calling of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. It is not surprising that the concept emerged in the 1970s when Africa and the majority world were experiencing seismic changes in social, political, economic and education as the shackles of colonialism broke and the free states became stable. This was the era of self-determination and recovery of the African identity. Before this era, one could not be considered educated if one did not adopt a Western style of living – speaking a Western language, wearing Western clothes, shedding off the extended family, and going to Church. Africans in postcolonial Africa discovered that most of their understanding of missions, theological education, and ecclesiology was shaped by foreign contexts, cultures, and ideologies. Taking the cue from the decisions of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 that emphatically stated that one could follow Christ without becoming a Jew, Africans can proudly say that they can offer authentic education without bowing down to Western principles and practices. They can become authentic Christians without adopting a Western lifestyle. This can be possible through the process of contextualization.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, simply defined contextualization as "the fact or process of considering something in the situation within which it exists and happens, which can help in understanding it."

For this exercise, I will use a contextualized curriculum as indicated by Bolt and Swartz (Bolt and Swartz, 1997) when they wrote "A contextual curriculum provides a new model of instructional delivery and the development of student competencies that are required in the contemporary work environment." A contextual curriculum focuses on competencies that students need to function effectively in their various ministries.

When the definition is examined, two concepts stand out: fact (content) and process (method). In the view of the ***process***, we will describe a contextualized theological education curriculum as one whose processes of development and implementation are embedded in each context or ministry of the student. Such a context or ministry

determines whether the competencies are relevant, meaningful and valuable to the student (Llego, 2022, September 1). It describes an instructional approach that makes a clear relationship between what students learn on the one hand and the situation in which they learn and use it. It is that instruction that links the learning of ministry skills with academic or occupational content. This allows the teaching and learning processes to focus on explicit application in a defined ministry that is of interest to the student.

The other component of our definition is ***"fact"*** which may constitute ***"information"*** or broader still ***"knowledge."*** It is the content of our curriculum. In view of "knowledge," we may describe contextualized theological education curriculum as one whose content has been generated from the context in which knowledge is taught or mediated and applied and is actively responsive to that context.

In most situations, "content" and "processes" have not been treated under the wholistic umbrella of contextualization but have been separated into two different entities, each entity having its own resolute and often antagonistic champions.

Those educators who call for contextualization of content want to see more African themes and issues in the curriculum. They abhor the uncritical acceptance of preloaded Western curriculum contents that are unapologetically given to students. They question the efficacy of such content and its appropriateness towards the transformation of the Church in Africa. These scholars have become conscious that what we had called contextualization of our curricula is not contextualization but adaptation – where foreign content is adjusted to fit into the context of the students. What they are calling for is a contextual curriculum or a home-grown curriculum. It is this push that has promoted disciplines like Liberation Theology, African Christian Theology, African Public Theology, etc. It has even led to the pluralization of theology such that we now have "theologies" rather than the singular "theology."

To further distinguish between contextualized curriculum (which they are agitating for) and adaptation (which is what has been done all these while) let me use an example:

> When I was growing up, I had no means of buying my own clothes. My family was also poor in doing so. My source of clothing came from the missionaries. When they give me trousers, for example, I will take them to the tailor, who will adjust them to make them fit. It never did (that is adapted). When I grew up and started earning money, when I needed a pair of trousers, I would go to the tailor and introduce myself. He will take my measurements and will sew the trousers to fit my exact specifications. Such trousers will always fit (that is contextual).

For a long time, we have used curricula developed for other learning situations by adapting such curricula to meet our needs. We change the name of course, but the content remains the same, we add a course here and there, but the philosophical basis and DNA of the courses always remain foreign. The question then is: ***Is the content of our curriculum responsive to the contextual needs of our church and society?***

The other dimension of contextualized theological education curriculum is ***"process."*** The group of scholars interested in this area is concerned with the way theological education is taught. The question of interest to this group of proponents is whether the way theological education is taught conforms to the natural ways Africans learn. This group of scholars has been promoting African epistemologies as opposed to the inherited Western forms of learning that are steep in individualism, grade-oriented, and dumping of information. They believe Africans are more prone to solving problems through communal engagements. Overall, methods are contextual when they fit the natural ways of learning. The question then is: ***Do our teaching engagements conform to the epistemological frameworks of our students? That is, do we teach in ways that conform to the ways our students learn naturally?***

The dichotomy of contextual curriculum into content and process presents an existential threat to building a transformational curriculum. What is being taught (the content) has an efficacious relationship to how it is being taught.

