KNOWING IS INTEGRATIVE

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KNOWING IS INTEGRATIVE, PART ONE

We have drawn attention to how theological education began to recognize and then address problems that we were experiencing in educating students. Treating the problems as if they were piecemeal and solutions were "add-ons" assumed we only needed "technical changes" (in the language of Ronald Hiefiz). Of course, each time we added this or tweaked that we created more complexity and thus more costs. But the changes we needed were not "technical" but rather "adaptive." We needed a more fundamental change.

That's why in the Kairos Project we talk about "knowledge" as "content, character, and craft." Without all three of these aspects of knowing, something essential is missing. By speaking of knowledge as content, character, and craft, we constantly are forced to integrate and thus to remember that content isn't the goal no matter how good, credible, or important that content may be. We recognize that there is an essential mutuality to these three dimensions which has been missing previously.

This linguistic change isn't merely semantic. It dramatically changes the educational journey. If knowledge is a three-fold mutuality between content, character, and craft, then the pathway students take toward an educational outcome, the assessment as to how well they have achieved that outcome, as well as whom needs to be working with the student on the journey toward embodiment of that outcome must reflect this integrated nature of knowledge. This is why in Kairos the mentor team includes a faculty mentor, a vocational mentor, and a personal mentor. It is only when we look through all three lenses that we can adequately assess a student's knowledge.

An institutional shift toward a more robust, integrated understanding of knowledge does imply a shift away from the previous role content has played. This is inevitable. When knowledge was identified with content then delivering content was at the center of the institution. That is no longer the case. This "decentering" of content and content delivery in the educational process in order to include attention to character and craft is a far reaching and sometimes painful process. It may be painful, but it is good.

But de-centering doesn't mean content is not essential. Content is essential. It is as essential to knowledge as character and craft are. One shouldn't think we are throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Because of this, we still have to address perhaps the most significant problem related to content: what content is necessary? This question is exacerbated by the fact that the amount of content in virtually every discipline is growing at phenomenal rates.

Of course, the abundance of knowledge really isn't anything new to any of us. I remember as a seminary student feeling just a little overwhelmed by the amount of reading that was expected of us for each class we took. And, it seemed the further I went in my education, the longer my reading list became. The more I knew, the more I wanted to know about a growing list of subjects, authors, ideas, and debates. One of my favorite T-shirts was a gift from my wife lamenting "So many books, so little time!"

Our earlier observation about the communal nature of standards of excellence provides us with an important starting point to answer our question. The default answer has always been the faculty. The faculty are hired as content experts with the result being that they control what is taught. In the language of our accreditors: faculty must control the curriculum.

Historically, it has been the faculty that constitute the community of practitioners who determine the standards of excellence regarding what should be learned. This really makes sense because they are the recognized experts in all the disciplines contained in the educational journey. Of course, it's not just a particular school's faculty that creates these standards (though they are forever called on to make these determinations). Really, it's the larger community of practitioners of the disciplines, which we sometimes call "the guild" or "the academy" that was essentially defining the standards.

I think this served the church fairly well when the community of practitioners in the academy was the same community of practitioners in the church. Many schools can recall a time in their history where the faculty not only served as faculty of the school but also pastored congregations and/or served in other denominational roles. When the ecclesial community and the academic community were populated by essentially the same people, there was strong convergence between the work of school and church. But, we all are aware that this hasn't been the case for most schools for decades.

As the disciplines became more specialized, complex, and nuanced, success in school more and more meant cultivating and honing the abilities to navigate the nuance and complexity of a variety of different disciplines, not to mention to accumulate and process the immense quantity of information the disciplines were each creating. Doing well in school was no longer necessarily connected to doing well in ministry. As communities of faith were challenged to engage an ever-changing world, the educational needs of those giving pastoral care and leadership to these congregations changed as well. Doing well in ministry wasn't essentially connected to doing well in school. Back to top.

