

• GORDON T. SMITH •

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## Faculties That Listen, Schools That Learn

ASSESSMENT IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Most faculties of theological schools struggle to know what to do with assessment.<sup>1</sup> Faculties want to be learning communities; they want to learn how to be more effective at the work that matters so deeply to them. And they assume that good assessment is essential. But this assumption is matched by a persistent perception that assessment is an imposition arbitrarily required by accrediting agencies or administrators and not inherent to their work as scholars and teachers. Assessment for some is a minor annoyance; as one faculty member put it, “One more damned thing we have to do before the summer break!” For others, assessment is an outright violation of true theological education—something that undermines teaching and learning because it is viewed as trying to measure and commodify learning.

In what follows, I demonstrate that such a reaction to assessment is unfortunate. In its very nature, assessment can and must be inherent in what it means to be teachers and learners. Assessment is integral to the character of our work. If we take the work of theological education seriously, we take assessment seriously because we take learning seriously. Theological education matters because the church matters and because leadership—theological and ministerial—matters. It matters enough that we want to have some degree of confidence that what we are doing makes a difference, that it actually does fulfill the ends for which it is designed, that it actually does provide effective ministerial leadership for the church.

As theological educators, we *want* to make a difference. From this naturally flows a desire to know if what we are doing *is* making a difference. Does learning toward effective ministry actually happen in our schools? Does our work, as theological teachers and as theological schools, actually accomplish what we say and pray is the goal of our endeavors?

In other words, thinking about assessment and doing good assessment matters. It merits our time and energy. Good theological schools attend to matters of assessment not because accrediting associations require it, but because they believe in their work and want to be confident that the work of teaching and learning serves its intended objectives. Having said that, it follows that accrediting agencies recognize that effective assessment is something that theological faculties do. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), with its delineation of what makes for a good theological school, specifies: "The institution offering the M.Div. shall be able to demonstrate the extent to which students have met the various goals of the degree program" (ATS, *Degree Program Standards* A.5.1.). Further, standard A.5.2. specifies that the school sustains a continual process of evaluation which determines the extent to which the degree program meets the needs of the students and the goals of the program.

What the ATS standards highlight is that we cannot take for granted that assessment is given its rightful place of importance in institutional priorities. The standards are a means by which theological schools call each other to demonstrate that good assessment procedures are happening. But in the end, we will not engage the practice of assessment and embrace it as something integral to our work as the faculty of a theological school unless we can come to an appreciation of why it is pivotal. Without an effective program of assessment, we will never move beyond good intentions; we will not have a solid basis on which to make decisions about matters of curriculum or points of complaint or criticism regarding our academic programs.

The work of theological education merits good assessment for at least two reasons. First, good practices of assessment provide schools with a form of intentional accountability, a means by which we demonstrate that we are doing what we say we are doing. Accountability is a fundamental spiritual discipline, and assessment is a means by which we practice what we preach. We have an obvious accountability to the ecclesial bodies that we serve and with which we partner in the formation of women and men for ministerial leadership. But we are also accountable to the wider community of higher education, for we are degree-granting institutions. Further, we are accountable to our students who invest time, money, and energy (and their hopes and dreams) into a curriculum that they trust is oriented toward effective ministry. (I say this even though I stress below that as adults students need to take responsibility for their

own learning.) Finally, we are accountable to donors, who rightly expect us to be good stewards of their investments.

We do assessment because in the end we lecture not so that teaching occurs but so that *learning* happens. We need, then, to find ways to gauge and confirm that what we intend to accomplish actually occurs. The bottom line is that we are accountable to the mission of the school, and assessment is a means by which our accountability finds expression.

The second reason that assessment merits our time and energy is that good assessment fosters learning. One of the objectives of a good education is that each student should become committed to continuous learning. This outcome should become evident in each student's capacity to evaluate his or her own experience and learn from it. We cannot reasonably expect this outcome in our students if, as theological schools, we are not fostering the same outcome in ourselves—to learn from our experience as we attend to what is actually happening in our academic programs. Good intentions are no more than good intentions; good learning is necessarily the fruit of intentional practices that not only foster good learning but also assure that it is happening. Thus, we lead by example and become, in the language of Peter Senge (1990; 2000), not only schools where learning happens but “schools that learn.” We learn from our own experience through a process of intentional reflection on what has happened and what it means, and we adjust our programs as our experience indicates.