From this brief interaction, it may be concluded that contextualized theological education focuses on curriculum content that is developed from situations the Africans face and is taught in the ways in which Africans naturally learn. A deficit in any of these areas may jeopardize the quest of contextualizing theological education in Africa. Understanding the dynamics of the African context in which the mission of the institution is pursued, a contextual curriculum should be one that is realistic, derived from the mission of the institution, and addresses the needs of the Church communities of interest.

A contextualized curriculum links education and competencies required in the work environment. To transform the work environment, we must link our curriculum to the knowledge, skills, and character needed in the real ministry in which the student serves.

Transform/Transformation/Transformational/ Transformative

The next word to look at in our topic is "transformation." This word is so used and misused that it is almost becoming nonsensical. It has become a buzzword in every dictum of schools and colleges. Without going into a complex definition of the word, again a simple dictionary definition will help us understand the term.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines transform as *to change in composition or structure. The Cambridge Dictionary* defines it as changing completely the appearance or character of something or someone, especially so that that thing or person is improved.

While the dictionary definitions are straightforward, the word itself is mercurial. Greg Whitby (2017, December 6), in talking about transformational education asserts that there will be many responses to what transformation is as there will be the number of people you may ask. The same may apply to transformational ministry.

The two definitions will put at par "transformation" with the word "metamorphosis" which is a change that transcends the entire nature and form of something. In biology, when we use the word metamorphosis, we refer to the process an insect goes through from the egg stage to the larvae, pupal, and finally adult stage. In each of

the stages, the DNA of the insect remains the same, but the form and nature are significantly different from each stage. It is a natural process that brings about radical structural changes.

In view of these definitions, what does transformative ministry look like? Let me propose the following: transformative ministry is one that has the potential to change the lives and circumstances of people and communities for the better without a change in the core message of the gospel. Such ministries become transformational when Church leaders create a ministry environment that encourages and nurtures God's people to integrate biblical truths and values into their fundamental perspectives, core values, relational patterns, and habits of life thereby opening and submitting themselves to the power of the Holy Spirit to change their lives and become God's living witnesses to Church and society.

As we design our curriculum toward transformation, we must be aware that the biblical concept of transformation is a result of a personal relationship with God. The students we train to lead transformative ministries must first be transformed. Transformation is an outcome that is powered by the Holy Spirit. This must be a critical factor in developing our content and processes of the curriculum (GlobalCHENetwork).

Contextualized theological education will enhance transformative ministry because both take context seriously. Both happen in the same context in the sense that contextualized curriculum that is homegrown is used to prepare homegrown pastors who lead home-based transformative ministries. Transformative ministry is an outcome of a contextualized curriculum. Consequently, if over the years our graduates have not exhibited transformative ministry, it is prudent that we start looking at our curriculum assumptions.

Assumptions

Most of the extant curricula in our theological institutions are nothing close to contextual. As I said earlier, most of them are adapting curriculum from other contexts and making some cosmetic changes as they offer it as a contextualized curriculum. Such an uncontextualized

curriculum, built on objectivism (Skinner, 1968) cannot enhance transformative ministry for several reasons:

1. They assume that knowledge is static. They emphasize the importance of external reality and objective truth. They are exceptionally low on context and extremely high on the discovery and understanding of facts. Consequently, a curriculum that has worked in one context will invariably work in another context. This encourages the hook-line-sinker importation of curriculum from one context to another – if it worked in Britain, it would work in Nigeria.

2. Since knowledge is external to the learner, and it is pure, someone (mostly the lecturer) may need to get that knowledge and deliver it to the students in the same manner he or she received it (You hear the expression – we teach the way we are taught). This makes the uncontextualized curriculum focus on the teacher – the teacher is the most important person in theological education.

