
**Building the three-way relationship:
Academics, Students and Libraries**
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In presenting a paper at an academic conference I am always torn between the need to present an astute, well-researched paper and my desire to tell stories. Today, I am in the happier situation of being able to weave these styles together in the one paper.

- **Significant relationships formed**
- **Danger!**
- **Alternative image**
- **Re-thinking and re-shaping vital in theological education**
- **Changing face of theology students**
- **Rise of theology in public universities**
- **Tertiary professionals must be vitally interested in *Learning***
- **Equip students with skills in information literacy**
- **From discussion to implementation**
- **Information literacy incorporated into course units**

Learning In Theology & The Role Of Theological Libraries

This presentation considers the research about learning in theology and the role of theological libraries, in the light of a particular case-study. At the Signadou Campus of Australian Catholic University a series of fruitful and significant relationships have been formed between academics and the library over the last four years. This has involved the blurring of neat boundaries; a preparedness by all parties to "waste" time; and an important commitment of personal resources. The results have been spectacular, more importantly, in my view this relationship can serve as a model for other theology faculties and other libraries.

Dangerous To The Task Of Theology

As with any good tale or academic paper, we need to begin with an examination of the title. *Building the three-way relationship: academics, students and libraries* is both apt and at the same time inappropriate. It is apt in that the processes involved in theological formation, teaching and research are akin to constructing a physical edifice. The process of construction brings together the skills and expertise of the academic with the needs and aspirations of students and these are bound together by the mortar of theological libraries.

The inappropriateness of the title derives from the fact that it does conjure such a physical image. The edifice that the title evokes is made up of discrete entities being cemented or bound together to form a single unit, but still retaining discrete functions. Such images are tempting to us because they neatly and succinctly detail the components encompassed in the activity. However, as Neil Brown argued in *Christians in a Pluralist Society*, this reduction of persons to components in a process is antithetical to the Christian vision of humanity, hence it is inherently dangerous to the task of theology.¹

Organic relationships

I do not offer an alternative title, but I want to ensure that your attention is of a quite different image to the

physical edifice. This alternative image is more thoroughly theological, as well as more appropriate for the enterprise of theological education. Instead of focusing on building, direct your attention to the term "relationship".

Relationships are not crude constructions; they are not formed of replicable and replaceable materials. Relationships are formed organically by bringing people together and, over time, allowing creative partnerships to form.

Where the term "building" is appropriate is to emphasise that these partnerships do not arise out of the ether; they require intent and encouragement. So, while the image of a brick-layer patiently welding bricks to mortar is inappropriate, the image of an architect securing congruity with the vision and meaning of the task is very appropriate.²

I am sure that in recent years we have all become heartily sick of the phrase, "life-long learning". Part of the suspicion that this phrase instigates is brought about by the fact that it is both patently obvious and somewhat tautological. There is also the fear that some of us have that it is an instance of the "Emperor's New Clothes".

However, the conceptual changes that the phrase suggests as being necessary identifies the need for a complete rethinking and re-shaping of the nature of education. In no field of academic enquiry is this more vital than theological education.

In 1998 the Melbourne College of Divinity sponsored a conference on theological education which brought together a number of national and international specialists in the field of theological education.³ This conference focused on the changing face of theological education in the modern era.

A range of statistics was cited by various theologians about how different theology students are now from those who studied in the field even as recently as 1980. In 1980, for example, 26 new students enrolled at the Catholic Institute of Sydney

in the Roman Pontifical degree, the number studying philosophy and theology at the Institute at that time was around 130. Almost all were male and candidates for ministry.

When that cohort commenced their formal theological studies in 1982 there were two people studying with the sole intent of gaining a theological qualification for teaching. By 1996 the number of students at the Institute had grown to 300, almost none of whom were candidates for the Roman degree but rather the Sydney College of Divinity degree.

The make-up of these students is interesting: over half are women; many have no thought of any *new* ministry deriving from their study; most have a previous academic background; a majority are happy to pursue the study as an academic discipline.⁴

In Melbourne the situation is similar; according to the June 1998 issue of *Pacifica*, 65% of the students in the MCD are female, most are married and over 35 years old, with less than 10% studying for ordained ministry.⁵ Other aspects of the new generation of students in theologates are important too: almost all are part-time students; they come to the campus to study and then have little to do with the Campus or life on the campus until the following week.

Rise Of Theology In Public Universities
This is not the total story of theology in Australia, however. In the last decade another phenomenon has also occurred in the study of theology: the rise of theology in public universities.