Beyond these two core reasons for assessment, I would also add the following. Many faculty have a deep and hidden fear that they are failures and that they are ineffective in enabling women and men to prepare for religious leadership in the church. One reason for this fear is that criticism is plentiful; there is much too little affirmation that highlights the value of the work that a theological faculty does. Further, the fear is often unstated, deflected, and based on incomplete information that provides no guidance for faculty to become more effective. Assessment, therefore, is, a vital aid to help faculty members and theological schools see the positive work they are doing. It is an integral practice—native, not alien, to the identity and purposes of any good theological school. The challenge then is to cultivate an approach to assessment that is congruent with our work as theological educators, linked clearly for each school to its particular vision of Christian ministry, and oriented around and through the routines and rhythms of our academic lives. Assessment is a practice that encourages us to think theologically about our work; the focus is not so much oriented toward a product as it is to a means of approaching our work in a manner that fosters both accountability and learning.

## THE CHALLENGE OF ASSESSMENT

Doing assessment well requires persistence, diligence, and care. This is so because of a variety of challenges that face theological schools, including (1) overemphasis on the measurable, (2) complexity of theological schools' objectives, (3) variables over which theological schools have little control, (4) the uniqueness of each theological school, and (5) the time required to do assessment well.

### OVEREMPHASIS ON THE MEASURABLE

In his recent publication, *The Answer to How Is Yes*, Peter Block (2002) has effectively demonstrated that one of the great temptations of contemporary organizations, including academic institutions, is to idolize pragmatism.<sup>2</sup> Western society values the concrete, the tangible, and the measurable. We are heirs of both the industrial age and modernism. Yet what matters most in theological education may not be that which "works" or that which is (immediately, at least) quantifiable. The danger is that we might pursue practices that are measurable while we unwittingly overlook or neglect the practices that foster what matters most and which, in the long run, are most beneficial.

Block (2002, 4) does not question that we need to attend to what "works." But he suggests that our pragmatism moves us there prematurely; we are inclined to focus either too quickly or too exclusively on that which is measurable. We easily make "what works" the defining issue to be addressed.

Elliot Eisner (1985, 184–85), in the same vein, insists that the outcomes of good teaching are multiple and not always measurable. There is something ineffable and hard to define, let alone measure, when good teaching happens. And Parker Palmer (1997) in his *Courage to Teach* stresses that good teaching can never be reduced to technique—to methods or approaches to classroom instruction that are either measurable or immediately obvious. Rather, speaking only of the classroom, it is imperative to stress that the character of good teaching itself cannot be assessed in quantifiable terms. The Lexington Seminar report prepared by Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (2000)<sup>3</sup> puts it this way: "One of the primary learnings from this project has been that the more important factors in successful education of seminary students are also among the more difficult to quantify or measure."

Is assessment then impossible? No. But these observations remind us that we will not do good assessment unless we learn to attend to what truly matters, what truly enables someone to become an educated and self-educating person. A sports analogy may enlighten this point. The genius of playing baseball is the skill of a team to "advance the runner." While the objective is, of course,

to score runs, great teams have learned to focus not so much on scoring runs, but on that from which scoring runs is derived, namely advancing the runner. This *a priori* commitment is necessary and elemental to winning. The genius of the game, in other words, is not to focus on “winning” but to cultivate the practices that make winning a likely outcome. In much the same way, it is essential that assessment in theological education focus on those factors that will likely foster long-term growth in wisdom, the capacity for continuous learning, and the inner dispositions that sustain ministerial effectiveness.

### COMPLEXITY OF THE OBJECTIVES

When we discuss assessment of learning in theological schools, we have a unique challenge: How to respond to the multiple objectives of our ministerial academic programs, notably the M.Div. degree? We are well past the thinking that a good education is merely a matter of attaining good grades. We do not assume that if a student has high marks in our classes that “learning” is taking place nor that someone with low marks is not learning. As is stressed below, the grading of student work is only one dimension of effective assessment, and, further, it is only effective when it is integrated with other sources of information. Yet, it is amazing how frequently grades are the only criteria for measuring learning that students and faculty have in hand. The Lexington Seminar report from Regent College (1999) highlights that students tend to place disproportionate emphasis on the significance and diagnostic capability of a grading system.