3. The uncontextualized curriculum assumes that since knowledge is exterior of the learner, the learner is empty and has nothing to contribute to the educative process except to passively receive what the guru (lecturer) provides. The brain and mind of the learner is the "bank" (Freire 1970, p. 58), where the lecturer deposits knowledge and can request for such knowledge in the form it was banked during examinations and texts.

These are some of the deep-rooted assumptions embedded in some of the curriculum that we use in our institutions that make them exceedingly difficult to contextualize. Such assumptions are not likely to produce graduates who will lead transformative ministries. Many institutions have attempted to make cosmetic adaptations and adjustments to such curricula at their own peril hence the accusation against them continues to be valid – irrelevant to the Church. It is not easy to transform such curricula because their very DNA cannot change. If you decide to change them, you must change the entire educational philosophy and approach.

Hope is not lost, as there is a contextualized curriculum that also has its own assumptions built on constructivism (Steffe and Gale, 1995). Some of these assumptions are as follows:

1. Knowledge is not outside of the learner; it is embedded in the experiences of the learner in context and hence learners can construct their own knowledge. Note that some theorists in this area including the writer believe that God's revelation does not change, but the hearers and doers are living in different contexts making them different and mutable.

2. Learning involves the construction of knowledge by the tools of experience and tools that help learners make sense of novel and confounding information.

3. Learning is a mediated process between the student and his or her context that is internally controlled by the learner.

4. Learning is both an active and reflective process. Consequently, the learner is not passive or an empty vessel to be filled. Knowledge is not passively received but actively built up by the experiential world of the learner. (Constructivism in Education, 1987. International Encyclopedia of Education.)

5. Learning happens in a community where students share multiple perspectives through reflection, collaboration, and mediation through which shared meanings and activities are proposed.

6. Learning happens through the processes in which the student accommodates, assimilates, or rejects experiences as they construct new meanings or new mental models.

The contextualized curriculum is all about the learner and learning.

Theoretical Foundations of a Contextualized Curriculum

Invariably, you may have noticed that contextualized curriculum toward transformational ministry is built on the firm foundations of constructivism in which the experiences that students have gained in context are critical to the construction of new knowledge that will help transform their ministries. It does not just offer hands-on ministry activities but helps the students to critically reflect on the

impact of their activities as they continue to revisit those activities in context with the view of improving them.

Contextualized curriculum toward transformative ministry is also built firmly on Kolb's (Kolb 1984) experiential cycle. For Kolb, learning starts with a ***concrete experience***. Concrete experiences happen in real-time, place, and context. The contextual curriculum is designed in such a way that it exposes the learner to contextual issues that require transformation. Such exposure to confounding realities in context creates some dissonance in the student that will naturally lead the student to the next stage in the cycle which is the ***reflective observation*** stage**.** This stage builds in the learner the passion and disposition to do something about what they have observed. It is the passion to do something that leads the learner into Kolb's third stage which is ***abstract conceptualization***. At this stage, learners start to form innovative ideas on how to manage the confounding realities produced by the concrete experiences they have been exposed to. They start to see how what they have learned can be used to creatively address their concrete experiences. The fourth stage in Kolb's cycle is ***an active experimental stage.*** At this stage, the student applies the new ideas they have developed to address the issues raised by the concrete experiences. The new ideas are actively applied toward the transformation of the confounding realities. The active experimental stage provides new experiences which now become the new concrete experience for the beginning of the next cycle. Thus, the contextualized curriculum, through the principles of constructivism and Kolb's experiential cycle will lead a learner to transform a concrete situation into a desired and better situation. Let me give an example of how this works in a learning situation:

You realize the poor state of evangelism and the sharing of Christian love in the community or nation where your Institution is located. Your board gives the mission of your institution as follows:

> Train God-called men and women for the work of the Great Commission and demonstrating such in Christian love for the transformation of their communities.