KNOWING IS INTEGRATIVE, PART TWO

There is simply too much content in any discipline for anyone to know everything. That being the case, someone has to make a determination as to what is most important to be learned. Historically, that decision has been made by the faculty.

The Kairos Project has taken a different approach to answering the question of who decides what content needs to be learned. We deeply value the importance of advances in knowledge and the rich nuance

associated with the academic disciplines. We believe the guild should be received as gifts from God to the church. Our faith and lives would be greatly diminished had the academy not been doing its work so well for many generations. We believe that the academic credibility associated with the content dimension of knowledge is essential for the work we are called to do. That said, we also recognize that the faculty alone cannot determine what content is needed. We believe that the vocational context to which a student is called should have as much say in what needs to be learned as the academy does.

To understate the obvious, there may be disagreement here. It is human nature to value things differently. God has created us in such a way that we are drawn to and have capacity for some things more than others. The result is that we will give greater value to some things than others. Those of us who have given our lives to the study of a particular subject matter will likely be strong advocates for all the good things our discipline can bring to the student's learning. (I don't know if I have ever met a faculty member who didn't think the curriculum could be strengthened if more of their discipline was required in it.) But because those with the deepest commitments to the student's vocational context were either under-represented on the faculty or had no vote at all, the important impact of that context has been greatly diminished.

That is why, in the Kairos project, we have made vocational mentors full partners with the faculty mentor in determining and prioritizing what needs to be known to do good work in a particular vocation. We believe that someone who successfully practices the vocation has an essential contribution to make regarding what content is most important. The vocational mentor is not a "consultant" from which the faculty asks "advice" (which can then be accepted or rejected), but rather a full partner together determining the content needed for the student to be successful. This is why you may hear us say that "vocation controls content."

But the vocational mentor's contribution isn't limited to helping identify and prioritize content. We believe the vocational mentor has an essential contribution for determining what skills and abilities the student needs for their vocation. Or, in Kairos, the "craft" needed for the vocation. This draws on our earlier observation that communities of practitioners (of the vocation) develop standards of excellence which help them move toward the ends to which they are striving. As we noted earlier, when the two communities of practitioners were essentially the same folks, when those on faculty were also pastoring and leading our churches, there was fairly good alignment in understanding the appropriate elements of craft. But the context has changed and those days are largely gone.

But we shouldn't think this contribution is limited to naming and assessing skills more or less unique to the vocation. (For example, if a person is called to pastoral ministry then the pastoral vocation has an important contribution to make in helping identify important pastoral skills and abilities.) A contribution in this area is no doubt valuable, essential even, but we believe there are other significant contributions to be made. Vocation helps contextualize other skills as well. Back to top.

KNOWING IS INTEGRATIVE, PART THREE

When "knowledge" is equated with "content" and decisions about "which content" have to be made, we have suggested that the vocational context not only has to be consulted, but it should be given a privileged place. "Vocation controls content" is the way we put it. Now, we are going to draw attention to the importance of one's vocational context for helping us better define the standards of excellence having to do with "craft."

Let's take writing as an example. The vocation, through the vocational mentor, helps us understand appropriate writing standards by helping us better understand how writing functions in a specific vocation. Writing can be significantly different if one is a pastor, a chaplain, a social worker, a business person, or an academic. Paying attention to what is most important for success in the vocation is essential for the student's journey.

Since writing is already an integral part of our standard pathway, it might be helpful to reflect on some of the formative dimensions of our current standards of excellence and the community out of which those standards have emerged. As we noted earlier, faculty tend to be hired as content experts in particular disciplines needed to be covered in the curriculum. The "gold standard" for academic credentials of a faculty member is a PhD. The PhD is a research doctorate inherently designed to create scholars, those who advance the goals of the discipline by making scholarly contributions. The culmination of this educational journey is a dissertation in which the candidate is deemed to have made a scholarly contribution. It is a rigorous, intense, and life-changing process. And, for the most part, faculty are expected to continue making contributions throughout their careers.