The goals of theological study are much more complex. Theological schools often speak of goals that relate to being, knowing, and doing. In other words, the conversation about assessment tends to center around different kinds (or categories) of formation. The Roman Catholic Program of Priestly Formation (PPF), for example, speaks of spiritual formation, a “well-ordered” pattern of personal and communal prayer; intellectual formation, with reference to academic studies; and pastoral formation, which “introduces students to the practical, pastoral life of the Church” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 2001, 43–46).

What complicates the matter of assessment is that different goals need different kinds of assessment. And, of course, the form of assessment needs to be congruent with that which is being assessed. We recognize, for example, that we cannot assess a student’s emotional maturity in the same manner we assess that student’s understanding of the theological tradition of the church. However, having said this, it is also important to add that we must not press or make too rigid distinct categories or goals. It is apt, for example, that the more recent editions of the PPF speak of the need for clarity—doctrinal and

otherwise—regarding the priesthood itself. In this way various streams or aspects of formation are located within a particular conception of the ministry. Individual dimensions are understood as parts of a whole. One could rightly wonder if a person really understands Chalcedon if this has not, in some substantial way, led to the ordering of the affections. In other words, each of the three categories of formation (spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral) needs to be assessed in tandem with the others; each is informed by the others.

The observation is often made that the contemporary theological school attempts to be three things simultaneously: an academy, a trade school, and a monastery. And because each of these foci have a different ethos and character, theological schools are faced with a tremendous challenge, and yet, in significant measure, schools have no choice but to be all three.

### **VARIABLES OVER WHICH THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS HAVE LITTLE CONTROL**

The variables that make for long-term effective ministerial leadership are many, and theological schools need to accept that they are but one of these variables, not as a denial of hope and vision, but as an affirmation of limits, for they are partners with undergraduate programs, family systems, and church bodies, and in some cases with houses of spiritual formation and community, but most importantly with the students themselves, who, in the very nature of things, only learn if they are engaged and take personal responsibility for their learning. While a program of theological study may be deeply formative, theological schools still need to accept that they do not have control over the outcomes. We cannot orchestrate the ends we seek through our educational programs, or, as Elizabeth Liebert (2000, 60–61) aptly puts it, we cannot “engineer” change. All we can do, as will be stressed below, is observe what is happening through our academic programs and do what we can to encourage the outcomes we are seeking. And we do this with a modesty in our claims of what theological education has done and is able to do. Theological schools need to affirm their limits as well as the limits inherent in the educational process itself.

### **UNIQUENESS OF EACH THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL**

Each theological school has a distinctive charism, a distinctive way of engaging the challenge of theological education. The narrative prepared by Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (2001) exemplifies how this distinctiveness is more than just a matter of theological or denominational heritage; a Lutheran seminary in California has a different sense of its mission than does a Lutheran

seminary in the Midwest. Consequently, no educator should espouse a single model or approach to assessment. Each theological school remains unique; each will have its own emphases and own range of convictions about theological education that will find expression in how its various goals are weighted, even how they are assessed. Each school is a unique confluence of monastery, academy, and trade school, and each has a different range of associations and partnerships with undergraduate colleges and ecclesial bodies, all of which will inevitably shape the way in which assessment happens such that the approach to assessment is congruent with the mission and ethos of the school.

### **TIME TO DO ASSESSMENT WELL**

Finally, one of the biggest challenges to doing assessment well is finding the time—the leisure and space in the schedule to design the questions, solicit the feedback, and reflect on the data collected. Assessment demands the careful work of those who collect the necessary information, but it also requires that schools establish assessment as a priority in their regular routines and that faculty view it not only as integral to their work but as worth the investment of precious hours throughout the academic year. Assessment should not be an exercise that dominates our lives as faculty, and it should not feel like an imposition. But we need to make appropriate time for this vital practice. If we value our common commitment to the mission of the school and wish to verify that together we are making an impact toward that mission, and if we value good conversation about how our students are learning, then we need to find the time—actually set aside the time—to do assessment well.

