

# ACCREDITATION CRITERIA AND THE QUALITY OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY ON THEOLOGY AT UNISA

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The arrival of democracy in South Africa brought with it a new education system and a different approach in teaching. The past fifteen years have seen a shift from what could be very broadly defined as classical education to outcomes based education. Loosely, classical education is positivist in nature in that there is a strong emphasis on content or volume which does not necessarily speak to a particular context and the kind of problems to be solved in that situation. It is the kind of education that does not interact with the prevailing political, social, cultural and economic situation which impacts the lives of people. In contradistinction to this type of education, outcomes based education is very pertinent about solving authentic problems and the development of competencies in the areas of knowledge, skills and values that speak to the real life situation of people. This approach is undergirded by social constructionism which in broad terms understands the creation of knowledge that will enable people to meet the challenges of their situation, as contextual in nature.

The question here is whether this new approach is salvaging Christian theology on two scores at least or whether the approach is not more of an impediment to theology. First, is constructionism helping theology to deal with authentic problems in the church and in society? Second, is it facilitating greater quality assurance in theology?

Before proceeding with the attempt to answer these questions, there is a need perhaps to say that outcomes based education in South Africa has come under scrutiny the past number of years. The general complaint seems to be that in primary education it is not really assisting in developing good reading and writing skills amongst kids. On all levels, primary, secondary and tertiary education, the complaint is that the approach is too technical, keeping educators very busy with technical issues like the completion of unit standard forms, portfolios, numerous little workshops, resulting in a situation where good quality teaching is jeopardised sometimes. One of the almost standard complaints is that there is too much policing and too little real teaching taking place. On tertiary level in particular serious questions are posed on issues relating to academic freedom. The argument is that outcomes based education is too much of a sausage machine, too much academic Fordism, too much forcing everybody into the same mould and too little space for the own creativity and innovation.

Much as outcomes based education may indeed be fraught with difficulty, the basic thesis of the article is that the philosophical grounding of the approach could potentially "save" theology in facilitating the development of a more relevant and more contextual, quality theology.

At the University of South Africa (Unisa) theology was greatly challenged to develop new study material that was outcomes compliant. I will argue that precisely this has enabled theology at Unisa

to create context-based knowledge in responding to the needs of the new emerging South African society. I will now proceed to organise the rest of the article as follows. First, to briefly develop an understanding of the philosophy of constructionism in which outcomes based education is grounded. Second, to look at elements of the unit standard that is used in outcomes based education with reference to modularisation. Third, to show how this particular approach in theological education could potentially enhance quality.

## **2. CONSTRUCTIONISM AND OUTCOMES BASED EDUCATION**

**There are basically three issues to pass the revue here. First, the issue of definition: What is social constructionism? Second, in what way does constructionism inform outcomes based education? Third, in very broad terms, in what way does constructionism help theology to arrive at a more relevant, context-based theology of good quality?**

### 2.1 What is social constructionism?

It is entirely beyond the scope of this little article to present an extensive and thoroughgoing exegesis of social constructionism. For example, issues like the emergence of constructionism in specific disciplines like psychology and the differentiation between constructionism and constructivism are not dealt with here.

In very very broad terms the basic understanding of constructionism is that all knowledge is contextual knowledge. Constructionism therefore contradicts the notion of readymade universally valid ideas that could be appropriated and applied to different contexts. In constructionism as a theory of knowledge all reality is socially, historically, politically, economically and culturally constructed or created by a particular group or groups. What we quite often perceive to be objective reality brought about by laws or the divine or nature, is in fact the by products of human choices.

If it is then true that the reality we live in is constructed reality, human made reality based on the interests of people, it means that such reality could be studied, analysed to the extent of uncovering the ways in which human beings participate in and contribute to the creation of social reality. A further issue therefore is that such reality is not cast in stone, but could be and indeed should be the object of deconstruction and transformation.

The connection between constructionism and outcomes based education seems to be the inculcation of competencies in knowledge, skills and values that will sharpen the reflexive capacity of learners, empowering them to confront authentic problems in society head on, solving them and by so doing to contribute to the transformation of society. Butler (2004) sees as the primary aim of outcomes based education the facilitation of desired changes in learners by increasing knowledge, developing skills and positively influencing attitudes, values and judgment. For her outcomes based education embodies the idea that the best way to learn is first to determine what needs to be achieved.