It is in no way surprising that one primary way faculty assess the knowledge gained in a course is through writing, and usually through a research paper. Often the research paper is the culminating project of a course and bears the greatest weight of the course grade. The standards used for writing these papers are rigorous and the documentation of sources is meticulous, as anyone who has written a graduate-level research paper knows. In fact, many of the style guides used in graduate school were developed by university presses for their own publications. I remember my own seminary experience and the hours upon hours of proofreading and care given to making sure every jot and tittle was exactly as the guides said they should be. I remember how thankful I was when I bought my first computer, an Apple IIe, and was able to edit my papers without having to totally retype the page!

Now, don't get me wrong, these standards are really important for documenting and attributing sources for the information used in the paper. These standards are appropriate and make perfect sense for a community of scholars where the standards of excellence are essentially shaped by the task of making an original contribution to an academic discipline and for persuading the reader of the correctness of a thesis.

I think this is informative as to why one of the "chief sins" in academic writing is plagiarism. Taking someone else's work, insights, or contributions as if they were your own is a violation of the academic community's deepest purpose. The standards for developing and organizing the paper are important, too, in that a research paper needs a clear thesis, display credible engagement with alternatives to what's being proposed; give clear evidence of the breadth of resources consulted; etc. There is absolutely nothing wrong with any of this, in a particular context. Given all of this, I don't think it's a coincidence that one of the highest praises we can give for a student paper is to suggest that it might be publishable.

Again, don't misunderstand me. I am not trying to argue against the value of writing a research paper: I am only trying to highlight some of the communal and formational dimensions that we might not have noticed. Seeing these communal/formational dimensions of a particular writing assignment and the standards of excellence used to assess it, helps us better see the essential role the vocation (and vocational mentor) should play in assigning and assessing the types of writing required for the journey.

All of this has been to point out that the contribution of a student's vocational context to their educational journey is significant and too often has gone missing. The vocational context is necessary for determining the required content as well as for helping prioritize it. The vocational practice is necessary, not only for helping us in recognizing the particular skills and abilities needed to be successful in the vocation, but also for particularizing more general skills and abilities toward the vocational practice. At the end of the day, we believe that the traditional approach to education has not attended in a satisfactory way to the vocational context in which a student is called to serve. The standards of excellence that have been formed largely by the academic community alone do not serve us well in helping our students flourish in the vocations to which they have been called. We have designed the Kairos Project in such a way as to specifically address that deficiency. Back to top.

CONCLUSION

In our Standards of Excellence white paper, we made 3 observations. The first observation was about context. We observed that standards of excellence always assume a context though that context is often ignored or not acknowledged. For decades, missiologists have been calling for attention to context. The Kairos Project is our attempt to take that call seriously.

The second observation we made had to do with what we called "communities of practice." We observed that standards of excellence, in part, grow out of a community of practitioners trying to achieve an end or a goal. Here, the fact that educators are part of a communal practice is important, but added to that is the recognition that the community is always striving to achieve a result or goal. Attention to that goal is essential for

understanding the standards which emerge from the community trying to achieve it.

The third observation had to do with change. We simply noted that standards of excellence can change. This change doesn't mean that the standard is arbitrary. It can be significantly binding but it is not a necessary quality of a standard to be unchanging.

From those observations, in this white paper we explored their implications for the Kairos Project. First, we developed why it is that we talk about knowledge as the three-fold mutual interaction between content, character, and craft. Knowing is an integrative process. Next we explored the important contribution the vocational context/practice makes for determining and prioritizing both the content and craft dimensions of knowledge. It has largely been the vocational context of the student that has been under attended to. The privileged status of the "academy" particularly as it relates to its end of the creation of new knowledge and formation of faculty who can make a contribution to their disciplines has deeply formed the educational experiences in ways often unrecognized. We only began to scratch the surface here, but more is sure to come. Back to top.