### **GOOD ASSESSMENT IS WORTH PURSUING**

Assessment is worth the time and energy that we devote to it. But we must learn to do assessment in a way that is minimally disruptive, most congruent with our vision and values as a theological school, and most likely to foster our capacity to be a school that learns and cultivates good teaching and learning. Achieving this outcome requires certain commitments and certain best practices. The commitments, at the very least, are the following: (1) thinking theologically about theological education, (2) maintaining clear objectives for theological education, (3) establishing broad faculty ownership of assessment, (4) fostering good conversation with ecclesial bodies and field supervisors, (5) assessing both competencies and dispositions, and (6) enkindling the joy of good teaching and learning.

## THINKING THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The task of theological education is a *theological* task. The call to do assessment is but an invitation to think theologically about our work as scholars, teachers, and educators—to think about what it means to do higher education in a way that is informed and sustained by our theological affirmations, convictions, and passions. This commitment to think theologically needs to be matched by a resolve to learn and excel at what it is that we are doing. Thus, we are learners, ever seeking to process new information and adapt to what we see and what the information we glean through assessment is telling us. Theological reflection without a willingness to learn and adapt is missing something that is inherent in the very meaning of theological education.

Thinking theologically about learning necessarily means that we think about education and study with a distinctive and purposeful orientation toward the practices of ministry. Essentially, all courses, not just those that are designated “applied” or “practical,” should be oriented toward the work for which students are preparing. We can then discard the flawed distinction between academic and applied courses and recognize that nothing may be so practical as a course in theology and nothing quite so intellectually stimulating as a course on preaching. This tension between the “academic” and the “practical” is highlighted in the narrative of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary (1999) in the apt response of the dean to the complaint that John Wesley was not a systematic theologian but a preacher: “Yeah, but some people think the reason he preached so well is that he knew an awful lot about the Bible, and theology!”

## MAINTAINING CLEAR OBJECTIVES

The practice of assessment requires a greater level of clarity about the objectives of our theological schools. It only makes sense that assessment be linked not to vague or abstract expectations or ideals but to specific objectives—the values and commitments of a school at a particular point in its history. Admittedly, this is not necessarily easy, as is demonstrated by those Lexington Seminar narratives that show faculty debating and disagreeing about the fundamental purposes of their theological school.

However, for assessment to be done well, these values and commitments need to be framed in terms of what is rightly called “student outcomes” (Palomba and Banta, 1999), which suggests that schools must understand both the intended outcomes that professors have established for their courses and the actual outcomes achieved by the students. The Lexington Seminar report by Claremont School of Theology (2000) arose from the question, “What happens for our students in the Master of Divinity program?” It then moved to

the realization that “we needed somehow to hear from students more fully than we had done to date.” The report for Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary (2000) begins by declaring a resolve to move from “teaching-centered to learning-centered pedagogies.”

Further, the focus of assessment should be programmatic rather than student specific. Students have multiple responses to the same courses and academic programs, and a variety of factors are involved in a student’s own learning over which the theological school has little if any control. Yet, the school does have the capacity and responsibility to assess its programmatic offerings and to consider these offerings in the light of the objectives of program.

Finally, academic programs should be viewed and reviewed as more than just curricular offerings. Cocurricular or extracurricular variables may well be as crucial to the programmatic objectives, if not more crucial, as courses might be. The common worship, the informal discussions over coffee, the student discussion groups for which there is no academic credit, are all significant means by which fundamental values and dispositions are formed.

### **ESTABLISHING BROAD FACULTY OWNERSHIP**

Both experience and the testimony of the best writing on assessment emphasize the need for broad faculty ownership and commitment to assessment. The role of ecclesial bodies and administrators is vital to the assessment and evaluation process. Further, students need to be encouraged to take seriously their own self-evaluation. (Indeed, part of what we need to do is to cultivate in students the ability and willingness to think clearly and effectively about their own capacities and sensibilities.) Yet the faculty have the primary role and responsibility in assessment. The Roman Catholic Program of Priestly Formation document stresses this point. Palomba and Banta (1999, 71) also highlight the crucial role of faculty in assessment and insist that assessment needs to be housed with the faculty, declaring, “Turn it over to them!”

