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Transforming theological learning: a conversation across the globe with Les Ball

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This is a review article responding to Transforming Theology: Student Experience and Transformative Learning in Undergraduate Theological Education, *by Les Ball (Preston, Victoria: Mosaic Press, 2012). It seeks to clarify how the concept of 'transformative learning' is significant not just for the formal settings of theological study that this book considers, but for all contexts in which learning about faith happens. The article explores the appreciative but not uncritical stance adopted in the book towards the term 'transformative learning'. It then goes on to examine what the concept means with respect to the prior (everyday life) learning which all participants bring, to the way in which courses are designed, and to how assessment of learning (whether formal or informal) is undertaken.*

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Les Ball's recent book is important to engage with in this journal because it is a significant study which raises key questions for theological education and learning at all levels. Though focused on formal institutions of learning, its insights have wider significance too. It is a careful study, undertaken through a combination of scrutiny of curricula used in theological training institutions in Australia, and of qualitative data drawn from interviews with students and staff who experience and teach those curricula. At the heart of the exploration – and as reflected in the book's title – is the concept of 'transformative education': the recognition that learning actually changes people. It *changes* people, and it changes *people*. In other words, it does things to participants (staff and students) in a way which affects their lives in and beyond the classroom. And it does this precisely because it is not simply about filling people's heads with cognitive stuff (be it facts about the Bible, significant dates in Christian history, or even doctrines to be recited by rote or techniques of pastoral practice to be put into effect). Theological education, all education, shapes lives through forming character, inculcating virtues, as well as transferring knowledge.

All good educators – at all levels (primary, secondary, tertiary) and in all types (formal, informal) of education – have, of course, long known this, often without having the theoretical conceptuality available to describe it as such. 'Transformative education' may be a new term. But it may ultimately mean no more than 'good' or 'wise' educational practice. Be that as it may, it still needs identifying, analysing and putting into practice, and may not be as easy as it sounds (otherwise, why do we keep experiencing bad teaching, poor training and the already proverbial 'death by PowerPoint' in sessions in which we participate?).

The phrase 'theological education' can, of course, itself be alienating. As I write, I am mindful of a recent conversation about whether to call a local event a 'training workshop', a 'discipleship session' or a 'Bible study'. Apparently, it is the third of those which produces greatest numbers. Hence, that basic bit of market research indicates that Christians in the West today (or just English Methodists?) are reluctant to be 'trained', may be suspicious of 'discipleship', yet are reassured when they know they will do something with the Bible. All such initiatives are, however, to be classed as 'theological education' in the widest sense of that term.

Meanwhile, ministers have to be prepared in some way, and what they do is, mostly, not different in kind from what most Christians do. It is just that they

do more of it, in a sustained and focused way, as well as being trained to be authorised leaders. It is important to know about the Bible and how to use it. It is crucial to have some sense of Christian history, and how the history of Christian thought has interwoven with the Church's and Western culture's history. It is vital, too, to reflect carefully and practically about what 'good worship' might be. It is also necessary to practise relating to others, to develop listening skills, to think about the Church as an organisation (and not just as a theological concept), to find out a bit more about the society in which churches currently operate, and to know something of the legal issues relating to church life. That, in a nutshell, is not a bad summary of what a ministerial programme might look like (biblical study, doctrine, church history, liturgical/worship studies, practical/pastoral theology). Without the big words and the scale of study, though, the same elements make up the 'Christian life' for any Christian disciple. It is just that most people don't have much time for formal study. Or, to put it more sharply and more challengingly for local churches, it may not always be apparent that such 'training' really is all that useful for living the Christian life on a daily basis.

Alongside all of this – whether we are talking about ministerial training or lay discipleship – there is the matter of 'pedagogy'. How might the insights of educators help the whole process of 'being trained'? Biblical study, doctrine and church history, in particular, have long suffered from the assumption that they are about 'stuff which you learn' (facts you imbibe), knowledge to be transferred from a book (or a computer screen) into your head. But what if the best kind of biblical study, especially in a computer age, is that which both makes you aware of *how* to get at that stuff, and teaches you ways of understanding *how the Bible 'works'* as a text on its readers and users, for a life of faith or for other purposes.

Les Ball's book is helpful in relation to all of these questions and concerns. As a study of theological education in Australia it is helpfully distinct from UK and US contexts, while being directly resonant of the same issues faced here. Across eight chapters Ball reports on his enquiry into the extent to which forms of theological education can be seen as 'transformative'. What does such study do *to and for* the people who study? In what ways are students aware of personal change going on? How explicit is such personal change in the educational programmes themselves, and to what extent do they notice such intentions within the programmes they study? To use a phrase frequently employed in ministerial training, though less commonly outside, Ball's report is a critical examination of the processes of 'formation' going on as people study theology.

(What kind of *people* do students of theology become?) In contemporary educational terms, it is also an exploration of what 'learning outcomes' are implicit or explicit in the programmes being scrutinised. What are these programmes *for*? What do they *say* that they are for? How is it known if they *achieve* what they set out to achieve? How clear are the participants about what is intended to be done *to* them?