While Australian Catholic University may spring to mind, Charles Sturt University has, in alliance with St Mark's here in Canberra, St John's Morpeth and the United Theological College's graduate arm formed a School of Theology; Notre Dame has theology, as does the University of Queensland, Murdoch and other Universities.

At the same time, religious studies as a discipline seems to be waning in Australia,

in contrast to the experience of Europe and the United States, with both the University of Sydney and the University of South Australia curtailing their offerings in these fields.

The students of theology in public universities are quite different from those in theologates. While few are studying for ministerial purposes there is quite a split in the demographic. There are those who are older and either retired or moving toward retirement and studying theology out of interest. These students are careful and diligent, for the most part. They also bring significant maturity and a breadth of life experience to their study.

The other section of the demographic are those who are studying theology for vocational purposes; they want or need to cover a certain amount of theology in order to secure or maintain employment or to qualify for promotion, typically in teaching, but increasingly in other human services fields. The needs of these students, particularly in terms of religious knowledge, literacy and skills are quite unlike those older students or those of a previous generation.

These comments indicate that theological education is simply not what it was in Australia even two decades ago. Instead it now mirrors tertiary education in other fields: student cohorts with significant part-time numbers, or even full-time students who are working substantial hours and who are pursuing study for either purely professional purposes (ie to get a job) or simply out of academic interest.

Vitally Interested In Learning

This brings me to the central assumption of this paper: the needs of students today require not simply academically proficient lecturers; nor simply librarians who are skilled in the development and maintenance of collections appropriate to academic needs. Instead tertiary professionals must be vitally interested in *learning* in order to meet the needs of students in their current guise as well as their needs in the future.

The needs of contemporary students means that what Freire termed the "banking model" of education is no longer appropriate.⁶

Equip Students with Skills In Information Literacy

In my view the most appropriate way to achieve this outcome is to build relationships between academics, students and libraries. Central to this relationship is the need to equip students with significant skills in information literacy.

Libraries, as this audience is acutely aware, are not simply physical collections of texts, nor even electronic versions of the same, they are also structures within which it is possible to "build" a collection of valuable human resources.⁷ One of the crucial assets that the human resources of libraries bring to the relationship is advanced skills in information literacy.

Academics bring to the relationship their own acumen within the disciplines or, as in the case of theology, in the contexts of their particular specialities. Students bring their needs and the sharp focus which only the demand to successfully complete assignments will bring.

Implicitly then, there is a foundation for the relationship that I think should be being built, or more accurately, nurtured. Communities and relationships are born not out of decisions to form them, but out of the recognition of mutual needs that can only be satisfied through such relationships.⁸

Such has been the instance in the case study that I have been privileged to be part of at the Signadou Campus of Australian Catholic University. At Signadou, the Library took an initiative to move discussions about information literacy programs out of the meeting room and towards implementing them on the Campus.

Decisions about collections and the kinds of sources one has access to or not are choices that are relatively easily made: budgets frequently determine areas of

expansion; the need to stay at the forefront of teaching and research dictate the increasing use of new technologies. What is more difficult to deal with is the increased need for information literacy. This is the very area that the library personnel at Signadou decided to tackle.

In 1999 the Information Services Librarian, Ms Julie McGorm, approached several academics to incorporate information literacy sessions into their units. This initiative was taken up in different ways by each of the Schools and Faculties represented on Signadou Campus

While I am not sure how much those first groups of students four years ago appreciated what was being initiated and offered to them, it certainly had a powerful impact on me.

Librarians As Active Participants

I came to see libraries and librarians as active participants *in* my units and classes instead of necessary adjuncts to my own activities. Despite "knowing" the theories of praxis education, I was only beginning to learn the necessity and scope of it. Slowly relationships have been built between academics and the library personnel.

Exploring the scope of this relationship has resulted in the School of Theology and the Library at Signadou being awarded two teaching development grants which have enabled systematic implementation of information literacy in first year and fourth year theology units over the last two years. These grants have enabled us to integrate teaching and learning, skills and knowledge related information literacy into the units.

Information literacy has been defined at ACU as, "the ability to access, evaluate and use information from a variety of sources."⁹ Our information literacy program at Signadou Campus has been designed to equip students with the skills which are necessary to complete their *present* studies in such a way that they can extend their capacities to study theology and which will also better

prepare them for their professional lives and life-long learning.