The faculty design and deliver the curriculum. Therefore, they must, in the end, assume responsibility for their work, a responsibility that they carry together. If they do not accept the need for and the approach taken to assessment, then it will be ineffective. If faculty perceive assessment as imposed by an accrediting agency, they will not embrace the need for assessment nor will they do it well. If they view assessment as driven by administrators or “education experts,” it will be less than effective, because they will not own it. They will perceive it as something imposed upon them and thus not their responsibility. Conversely, faculty care about their work. They want to make a difference, and theological schools can appeal to these fundamental values and commitments. Thus, schools need to design, with the faculty, an approach to

assessment that is congruent with the faculty's vision for theological education yet still consistent with the mission of the theological schools to which they belong.

While the faculty need to own the program and plan of assessment, they will only be able to do assessment well if key administrative personnel—notably the president and dean—are equally committed to the process and to bearing the weight of the load for the administrative details. There may be an assistant or associate dean who does the bulk of the work. But assessment cannot be done for the faculty; we cannot merely delegate this away to an administrative staff person so that we do not need to be bothered with it. The faculty must own the process, and those in academic leadership need to bear the weight to make sure that it happens, that this remains a priority on the agendas of faculty meetings. The president and dean will assure that the work of the faculty in assessment is actually used to inform key administrative and curricular decisions. Faculty need to be able to see that assessment makes a difference.

### **FOSTERING GOOD CONVERSATION WITH ECCLESIAL BODIES AND FIELD SUPERVISORS**

Theological schools will not be able to do good assessment of their academic programs unless they recognize the critical need to give a privileged voice to the practitioners—those who actually do the ministry for which the degree program is designed. This applies equally to the formation of women and men for religious leadership as it does for social work and medicine.

While denominational officials and church bodies can certainly have either unreasonable or misinformed expectations of the full character of academic programs and culture, they are an indispensable source of insight and encouragement. Taking assessment seriously necessarily means that we recognize the critical place of field supervisors in both the learning of students and the evaluation of their learning. The critical piece in assessment, then, is the conversation between the practitioners and the academic faculty, which ultimately leads to the meaningful capacity of practitioners to inform the shaping of an academic program. Such conversation can be structured in a variety of ways, but how it happens is probably less crucial than that it happens, although I would stress that whatever form is developed needs to allow for faculty (and not just administrative personnel) to be in discussion with those in the field.

### **ASSESSING COMPETENCIES AND DISPOSITIONS**

Good assessment is only possible if, as noted above, we appreciate that we are seeking multiple competencies for our students. But it is also vital that we affirm

that effective religious leadership is the fruit of a set of competencies that are, in turn, complemented and sustained by certain *dispositions* without which the competencies are not only meaningless but potentially harmful. Thus, our approach to assessment needs to emphasize that we are evaluating growth and development on both fronts.

If we are seeking to form wise women and men for pastoral ministry, then our “measurements” need to be consistent with this objective, requiring that we learn to work with both the “hard” data of grades as well the intuitive judgments that may in the long run be as significant as anything we have to offer to the process of assessment. Grades matter. But as noted above, they may not actually measure whether the most significant sort of learning is happening. Further, the manner in which grading is done may well undermine the most important learning that is sought.

In *The Answer to How Is Yes*, Peter Block presents an idea that strikes me as pertinent to theological education. He suggests that Western society, in its passion to judge the world by what works, has elevated the archetype of the “engineer” to such an extent that it encourages a one-dimensional perspective that fails to account for some of the most critical aspects of life and work. Things need to work, but they also need to sustain the core values and dispositions that make life worth living. In response, he proposes the archetype of the “architect” as one that faithfully integrates the vision of the engineer, who can make a structure safe and secure, with the vision of the “artist,” who has the capacity to cultivate soul, thus accounting for the aesthetic, affective, and spiritual dimensions of life (165–169).