The “salvation” wrought on theology by social constructionism is to perceive of reality not as God ordained, but as socially constructed, much as in Christian theology there is a basic understanding of creation and of culture as gifts from God. Social constructionism forces theology and the church to be more rigorous in their discernment of the reality around them, more careful in reading the signs of the times. In the African continent social constructionism as yet another import article, can

however, salvage at least the following situation for theology and the church: to perceive of the woes in the continent not as divine revelation almost or as the consequence of natural laws, but as the logical consequence of the type of social, political, economic and cultural constructions in the continent either by people from elsewhere in the world who benefit from the situation or by the powerful elite in the continent itself. Social constructionism is very much about meaning and power which is all we really can claim to know about. But it is also not only about analysis and deconstruction, particularly in theological education. Any danger of a paralysis of analysis could be overcome by strategically bringing together social constructionism and outcomes based education with the view of equipping people to work for transformation. In theological education and ministerial formation in Africa the most fundamental issue should be profiling. What should any woman or man, any pastor be able to do when they have done their training at a particular institution, be it a theological seminary or a Faculty of Theology at a university? How does one do theology in the African continent? How does one tackle authentic problems in the continent? How does one respond to real life situations from an ecclesiological and theological perspective? Social constructionism in combination with outcomes based education suggests that there are no ready made ideas, but new ones to solve the problems and the woes of the continent are to be constructed since knowledge is by definition contextual knowledge. A word is not a word *an sich*, but could only be understood really in the context of a sentence as the sentence only makes sense in terms of a paragraph, etc. New knowledge could, however, also mean interpreting old knowledge in a new way, creating new avenues for understanding. Particularly in the continent of Africa there is a real need for digging deep in terms of tracing the philosophical sources from the past that will enable us to understand ourselves better as Africans in a post-colonial, post-modern, neo-liberal age.

### **3. UNIT STANDARD IN OUTCOMES BASED EDUCATION**

**The genius of outcomes based education for theology is that for the first time in the history of South Africa, theological education is forced to develop study material that is relevant and context based. Of course this has in a sense been pre-empted by modes of contextual and liberation theology in South Africa since the early nineteen seventies. The see, judge, act or action-reflection methodologies were very helpful in developing theologies that were context-based.**

**Retrospectively one has to concede that this was indeed still very limited. With the arrival of a new education system in South Africa and in an attempt to curb the proliferation of little institutions offering theological education without knowing whether there was good quality, new structures like the South African Qualifications Authority and its concomitant Standard Generating Bodies, theology across the board was required to comply with a number of set criteria. One must hurry to say that in a situation like this there will always be the real danger of forcing everybody into a straight jacket or imposing a weird type of Fordism, seriously jeopardising academic freedom, particularly at tertiary institutions. However, my very strong suggestion here is that outcomes based education undergirded by the knowledge theory of social constructionism and strategically worked out in the South African education system in terms of accreditation criteria and quality assurance measures, have greatly assisted in arriving at a more relevant, context-based theological education that speaks to authentic problems in a country like South Africa.**

**There will always be a downside to standardisation, or perhaps one should rather invoke the notion of quality development. Be that as it may, since the nineteen nineties all new qualifications**

**in South Africa and new study material have to comply with a number of unified criteria for purposes of quality assurance. This has forced theology to carefully formulate and develop purpose statements, outcomes, learning assumptions, range statements, assessment criteria, critical cross field outcomes and the embedded knowledge in a particular course or module.**

#### **4. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN OUTCOMES BASED EDUCATION: THEOLOGY AT UNISA**

**Briefly now and based on the very cursory treatment of social constructionism and outcomes based education, a specific module in Missiology at Unisa will be pressed into service to illustrate how theology benefits from the unit standard in education in the areas of relevant, context-based study material developed in terms of best practices in instructional design and in quality assurance.**

Let us now briefly look at the Unisa Missiology module on *Intercultural Christian Communication* in terms of the elements of purpose, outcomes and critical cross field outcomes in the unit standard.

##### **PURPOSE AND OUTCOMES OF THE MODULE**

The purpose of the module is shown to be the development of competencies in intercultural Christian mission, enabling students to practice sensitivity as well as responding critically in communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ in various intercultural contexts. The purpose of the module is to foster understanding and respect for the other and to create an atmosphere conducive to cooperation.

As far as the specific outcomes of the module are concerned, students should be able:

- To explain key terms, facts, concepts, principles and theories on intercultural discourses in its relation to a Christian understanding of personhood. They are therefore assessed on the basis of whether they can identify, define and use technical terminologies associated with intercultural discourses. Also, whether they can identify, evaluate and find new solutions to intercultural problems in using theories appropriate to intercultural settings. This points to a very important aspect of outcomes based education, i.e. that it feeds into constructionist learning environments (Jonassen), driven by problem solving.
- To cooperate with people from a different cultural background than their own. They are therefore assessed in terms of whether they can select and apply methods, procedures and/or techniques in choosing and cooperating with a learning partner from a different cultural background. Also, whether they can create a high cultural context activity with the learning partner. Such activity is aimed at identifying differences in cultural concepts and behavioural patterns and negotiating and managing them with great sensitivity.
- To reflect critically on and evaluate the entire intercultural experience against accepted ethical Christian values and principles. Here they are assessed in terms of their ability to manage, take responsibility for, reflect on and account for the the Christian intercultural learning process.

