

## Nurturing the Intentional Learner

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**The thesis:** *Continuing education among church professionals would be enhanced if the learners had the skills and interest in becoming intentional learners. It is possible to teach those skills and encourage the attitudes that are the basis of intentional learning.*

Much of the education system in the United States fosters dependency upon others in the education process. The process is teacher focused, requirement ordered, testing monitored and check list organized. Back some years one stated it as “Boot Camp Begins in Kindergarten.” A Harper’s magazine Index (Sept. 2009) reported that *kindergartens* in two major cities (NYC and LA) spent about the same amount of time on standardized test preparation as they devoted to unstructured playtime (about half an hour per day.)

Preparation for professional status in the church finds students checking off the list of required courses as determined by the theological school and then those on the list of the denomination’s readiness chart. Fewer and fewer electives can be scheduled, a consumer model prevails and students choose a requirement from one list or the other on the basis of schedule and convenience. This causes students to become dependent on the decisions of others.

Then, in a professional arena that is behind other professions in continuing education expectations, the now accepted professionals are expected to engage in self-directed, self-motivated on-going education for the sake of their personal and professional well being. Continuing education directors find themselves studying marketing techniques in order to fill the slots in the course offerings; how can we be attractive enough by topic, leader, location, cost and schedule to get our share of the market? Participants find themselves back in the “choose one from column A and two from column B” of the fabled Chinese restaurant menu model of planning their continuing education.

While some participants are motivated by professional or personal **crises** to scan the list of offerings and enroll for an event, few have a continuously re-worked set of personal and professional learning goals that reflect their successes (need based orientations predominate) learning styles, and clearly identified desire for spiritual nurture. (Primary grade Montessori schools that teach and nurture self-directed learning find that students who want to transfer into that form of education after a year or two in the general schooling model are unable to handle the self-directed expectations. They flounder, having been taught dependency. This suggests that many potential participants in intentional continuing education face a need for re-

training. The consequences extend beyond the realm of continuing education since the church professions are very much self-directed at their core.

Some years ago a Southern Baptist pastor shocked his parishioners and colleagues by announcing his resignation from a large effective church to become the pastor of a small congregation. He said that he had found that his life was organized around the pink slips left on his desk by his secretary – and that if there were no slips he did not know what to do. He also found he did not know who he was. His ministry had become rather totally a reactive other-directed enterprise. His very identity was tied up in that pink slip mode of operation. He decided to end that and seek to re-establish a pastoral ministry that came more centrally out of his own identity, a rediscovered identity, an original passion for pastoral ministry.

It is possible for theological schools and continuing education program to build into their process the nurturing of intentional, self-directed learners. But would such institutional expressions of education want to nurture such a person since dependency among learners is in some ways an easier process to manage. It can be argued, however, that the long term health of the professionals and the effectiveness they have in ministry means that **teaching how to learn and develop one's own plan for that** is as important as teaching the foundation disciplinary materials and the skills of ministry; that fostering the strength of the intentional learner will enrich the whole enterprise.

Some suggested steps:

*Measure teaching/learning by criteria that are more generic than simple course completion.*

This task requires schools and judicatories to think beneath the obvious in ascertaining readiness for ministry. For example, many seminary courses reward the writing of term papers – yet few parish clergy find that they are ever asked to write a term paper as an act of ministry!

*Individualize the curriculum and the instructional methods.* The How as well as the What of continuing education programs can be given some greater diversification. The introduction of on-line experiences adds but does not completely replace the need for face-to-face meetings. The “final product” of any event can be left open to a variety of forms – essay, term paper, program plan, wisdom document, lesson plan, sermon plan, written or oral or in an even more elaborate presentation.

*Pay attention to variations in learning style and accommodate those variations.* Some people like to listen, some like to read. Some like small group discussions, some like time by themselves. Some like to roam the stacks of the library and fall upon unexpected works . Others like to check out the assigned texts and no more. Some favor practical applications and problem solving, some like to understand theory and principles and their foundational roots. Kolb's

Learning Style Inventory is a simple way to get this reflection process started.  
(<http://www.businessballs.com/kolblearningstyles.htm>)

*Teach how to reflect on past experience in order to build on success and strength.* Tom Brown was one of the initial movers and shakers in the pastoral counseling centers devoted to clergy and their problems. One technique he used was to ask them to keep track of how they spent their time – a daily log for a few weeks. He would then ask them to write down on a separate sheet the parts of ministry that they found difficult and draining and the parts that they found rewarding and energizing. Too often he had to help them re-order their priorities so that they spent more time on those things they liked to do and less on those they found draining. The result was that they received enough energy from the pleasant tasks to carry them through the difficult tasks with much greater overall satisfaction and effectiveness. Similarly, students can reflect on what has been really good in their learning process, decipher what made those good and seek out new events that are similar.

*Encourage depth learning in some interesting arena.* “ We have to learn everything so we can’t learn anything.” That comment from a student was his way of saying he, and his companions, had no time to explore in depth some area that they found particularly interesting. The thesis of this suggestion is that a deeper knowledge of one subject or skill of interest can carry one along through learning that is prescribed by circumstances.

*Teach the setting of learning goals that are both personal and professional in nature.* These need not be elaborate. They can be simple and concrete. They should be attainable since success breeds success. “I want to know...; I want to be able to...; for starters and then later on I will re-state those goals in more challenging ways.” Every seminary could require that a candidate for graduation submit a summary paper of the highlights of their learning experience and attach a proposed five year plan for their continuing education. !!

*Encourage students to set in place accountability structures that lead to planning.* Encourage the individual to share the goal statements with someone else – mutual sharing for accountability– and set a time and place for reporting progress. The conversation is not monitoring so much as it is cooperative encouragement.

*Do some if not most of the above within the context of ongoing support and consultation arrangements.* The idea here is that this process can be worked into many continuing education events – a short time during the event to do this reflection in a guided fashion as it is introduced and developed further in a mutual support process as the students become more and more adept at the planning.

I don’t know the statistics of the percentage of church leaders who participate in a significant continuing education event each year. Once upon a time I did know and the percentage was

very low. I think the climate for leadership in the church has changed so that new demands and opportunities for ministry are rushing onto the stage. The traditional areas by which success in ministry used to be measured have been challenged by present realities and changed by the times in which we live. The staying power of the leadership in effective ministries calls even more for continuing education tailored as closely as possible to the intentions of the learners. Steps forward are possible.