## ENKINDLING THE JOY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Whatever image or archetype we use, one critical sign that we have moved in the right direction will be when our assessment is designed around competencies and dispositions (both of spirit and character) rather than courses (which are a means to an end). In this regard, the New Testament highlights that we cannot learn—we cannot hear and respond to the Word—if we are angry; we either hear and respond with meekness or we do not learn at all (see Jas. 1:19–21). In 1 Thessalonians, Paul suggests that he knew his readers had experienced a genuine conversion in the Spirit because they received the Word with joy despite the presence of hardship and persecution.

Furthermore, the classic sources or texts on discernment in the history of Christian spirituality—whether in the “Rules of Discernment” in St. Ignatius Loyola, Jonathan Edwards’s *Religious Affections*, or the sermons on the inner witness of the Spirit in the works of John Wesley—consistently stress that what is happening to us affectively is not incidental to our capacity to both teach

and learn. The gift of learning—a gift made possible through the gracious work of the Spirit—will only be experienced through diligence and hard work, but it should be filled with joy. Surely, then, one of the indicators or signs that good learning is happening is that both teachers and students experience the joy of exploration and discovery.<sup>4</sup> While the “rules of discernment” remind us that the presence of joy in itself means nothing and may, in fact, be a “false” consolation, the lack of joy is a sure indicator that something is amiss. Thus, surely, one of our resolutions must be that we will delight in our work of teaching and learning, such that both faculty and students “experience a deep joy.”

## BEST PRACTICES

While each school needs to find an approach to assessment that is congruent with its distinctive charism—its mission, ethos, and values—we can nevertheless discern certain “best practices” that guide those schools that do assessment well and that are applicable for all when it comes to how assessment is done. Among the most important of these best practices are (1) the active participation of students in assessment, (2) the presence of intentionality without excessive intrusiveness, (3) the asking of good questions, (4) the use of multiple sources of information, (5) the effective use of grading and student evaluation, and (6) the effective design of programs and curricula.

### ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS IN ASSESSMENT

Student involvement in assessment should have two distinct dimensions. First, as noted above, schools are wise to encourage and assist students in taking responsibility for their own learning. Attending to one’s own learning is itself a sign that one is an educated and self-educating person, capable of continuous learning well beyond one’s days of formal theological study.

But second, student participation is also critical to programmatic assessment. “Assessment must be seen as an activity done with and for students, rather than to them,” Palomba and Banta (1999, 71) rightly insist. Theological schools most committed to doing good assessment have actively sought to find multiple ways to solicit student feedback not only on specific courses but also on the program as a whole. They need to be in conversation about their own learning—not merely through forms or questionnaires but in actual conversation at regular intervals during their program of study and at key intervals after the completion of their degrees (through longitudinal studies, for example, done two, five, and even ten years after receiving their diplomas).

But students can only play an active role in assessing their own learning and helping the school assess its teaching if schools make explicit the intended out-

comes of their academic programs. For example, a school should describe to each incoming class in an M.Div. program what the school is seeking to accomplish and how students can expect to assess not only their own learning and development but the school's process of assessment. If students are going to contribute to the assessment process, they need a clear list of criteria for critical reflection.

### INTENTIONALITY WITHOUT EXCESSIVE INTRUSIVENESS

Assessment can only be effective if the goals of the assessment process are clear, the approach to assessment is explicit and intentional, and the means of soliciting information are simple. Schools that are managing to do assessment well *describe* what is happening, *interpret* the information they gather, and follow accepted criteria by which they *evaluate* how lessons learned should shape the academic program.

While good assessment is necessarily “intrusive” in that it forces us to stop and consider what is happening, it should be an intrusion that is both integral to the work that we do as well as to the process of learning itself. Rather than an artificial or contrived mechanism for soliciting feedback, a process of assessment can be integrated into the experience of learning so that both students and faculty find it to be an essential part of what they are doing. This requires that the methods adopted for the assessment be accessible to both students and faculty—not so technical that only educational theorists are able to use and interpret them. Further, the approaches to assessment that we adopt cannot be labor intensive. Faculty in theological schools consistently report that they feel overworked and overextended; therefore, schools cannot assume that they can add a whole new layer of work—hours and hours of assessment—and expect faculty to graciously accept their part in the task at hand.

### ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Good information about student learning is obtained by asking the right questions; good questions are the only way to get good information. Bad or misconstrued questions are not just useless; they can be counterproductive. Therefore, the instruments we use for collecting data and doing assessment need to be carefully developed. We should not collect information that cannot or will not be used. Our approach to assessment needs to be simple and accessible enough that it is clear how the information we are seeking through our questions will actually inform and, as necessary, change the way we do theological education.

Two kinds of questions need to be asked, from two different perspectives. We can and must ask questions that enable us to attend to both competency

development on the one hand and the formation of dispositions on the other—always with the assumption that our academic programs are geared to both. Second, we can and must ask questions about both the final outcome—the objectives we seek—and what we have determined to be the essential elements of the program that are likely to foster that outcome. This in no way discounts the significance of the intuitive judgments and observations we make about our classes and the progress of our students. But good questions enable us to be sure that our intuitive judgments have a legitimate foundation.

I would also observe that good questions include what is going well for a student, what experiences he or she is having that are positive, encouraging, and particularly effective in advancing his or her development. The questions are not designed to encourage a round of complaining; they are meant to determine whether effective learning is happening.

Further, it is important to indicate up front how we as a faculty will respond to any negative information that arises from our enquiries. Not all criticism merits the same kind of response; some negative reactions may actually indicate that good learning is happening! And so, as questions are posed for the work of assessment, it is helpful to identify what kinds of positive and negative responses might arise and to consider in advance what each of these might mean for the work of course and program development.

Finally, when it comes to establishing the questions we will ask, we might also want to consider the following: We cannot assess or respond to everything; therefore, might we be wise to consider one aspect of our courses and programs each year and focus only on that aspect? We might even have three, four, or five critical questions that we will ask in a cycle, over the course of three to five years, all with the thought that we cannot address the whole of our programs each year, but we can agree on a critical question about which we will seek dependable information.

This suggests that it may well be that the standardized form—the same form every year for every class—is not the most effective way to solicit student commentary on courses and programs. Student evaluation forms might help an academic administrator determine that a problem exists with a particular course. But the downside is that faculty frequently see these forms as a means by which students will judge their competence to teach. And so, as often as not, they do not value the forms or view them as a means of their own learning. Conversely, if faculty could agree first on what they all as a faculty want to know about their courses and programs each year—and if an individual faculty member could, perhaps in consultation with the dean, design a form that is course specific—then the student responses could be made integral to both the course and to critical reflection about the school's academic programs.

## MULTIPLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Our decisions about programmatic changes—curricular and cocurricular—need to be based on corroborating information from multiple sources. What we seek is to make good judgments based on good feedback from diverse perspectives of our work. Most schools recognize that good assessment weaves together a variety of sources of information—from hard data to anecdotal reports, from specific information gleaned from a student questionnaire to comments made in an alum focus group. It would seem that the schools that do this most effectively are those that build their assessment around core competencies.

Further, good assessment requires that we not only integrate the various data culled from multiple sources but also synthesize what we are learning so that we do not solve one problem and inadvertently create more problems. Our hard data must be corroborated by what we are learning anecdotally. Thus we must be patient and recognize that the perspective arising from one source of information needs to be verified by what is being heard from another source.

Finally, schools must take particular care that they do not inadvertently give greater weight to a few loud negative voices when many positive, if less insistent voices, may actually represent the majority view.

## GRADING AND STUDENT EVALUATION

One of the critical factors in a program of assessment is how a school chooses to integrate its grading and evaluation system. The review and evaluation of student assignments is an essential element in educational assessment, but if it is the sole criterion for evaluating learning, it has little meaning. Alfie Kohn (2002) makes a compelling case for setting aside some of the common shibboleths about grading—particularly the assumption that grades mean little if anything because there is so much grade inflation and, conversely, that grades are a measure of how effectively a person will do in parish ministry. Grading can be an effective monitor of how well students are processing their opportunities for learning. But we must not overstate the significance of grading as a measure of what students know and how effective we are in our instruction.