The objectives of our interventions were:

- basic training in accessing library catalogues and databases
- achieving greater understanding of the depth and breadth of library resources
- refining database searches
- achieving competency in accessing and using electronic resources
- demonstrating competency in effective research techniques
- demonstrating critical thinking skills

Our method of achieving these outcomes has three strands:

- general training in information literacy within the context of specific theology units;
- specific training in the use of electronic databases for unit and discipline purposes;
- assessment requiring demonstration of information literacy competencies in order to secure a passing grade.

Each of these strands necessitates the relationship which I have come to see is at the heart of these projects. Obviously, anyone presenting a significant teaching intervention needs knowledge and skills in the field, and also the ability to communicate the knowledge and skills effectively. So, it could be that any academic wanting to pursue such a program could do it all herself. Such an approach is, in my view, misguided and a serious waste of expertise.

In the contemporary university setting no academic has the time to maintain complete mastery of their subjects, conduct research, be involved in administration *and* stay in touch with the latest information about accessing information. The relationship formed at Signadou has as much to do with academic integrity as it has to do with teaching new skills. I am able to maintain greater contact with my discipline *because* I do not have to worry that I need to be proficient in the latest changes to databases and collections for

the next information literacy session.

The library personnel do not need to become experts in all the facets of my units, but through their expertise with the various techniques of information literacy and shaping these for the specific units, they do learn a great deal about appropriate sources of information *in theology*, about theology-specific referencing and about assessment tasks for these units.

Increased Recognition Of What Each Of Us Brings

These three strands emerged in our project. What has happened in the course of the partnership and the growing relationship between the School of Theology and the Library has been an increased recognition of what each of us brings to the encounter. There has been a need to recognise the importance of maintaining the integrity of the units in which this project has been offered.

Information literacy is not an adjunct to education, it is a method and key principle of education. This means that the program has had to be woven into the fabric of units and programs in order to try to make a single cloth to the extent that this is possible. To do that, it has been necessary to both recognise and appreciate the skills and expertise that each of us brings to the relationship.

The demands of covering the content of units such as, *Introduction to Theology* and *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, could not be allowed to dictate the entire progress of the program. Instead there needed to be the space for information literacy and alteration in the unit timing and content to permit it to take place.

Other information literacy programs at Signadou have been offered in a different mode, which I describe as "stand alone". Here the library personnel take a tutorial either within normal class time or in additional but compulsory classes. This is how my own involvement with information literacy began; however, I very quickly realised that one of the messages that the students were taking away from these

sessions was that they were less important than the other aspects of the unit, or they were optional extras.

When Julie McGorm and I applied for the grants to offer information literacy preparation to students, we believed that it was vitally important that the students see it as integral to the unit. Two ways of achieving this were adopted: firstly, to have a requirement in assessment that *needed* the skills we were teaching to be used; secondly, that Julie be seen as a central and important part of the unit too.

I have always taken the view that effective education depends on rapport with students as much as on the expertise of the teacher. For this reason I invited Julie to the opening lecture in order to introduce her and the project and then to each of the initial tutorials with the level one students.

In this meeting with the students in smaller groupings I introduce myself and invite them to do the same. Sharing stories is an important part of communities and community building. It was Julie who later noted how important these sessions had been to her effectiveness in the project. The students have responded to her as though we co-teach the unit.

The library, in particular the library manager, Nancy Clarke, reorganised rosters and schedules to enable Julie to be free not only for her teaching sessions but also for the associated planning and the meetings with students. The Library took a great deal on trust since we were not really offering too much certainty about the tangible benefits for the library.

Insights upon Reflection

Reflecting on this project, now in its second year, has brought some important insights. The risks that each of the major protagonists, the School of Theology and the Library, more personally, Julie and myself took were like seeds cast into good soil. The yield *has* been a hundredfold, in ways that we anticipated and in ways that we did not intend.

The students were seen by us as the subjects of this intervention, but it became clear very quickly that they also saw themselves as partners in the project. The level 1 students of 2001 acknowledged the difference the project made, they came to see themselves in something of a special light. They spoke about their experiences to other students.

As a result we began to get questions from students in other years about when they would be the recipients of these important lessons. The comments from students in the research dimension of the project, the unit evaluation and in focus groups assisted us to see them as partners rather than participants; as members of the learning community we had helped to form rather than clients coming to us for expertise.

One of the spin-offs for the Library has been that once Julie had become known personally, it seemed that this gave students an entrée to the other library personnel as well. Increased reference queries is one measure of this, but it is a soulless benchmark. I might as well point to the increased use of electronic databases as evidence of our success.

Instead (remember that this paper is presenting a view about libraries within a learning community) what has really demonstrated to me the effectiveness of the program is being able to walk into the library and overhear students discussing the unit content and assessment with librarians at the information desk.