Ball locates his enquiry in the context of current educational thinking about transformative education (ch. 2). Setting off from a short summary of the ideas of Jack Mezirow, Ball considers proponents and opponents alike, noting as a central thread a shift from 'content-centred' to 'person-centred' pedagogy. In contexts of theological learning, perhaps strangely, this proves a hard pill to swallow. Even though people are consciously being 'formed' (as disciples or ministers), and may need 'transforming' to become so, as Ball will go on to note in his concluding chapter (ch. 8) theological institutions still want to stress the primacy of biblical and theological knowledge.

The main part of the work contains the results of analysis of curriculum documents (ch. 3), scrutiny of how participation in learning programmes does or does not mesh with life experience (ch. 4), and then analysis of what students and staff themselves say about their experiences as learners and teachers (ch. 5). The final three chapters begin to look at the consequences of the findings: for the place of formal programmes within a person's life-journey (ch. 6), from the perspective of identifying existing good practice (ch. 7) and with a view to suggesting key principles for the future (ch. 8).

The material presented is full of sobering data and helpful insights and essential questions, about any educational or training programme, not just theological ones. What, though, emerges directly and indirectly from the published conclusions which may be of interest and use to readers of this journal, both with respect to formal learning in theology, and the more informal versions of theological education which happen in local church life? I suggest four things, each of which I shall examine with respect to each of these two contexts.

First, it is good in Ball's study that 'transformative learning' is not taken on uncritically as if this is something wholly new of which educators from the past were unaware. As noted already, it may be a recent concept but lots of educators know that education can be life-changing. With reference to transformative learning's critics, though, Ball recognises that it may be a fallacy to assume that good adult education by definition incorporates 'critical disorientation, reflective processing and identity formation' (p. 13). I can, from experience, vouch for the

damage which can be caused in educational programmes when the process of 're-formation' is emphasised so strongly ('you *will* leave here a different person') that it proves not constructive for students.

That said, ensuring that attention is paid to people's lives, and the place that study occupies within those ongoing (and potentially developed or transformed) lives, is not in itself new, and is a valuable, indeed vital, educational approach. Ball is able to recognise that 'transformative learning' may simply be what results from well-thought-out programmes of teaching and learning, together with the acknowledgement that people learn and develop in ways that go *beyond* what it is planned for them to learn. (Educators really are not wholly in control of what learners learn!)

How, though, to get there, when so little pedagogical reflection may be happening? That is the challenge Ball faces, as do we. In terms of learning, formal and informal, which goes on in academic and church contexts, it is, then, vital for anyone leading a session of any kind to be clear about what's intended, and how it will be known if what's intended has been achieved. This is the background to the Learning Outcomes revolution of recent decades. Though often criticised as the imposition of administrators and managers, the revolution can be received much more constructively in educational terms.[1] Furthermore, the recognition that people are in part transformed by what happens on the margins of groups, in the incidental exchanges within groups, in the one-to-one interactions which occur beyond groups is of crucial importance. Not all learning can be labelled, assessed and monitored. But it may still be transformative.

Second, there is a concern throughout Ball's study to cajole programme designers into thinking about what experience people *already bring* to theological education. I have encountered in many different forms over the years learners who 'think they know it all already' because of the life or work experience that they bring. That is problematic in itself. Equally problematic, though, as already noted above, is the dangerous tendency of educators or trainers who desire to 'knock it out of them' and 'return them to basics', as if life or work experience does not count. The much harder task (for trainers/tutors and learners) is how to encourage people to identify and use their experience, while also re-evaluating it, reflectively and critically, and asking how it fits (or not) into their life, discipleship and ministry.

At its best, in formal theological education, this challenge will take an interdisciplinary form, enabling people to process their life or professional

experience not simply through a theological lens, but to use, say, professional psychological or sociological insights, or insights about management and organisations, drawn from other study or professional experience, within ministerial/discipleship formation. The context of formal theological learning may, in fact, be the first time that people from different 'schools' of organisational theory of experience have met and reflected on their practice. To do so while permitting both to be engaged with theological insights can prove very rich indeed.

In a local church context, where it may easily be assumed who the 'experts' in finance and property are, or who the teachers and lecturers are, it can be much harder to construct settings in which 'critical reflection on practice' occurs in a way which draws on insights gained within the church community through the life and work experience of traffic wardens, supermarket assistants, child-minders or pizza delivery workers. But that *is* the challenge of transformative learning in the local church: where are the contexts, however informal, in which interaction between people with different life and work experience actually occurs, so that it benefits all?