Grading is most effective when it is actually done by the one teaching the class. The use of teaching assistants for grading can only, in the end, indicate if students have completed the assigned work. It cannot provide faculty with a means of hearing their students, processing their work, and considering the quality and character of their learning. Grading at its best is an exercise that requires intuitive judgments and a nuanced appreciation of student learning. Only as a faculty member does his or her own grading can he or she attend to

a class of students and determine how this class is engaging the material and responding to the lectures, readings, and class discussions. Grading at its best provides an opportunity for mid-course adjustments; faculty read their student assignments and accommodate their lectures accordingly. In other words, the grades that are given midway through a semester are an indication not only of the students' learning but also of the teaching that is (or is not) happening. Thus these grades help a faculty member assess his or her own teaching and adjust how he or she is approaching the material—all with the assumption that this year's class is unique, that it is approaching this material differently, and that what the teacher is most concerned with right now is to know what learning is happening in this class.

Grading is also most effective when students have a clear appreciation of why they received the grades they received. Grading only has value as a means of assessment if it is clear to the student that the grading has been completed according to a clearly defined rubric—equally available to both the student and the teacher.

Grading is most effective when faculty appreciate the need for grading but use it only as a *secondary* means of motivation toward excellence in learning. Students will strive to learn if they care about their subject matter and experience joy in doing well.

Finally, grading is most effective when it is clear to all involved that the final assessment of a student's learning will incorporate more elements of evaluation and review, including the student's own reflection on the learning thus far. And this means that grading is always done with the goal of enabling students to be self-reflective, to monitor their own learning and study. Thus it cultivates the capacity of the student to be self-educating.

Bottom line: Grading is effective if it is not merely a measure of learning but is a means to cultivate learning for student and teacher alike.

## PROGRAM AND CURRICULAR DESIGN

Schools that do effective assessment not only ask good questions and learn from the responses to those questions, but they also have found a way to incorporate their learning into the design and implementation of their academic programs. These schools have found an effective way of “closing the loop”—of appropriating insights, responding to feedback, and adjusting programs accordingly. The abiding question in assessment is not only “What data is collected?” but also “How is it used and incorporated into institutional planning?”

Good assessment leads to a responsive faculty with a responsive program and curriculum. But “responsiveness” does not mean a knee-jerk reaction or a simplistic fixing of a problem. We can and must avoid the reductionism that

assumes, for example, that a deficiency can be fixed or a “gap” in the curriculum can be resolved by adding a course. We should not assume that if we have “gaps” in spirituality, we need another course on prayer; or if we have “gaps” in biblical understanding that the solution is another course on Scripture. It may be as much a matter of *how* we teach our courses as which courses we teach. Simone Weil’s impassioned plea for the study of the ancient languages (1951, 66–76) is a reminder that the study of Hebrew may be as valuable for learning how to pray as any other course in the curriculum, depending on how it is taught. In the same manner, biblical literacy may be fostered as effectively by a good course on preaching as by another course in Scripture.

## CONCLUSION

Assessment is not an option; we need to do it and do it well. We have no choice if we are going to be accountable for our work. As Dan Aleshire (2002) has put it, “Our choice as theological schools is to learn to do this kind of educational work grumpily because it has been externally mandated, or to learn how to do it faithfully because we care about our work, our graduates and the communities which they serve.” We need to embrace this challenge as something that is both integral to our work and as something in which we actually find joy. Why? Because our work matters. But also because assessment is ultimately about learning, and there is a deep joy that comes in learning. If we do assessment well, we will find that it brings joy to our work and enables us to foster excellence in theological education.

## NOTES

1. Palomba and Banta (1999, 4) define assessment as “the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development.” Following Palomba and Banta, then, I am using “assessment” in this essay to speak of both the systematic collection of data and the means by which this data informs the teaching-learning process.
2. See also an earlier publication by Schon (1987).
3. All narratives cited in this book can be found in the Archives section of the Seminar’s Web site: <http://www.lexingtonseminar.org/>.
4. Raymond Williams (2002a, 3) rightly makes the following observation: “. . . students who catch a glimmer of what it means to be a truly educated and self-educating person, and the potential that opens up for them, experience a deep joy.”