I could tell that these conversations grew out of queries about finding particular kinds of information, but quickly the librarians were being asked for interpretations and opinions about the meaning of life, the existence of God, the problem of evil and the mystery of the Incarnation!

Part Of The Composition Of Learning

Libraries with all their array of resources, physical and human, are part of the academic enterprise. However, this can no longer be understood in a passive manner. The involvement of libraries and

librarians in the learning process cannot occur from the sidelines.

Instead these personnel and resources are increasingly part of the composition of learning. This is especially true for theological libraries. Theology offers the world a means of synthesising data, experience, knowledge and skills with our commitments, values and judgments in a way that assists in the creation of meaning.

The relationship between students, academics and the library that has been formed at Signadou has promoted learning and the development of skills; far more importantly, it has assisted all of us to refine and renew our sense of meaning.

As this paper draws to its close I am conscious that little has been said about the students involved in this project, except as the subjects of an experiment. It is appropriate, therefore, that the last words of this paper be a sample of their comments during the focus groups which are part of the research dimension of this project.

Sample student comments

Level 1 students

- *This program is vital... it is not just that study would be more difficult... I just couldn't do the assignments that were demanded in this subject without the Information Literacy sessions.*
- *I loved learning what was available on databases and how to access the information.*
- *This program opened doors to possibilities for me.*
- *I found that it was important to go and ask library staff when I needed to be reminded... they were all very approachable. Of course, it was made easier because we had been introduced to them. It is important to know who they are.*
- *I used this (IL) in all my other subjects*
- *Through doing this I found the value of journal articles... they (journal articles)*

are able to apply theory to specific contemporary issues...the link with assessment was vital, you really have to be able to use the skills when it is linked to assessment

- *Was done well, opening eyes to journals, IT uses; it was good intro to library staff*
- I thought it was really important that all questions were treated seriously and that there were opportunities to ask questions. This increased my confidence with the material and also to ask further questions... this increased my awareness of what was possible and meant that I actually used the databases and the library more than I would otherwise have done.

Level 4 Students

- *It was good to be shown how to do it as well as told how to do it.*
- *Through this I became more comfortable approaching librarians because through this I knew what it was I wanted to know ... I had some skills and some ideas about what I needed and could confidently ask questions.*
- It is good that you emphasised that it was a habit of study and linked it to an assignment completion task.
- *Information literacy has opened doors for me and I will use it with my own students... they need to know that learning is not just a box of books or what happens in school, but that there are new/other/different sources of information and knowledge. I want to give my students the thirst for knowledge that I have now.*
- The skills in this program are just not optional... they are vital and HAVE to be taught from level one onwards. Learning about the research process

has helped my time management ... it provided a structure which actually helped the research itself. I used to be aware that there was so much I didn't know. This program has helped me see that part of my problem was that it just cannot be done in one night. I have become much more critical about what I am reading...this has helped me develop critical thinking in other subjects and other things I am reading... I even think critically when I am reading the paper or listening to the news on TV.

¹ N. Brown (1986) *Christians in a Pluralist Society*, Catholic Institute of Sydney, p.5.

² In a slightly different context, David Kelsey has suggested that "building approach" is very like the movements in manufacturing industries. See D.H. Kelsey, "Spiritual Machines, Personal Bodies and God: Theological Education and Theological Anthropology", *Teaching Theology and Religion*, vol.5, no.1 (2002), pp.2-9.

³ *Beyond 2000: theological Education in an Ecumenical, Plural and Global Context*. University of Melbourne, 5th-10th July, 1998.

⁴ G. Kelly, "Future Directions in Theological Education and Formation", *Australasian Catholic Record*, Vol.79, no.2 (2002), pp.164-175.

⁵ H.J. Pidwell, "Editorial" *Pacifica*, Vol.11, no.2 (June 1998), p.123.

⁶ P. Freire (1970) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* Herder and Herder: New York.

⁷ Kelsey (2002) cited above, discusses the importance of an appropriate theological anthropology in order to engage in genuine theological education. I think his ideas are broadly correct: this is not, however, the place for that discussion.

⁸ N. Brown (1983) *The Worth of persons*. Catholic Institute of Sydney, p.60.

⁹ C. Doyle (1992) *Outcome measures for information literacy within national education goals in 1990: Final Report*. Eric Document 351033.



You see, I don't believe that libraries should be drab places where people sit in silence, and that's been the main reason for our policy of employing wild animals as librarians.

- Monty Python skit