The specific outcomes of the module indicate how important the do-ability of theology/missiology is. To be able to do what is required in the intercultural communication of the gospel particular

competencies in knowledge, skills and values or principles are required. A further issue is that the module is not speculative in nature or does not take a positivist approach by divorcing the learning process from authentic problems or real life situations. No, in the intercultural reality of South Africa it is necessary for theological students to be equipped for the context of religious and cultural pluralism, to mention only two. Once again, however, the issue is not simply the application of ready made ideas to the situation, but the construction of new contextual knowledge if this is not too much of a tautology. The genius of constructionism is that even this new knowledge might soon be up for deconstruction and serious scrutiny in search of the progressive transformation of society. Constructionism is assisting theology in overcoming and breaking through the explication-application model. In very broad terms this model feeds into a linear reading of the Bible, as if there is a direct line between the text of the Bible and the context of people. In accepting that all reality is constructed reality, constructionism accepts that knowledge in the sense of language will always be interested language.

A third element from the unit standard is aimed at developing competencies that are not only relevant to the specific field of study, but cut across different fields. The critical cross field outcomes envisaged for learners doing the Unisa module on *Intercultural Christian Communication*, are:

- Identifying and solving problems as well as making decisions in using critical and creative thinking. This goes way beyond classical education that has turned learners into parrots more than anything else, not at all developing their capacity for critical thinking.
- Organising and managing the learning experience in a responsible and effective manner
- Collecting, analysing, organising and critically evaluating information. In the age of information and communications technology this is in itself a huge competency.
- Communicating effectively using language
- Demonstrating an understanding of the world as a set or a complex of related systems by recognising that problem solving contexts do not exist in isolation.

## **ON METHODOLOGY**

In an attempt to avoid a trial and error approach in teaching the module on *Intercultural Christian Communication*, the pastoral or praxis cycle is used as a method and an organising principle. Learners who registered for the module are challenged to proceed with the learning process by working logically and coherently through the four steps of the cycle which are insertion or as some prefer, identification, context analysis, theological reflection or the reading of the Bible and planning. The cycle as an interpretive tool contains the basic elements of the see, judge, act or action-reflection methodology. The agreement is that at the heart of the cycle is spirituality or more specifically Christian spirituality. What Missiology at Unisa is trying to achieve by using the cycle is to strike a balance between academic learning and the inculcation of a spirituality that will enable pastors, mission practitioners and church workers to respond with problem solving in an informed and sensitive manner. In the case of the module on *Intercultural Christian Communication* it is hoped that learners will be able to work well in a situation of cultural pluralism by pressing into service both the technical knowledge in the form of book knowledge, theories, skills as well as a spirituality

informed and formed by sound Christian values. The cycle facilitates a situation where these two are brought together inductively and not on the basis of the classical explication-application model.

In working through the cycle, learners are challenged to:

- Narrate their own insertion into the Christian faith, God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, church, mission and society. They are challenged to show their roots, to reveal their cultural tradition/s and to say something about their understanding of the intercultural communication of the gospel right at the start of the learning process. They are challenged to reveal their feelings about persons from another culture and expose the gut responses they sometimes formulate in meeting the other.
- Analyse the context of cultural pluralism as rigorously as possible by using their own intuition and in particular by using theories on intercultural communication. Learners are challenged to look at culture not only in terms of customs, traditions, artefacts etc., but specifically also in terms of the prevailing power relationships. Which are the dominant cultures? Which are the “suffering” cultures”? Is there something like a Christian culture? How could the gospel best be communicated in a context of cultural pluralism that will display competencies in the areas of knowledge, skills and attitudes and values, if the latter is to be understood more as spirituality.
- Read the Bible or do theological reflection in a manner that will show how the steps of insertion and analysis inform the interpretation of the Bible. If the exercise is done well the text of the Bible will always shed light on the context of cultural pluralism, correcting the context, but simultaneously the context of cultural pluralism might illuminate the Biblical text and make it more accessible and more understandable to readers. The cycle is in a sense a radical break with the type of interpretive model which suggests that there is a linear relationship between the text of the Bible and the context of people. In terms of the cycle the relationship should be seen more as a circular movement than a linear movement. If the relationship is linear the text of the Bible could simply be applied to the context on the basis of the explication-application model. If the relationship is circular as suggested by the pastoral cycle, there needs to be constant interaction between the text of the Bible and the context of cultural pluralism.
- Plan mission strategies for the intercultural communication of the gospel in context.

From experience with learners for the last five years or so, it has been found that a lot of learning takes place outside the more formal and technical confines of the module. Deep learning is sometimes facilitated in a very refreshing and surprising manner by the broader learning environment in general and by challenging learners to journey with a partner from another culture specifically.

## **CONCLUSION**

This very brief article is meant to show the potential of constructionism in the form of outcomes based education to liberate theology from its captivity to the enlightenment paradigm. The subjection of theology in South Africa to the same criteria set for the other sciences, has surely

contributed to an enhancement of quality in theological education. Apart from a few other criticisms of outcomes based education alluded to in this little article there are already those in South Africa, amongst them experts in the field of curriculum and learning development, who suggest quite strongly that we should move on to post-structuralism. We shall have to wait and see. For now, I would like to suggest that outcomes based education has facilitated two issues for theology. First, the development of study material geared towards authentic learning environments, speaking to context and secondly, the development of greater quality in theological education.