A contextualized curriculum toward transformation using the principles of constructivism and Kolb's experiential cycle will use the following questions and activities:

1. What is the state of the Great Commission (GC) in the nation? How are Christians demonstrating love in context?
   Concrete Experience: This question must not be answered in abstraction. The contextualized curriculum will allow the student to have a concrete experience of the state of the GC and demonstration of Christian love. The student needs to embed him or herself in the context. The contextualized curriculum will not tell the student. The student would have to experience that reality.

2. What is it that accounts for the state of the GC and demonstration of Christian love in my community? What are the variables and how are they related?
   Reflective Observation: The contextualized curriculum will create space for the student to ponder over their concrete experiences. The student as they reflect may ask questions like: What did I just see? What is responsible for the type of things I saw? What may have accounted for the situation? The curriculum must allow the student to actively process these questions either as an individual or in a community of learners.

3. What can I or We do about it?
   Abstract Conceptualization: The contextualized curriculum will allow the learner to produce ideas and solutions toward transforming concrete experiences or situations. The learner may ask questions like: What can we do about the situation? What do we need to intervene successfully toward transforming the situation? Who are the critical stakeholders to work with? At this stage, the student may read a book, take an elective course, etc. to empower themselves for the application of their ideas.

4. Let us go out and do it.
   Active Experimentation: The conceptualized curriculum allows the student to implement their ideas in transforming the situation. As the ideas are implemented, the results become another concrete experience that will start the cycle. After

implementation, the student stands back and examines the impact of their work.

Benefits of Contextualizing Curriculum

Before we undertake the serious task of contextualizing our curriculum, we should be aware of the immense benefits it brings to the mission of the Church and the lifelong learning of our students. Some of the benefits as outlined by Llego (2022, September 1) are:

1. Contextualizing our curriculum may help the learners to connect the information they obtain to their ministries, lives, and confounding situations in their communities. It makes learning more relevant thereby motivating students to take more interest in their training.

2. Contextualizing our curriculum may help students develop a deeper understanding of the concepts and principles embedded in their academic pursuits. It helps them to develop knowledge through concepts and theories to explain confounding issues. It takes an inductive approach to learning and theory development.

3. Contextualized curriculum helps us to become knowledge producers and not only knowledge consumers.

4. Contextualizing our curriculum may help students develop metacognition skills and further help them develop critical thinking and lifelong learning skills that will serve them well in their future professional and academic endeavours.

5. Contextualizing our curriculum may help students analyze situations and develop appropriate responses to those situations in view of transforming them. It may develop critical thinking skills in the students.

Building a Contextualized Curriculum Toward Transformation

Building a contextualized curriculum requires certain skills that the traditional curriculum development does not give much attention to. Let me suggest a few tips for your consideration as you strive to build your curriculum.

1. Start with your mission statement and ask the question: To what extent is the mission of our institution embedded and responsive to contextual realities in our community? What specific contextual issue is our institution established to address and is this issue reflected in our mission statement?

2. Examine the profile of graduates who will enhance the realization of your mission. The mission statement sets the task for your institution, but that task is done by your graduates, you need to develop a graduate profile indicating which skills and character such graduates may need to conduct the mission of God through the ministries they serve.

3. Be alert to where the people you admit into your college come from. You must be familiar with the context in which your incoming students live, their life experiences and what they are bringing to the learning institution.

4. Determine the content (knowledge) that the incoming students will be exposed to for them to become the graduate you seek to produce.

5. Determine the context and way your curriculum will be implemented. Is the context in which you operate your curriculum the same context in which the students live?

6. Determine the type of faculty members to hire and retain. Are your faculty members living in the same context as your students or do they have enough knowledge of the context of your students?

7. Determine the place and pace of the curriculum: How long will it take the student to complete the curriculum and where will the curriculum be implemented? Residential, online, mixed, etc.? How much control will the institution have over the curriculum in terms of place, pace, space, and time?

8. Indicate how you will know that the curriculum has achieved its intended goals.

These are just the few thoughts I have for you on the matter and as we continue for these two days, my colleagues will further shed light upon these issues. I will be available to take your questions and suggestions as we strive together to make this conference a resounding success.

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