Third, at every turn Ball is keen to draw out what the findings of his research mean for teachers, lecturers, tutors, course leaders (and, we must add, workshop leaders, trainers, anyone, in fact, who runs any kind of 'session' which invites participants to learn). Whether or not such people call themselves 'learning facilitators', that is what they are, and that is how they need to see themselves. This is not to deny that there may be content to be 'got across' at some points, but it is vital to remember that the focus has to be on how participants in any group connect with the subject matter (be it Bible, listening skills, social study, church history, spirituality) and then make use of it in some way beyond the learning that they undertake 'in class' (or online). There is also something to be explored about 'transforming teachers': teachers transform others through their facilitative style, and can themselves be developed and transformed as people through the learning experiences in which they are engaged. Given how much happens in the interaction between 'teacher' and 'learner' (and that roles often switch within learning interactions), the question 'just what kind of person are *you*, as you do your teaching?' reverberates through the book, just as much as the question 'what happens to students?'

This thread again hits hard in the two different contexts we are considering. Paid, or at least formal, educators will have formal training available to them, even annual 'continuing professional development' sessions which they may

be required to attend. There is the danger that such professional 'updates' are paid lip service to, or do not really bring about much change in teaching practice ('we know what works, and what doesn't', after all). But if this insight is taken seriously then the interactive nature of teaching, and critical reflection on the practice of teaching, constantly has an impact on the practice of the teacher, as him- or herself a learner about their pedagogical practice. So teachers are themselves learners, and this should in turn inform how they teach what they teach. A biblical scholar may be a New Testament expert and regarded as a 'very good lecturer'. But if a student leaves their session thinking that they have only gathered facts, then from a transformative learning perspective, the lecturer has failed as an educator. Content will have been learned. (With no 'knowledge transfer' then the session would be inadequate anyway.) But the personal impact of the encounter with the content would need to have been part of the session too, plus the beginnings, or continuing, of exploration of how the biblical text influences them or society outside of an educational context.

In local church terms, this applies just as much, if in slightly different ways, to small group sessions, Bible studies, house groups, or in whatever context informal biblical or theological learning occurs. Many is the time I have heard it said of particular church members that she or he (and, significantly, it has often usually been 'he') is a great 'Bible teacher'. In practice this has often meant that the person is indeed widely read and well informed, reads commentaries and knows much about whatever passage is being studied. But the person also enjoys having the knowledge and expertise, and may not be seeing as a key aim of a Bible study that all participants engage with the text, whatever their level of education or background knowledge about the text. This simple illustration highlights just how complex and yet also how vital local church Bible studies are.

Fourth, there is a crucial issue about how assessment is to be done (and how much). When the content of education is 'subject knowledge' it seems relatively easy to know how to assess it ('write an essay on who wrote the Fourth Gospel'). When it comes to personal development, learning outcomes ('what *is it* exactly that is being looked for and tested here?') and methods of assessment are harder to draw up. Furthermore, and as is the case in so many local church settings, beyond the requirements of ministerial training, what about when people will not be doing (and will have absolutely no desire to do) any assignments or 'assessable work' at all? Ball does not address the latter point, as that is not his focus. But it is in part addressed by the way his work touches

on the first. It really is important to ensure that learning outcomes and assessment begin to address what happens to people as a whole, and not just the cognitive content which may be transferred into their heads. This being so, we might add that for every training session, discipleship workshop or Bible study that happens *anywhere*, anywhere in the world, as well as pressing for learning outcomes (however informally drawn up and acknowledged) it is not unreasonable to require leaders/tutors to state how it will be known what has happened as a result of the session. And however informal the 'assessment' might be, it is not unreasonable for that to be checked out as part of the experience.

It may seem an obvious point to make, but the simple task often asked of people at the end of a workshop or training session to note down 'one new thing they have learned as a result of the session' at least encourages participants to reflect on what has happened and to take something away from it. It may reveal, of course, that a session leader's learning outcomes have not been met (which may mean revising the session for future re-use). This simple exercise does, however, stand on a continuum with the much more formal forms of assessment, in all their variety, which are used in theological training institutions. The very variety (group presentations, critical reviews, short electronic-resource-based exercises, posters), which now moves well beyond the requirement to 'write an essay' or 'sit an examination', is testament to the impact of transformative learning upon the learning and assessment process ('just how will participants get hold of what they are supposed to learn?'; 'how will they retain and use what they have learned?'). But there is still the tough task of ensuring that the most appropriate and creative forms of assessment are used, forms which stretch and challenge, while also, if at all possible, being *enjoyable* to undertake.

Les Ball's study, then, has proved very fruitful for this particular interactive, critical reviewer. In truth I have barely been negatively critical at all, only appreciatively critical in engaging with the book. If I were to sound a predictable negative note it would be that it is rather dry to read. But it is a research report, after all. And it is, of course, bound to some extent to the context from which it comes. But all research is susceptible to this charge. Beyond such points I want, rather, to express gratitude for the work. As I trust I have indicated, it has very far-reaching implications for anyone involved in theological education, discipleship training, local church session leading across the world. He is to be warmly thanked for having done the work, written it up and made it available. It would be gratifying to think that lots of people may

be picking the study up and using its insights in the practical, life-enhancing ways which potentially flow from it. Growth in grace and holiness requires it.

Note

1. See, for example, Clive Marsh, '"Learning Outcome" as a Theological Concept: Skills, Competences, and Personal Development in Theological Education', *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 11(2), 2014, pp. 110–122.