



Exploring the relationship between theology and learning through the lens of disruption

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Presentation abstract

As in many other contexts, for theological education practitioners, successful teaching and learning outcomes not only include students' clear comprehension of curriculum content but also the cultivation of skills to contextualise learning in multiple, unforeseen circumstances. In other words, academic achievement and personal/spiritual formation are inseparable. My research suggests that disruptive pedagogies (whether related to what is taught or how) are a foundational pedagogical tool that not only equips students to gain and understand new information but also equips learners to practise the imaginative posture required to use their learning in real-world situations. Against a larger backdrop, this presentation explored: (a) the pedagogical and sociological factors implicated in (what I call) disruptive-inclusive learning, (b) how my work concerning the nature of the relationship between theology and pedagogy could contribute to a wider framework for considering the learning methodologies and methods pertinent to a range of subject disciplines, and (c) how such discussions, in turn, may lead to richer, more holistic and integrated approaches to learning development more generally.

The overarching, guiding (but clearly also only initial) questions which require further attention were:

- What are the biggest challenges in developing a dialogue between the how and the what of teaching and learning (i.e. curriculum content and teaching and learning methodologies/methods)?
- What categories of learning disruption are specifically associated with different subject areas? As learning practitioners, do we equip learners to embrace or avoid these disruptions?

- Did we/what did we learn from the pandemic about operating in and preparing for the unknown and unforeseeable? What might the next phase of this be?

Keywords: theological pedagogy, disruptive-inclusion, learning methodologies, dialogue

Community response

The presentation was thought-provoking and sparked conversations, ideas and questions for participants. For example, one participant found the dynamic nature of learning (impermanence) that was described to be of much interest:

I was really struck by something you said in this thoughtful and reflective session: the goal of learning is to be at home on the road. I love that reminder of impermanence. There is a curious tension, I think, in the ever-moving state of learning and the value of stopping to look at where you are right now. This is what writing helps to achieve for me, a catching of the breath and a pausing for thought, whilst also knowing that my ideas will continue to evolve beyond the confines of any publication. For me, that insistence on being here now and considering where we've been, rather than racing ahead to the next thing, is a useful form of disruption, and writing is my tool for being present and connecting to where I am. The question for me is, how do we help students see the value of writing in this context and embrace the slowing of pace?

This presentation encouraged many participants to introspect on the overlaps between theology and education:

As I reflect on your session, a key insight for me is how my own approaches and understanding to student learning and development have been shaped by the fields of theology and education. As a practitioner with these dual foci always in mind, I am considering how the discipline of theology can inform educational development, helping to shift the focus of 'student success' from a grades or performance orientation towards an understanding of the role of academic development as a part of human formation, allowing students to grow towards their human potential within and beyond academic coursework.

Another participant added:

I'd definitely echo the comments above, writing again as someone for whom theology (in both its more 'academic' and 'everyday' varieties) is the stuff of a daily life of faith and failure, and so plays an integral role in how I navigate and make sense of learning and teaching – themselves practices that are, for everyone involved 'religious' or otherwise, ever informed by faith and marked by failure! I

would add that a further affinity lies in the tensions that can be observed between the radical, disruptive insights of the gospel and institutional religion on the one hand, and the ideals of educationalists and the realities of institutional higher education on the other. How we negotiate these tensions seems like a fruitful source of further dialogue between theological education and learning development. As such, I sincerely hope that Jen's fascinating paper marks something of an inaugural statement in the development of this dialogue.

For some attendees, the title caught their attention, though they were unsure what to expect:

As an academic skills advisor, I have occasionally encountered students with a strong religious faith and been very interested in how they have responded to academic study and some of the difficulties they have had (very similar to those described by the student 'Sara' in Theresa Lillis's 2003 article 'Student Writing as Academic Literacies') (Lillis, 2003). I found the talk really exciting – particularly the idea of moving away from 'trying to get there' to 'getting better at being here', the idea of learning as building 'connection' rather than amassing 'information'. I did find it a bit hard to envisage what these things might look like in practice, and this is something I'd be very interested to follow.

Finally, this session spoke directly to the context some participants found themselves in as theological educators and learning developers, evoking the response:

...yet ne'er the two worlds officially collide in an academic conference space...until now! Thank you Jen for this bold step to map out areas of overlap and points of shared learning between the two worlds of theological education and learning development. Indeed, I find the two worlds share much in common. For example, both fields, I believe, are largely values-driven fields that somehow require measurable outcomes to remain sustainable in a 'shaky space' (economically speaking) so experience similar tensions and frustrations. Both are committed to a holistic, student-centred approach due to the values of empowerment and accessibility that are central to both learning development and theological education. Certainly, the focus on the marginalised within institutional systems is perhaps the greatest overlap, and Jen's explanation of Jesus' relentless reminders recorded in the Gospels to include the marginalised in society echoes the learning developers' cry to create an accessible system of education that knows the value of each diverse learner and desires that they thrive amongst adversity. It is a useful and indeed necessary step in this cross-disciplinary conversation to find the similarities and 'stakes' as you outlined them, Jen, amongst the fields. I am looking forward to exploring further how the two fields can learn from each other in these dialogues. This strikes me as the beginning of a very useful, much-needed conversation to have. Invariably though, for a deeper analysis to occur, this will eventually require outlining and acknowledging the differences and distinctives between the fields, which I imagine could be a much more precarious task.

Author's reflection

I am deeply grateful to all involved in ALDinHE and those who attended my session and have responded so warmly. Approaching the conference, I was a little trepidatious about how my alternative approach to the sector and some of its associated disciplines would be received, but I have been greatly encouraged by the welcome I received and the sense of simply adding another alternative viewpoint to an already diverse collective. I am deeply convinced that theological educators have much to both learn from and contribute to the wider learning development community and will continue to invest in those links.

More specifically, I am thankful to those who took the time to respond to my offering and agree that there is much value in pursuing this work further. I agree with the respondent who commented about the potentially precarious nature of this analysis, but this only spurs me on further – most things that are worth doing involve some jeopardy because there is something important at stake. I take on board the encouragements to keep the practical in mind and will continue to wrestle with how this intersectional work will ‘land’ with different categories of educational disciplines, types of educational institutions and educators.

Next steps

During a season of sabbatical in 2026, it is my intention to create a book proposal for a volume addressing ‘Conversations between theology and learning development’ (or similar). As preparation for this, I intend to develop the short presentation given at the conference into a journal article. My initial presenting questions at this stage in the process are:

1. Is this a project that would benefit from taking a broad approach to opening up potential conversations between theology and learning development, i.e. an edited volume collating the contributions of a range of voices, or better to begin the conversation in a single author, focused way that further opens opportunities for wider contributions?
2. Similarly and deeply connected to the above, the intersection between theology and learning development could initiate conversations in multiple directions. Is it better to use any initial volume to ‘test out’ multiple potential areas of enquiry or limit it to the most immediately obvious/pertinent areas?

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Author details

Jen Smith began her career as a modern foreign languages teacher. She initially undertook theological training to investigate the relationship between Christian faith and educational methodology and to become a better teacher and learner. In the process, she discovered a passion to extend and enrich dialogue at the intersection of theology and pedagogy. During her doctoral research on John Hull's 1985 work, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?*, she created disruptive inclusion as a foundational lens to understand one of Hull's central, but still yet-to-be seriously considered, claims about the crucial role of the challenging and unpredictable for Christian learners (Smith, 2024). She is a Development Tutor at The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education in Birmingham, UK.

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