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Self-educated Achievers: Can Unlettered Theologians Reach Their Potential?

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A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education

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Foreword

The past 20 years have seen a period of continuing change in New Zealand education. The change in overseas governments' entry requirements for New Zealanders to live and work in their countries, the evolution of "Education Permanente"¹, Government policy to promote community education - have had an impact on the motivations of adults to enter formal education.

It seemed relevant to visit the topic of self-education to discover what, if any, changes have occurred in the motivations of self-educated theologians in the last two decades. It was my intention to identify any patterns used by the theologians for self-directed learning during this period.

The literature review established five themes relevant to the study. In brief these themes are that adults are self-directed to a greater or lesser degree; that meaningful learning takes place when adults are in control of their learning; that given the right environment, all adults can develop intellectually; that a variety of factors may determine whether adults choose to learn through formal or independent means, and that the context of learning is determined by who you are, how wealthy you are and what access you have to resources. It was important in this study to balance the assumptions of andragogy with the 1986 critique by Stephen Brookfield.

A range of research methods was used. The primary method used questionnaires and interviews administered to nine self-educated theologians who have practised theology within the past 20 years. Questions covered motivation, subject categories studied,

¹ The key philosophical ideas of "Education Permanente" are that education is no longer limited to a particular period of one's life, and encompasses formal, non-formal and informal educational activities.

acceptance by degreed theologians, expectations, strengths and limitations of the learning method employed. A second questionnaire was used to interview secondary respondents about self-educated theologians they had been closely associated with to confirm the findings.

Findings

The changes the theologians observed in their own motivation included intolerance towards irrelevant or uninteresting courses, or inflexible schedules, a determination to solve their own problems and to acquire specific new knowledge quickly and inexpensively, and a devotion to the pursuit of truth.

Some influences which have affected their learning include specific life-changing situations, political changes within government, mission organisations and denominations, changing circumstances and personal preferences.

Strategies used by these teachers of theology to survive the ever-present pressure to become credentialed include accepting honorary doctorates to open doors previously closed to them, working within communities where credentials are not of significance, accepting that without a credential opportunities for status positions may be limited, and putting in extra effort to ensure that they can outperform professionals in order to justify their stance.

This study shows that although a credentials-oriented society is alien to the theologians' purposeful goals for learning, they have both resisted and worked with it, using diverse opportunities to develop and improve their thinking skills.

The significance of the case study is that while it will to some extent provide historical documentation of the experiences of nine theologians (and the impressions of respondents about a further five theologians) during a significant period of educational change in the history of New Zealand, it will primarily serve to add to the literature on successful self-directed teachers/learners and the implications inherent in this for polytechnics moving towards more flexible pathways to qualifications in a knowledge-driven society.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

“Traditionally New Zealand has not been a country with a high regard for formal educational qualifications.”

- Noeline Alcorn

1.1 Background to the research

The last twenty years have seen tremendous change in the area of adult education. There have been significant developments in approaches to learning and teaching, including flexible pathways to qualifications, there has been increasing pressure to have credentials and further pressure for the accreditation of learning. In addition, frameworks such as feminism and postmodernism have had an impact on practice. Educators recognise that adult education has to evolve and find its place within changing contexts. It can no longer be defined as learning which occurs outside educational institutions but needs to be redefined as learning which may take place inside or outside and may not necessarily be limited by what is considered appropriate by educators (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997).

The purpose of this research project has been to investigate self-education as opposed to formal education, within the context of teachers of theology in New Zealand religious institutions during the period from 1980 to the present.

The results of the project will give substance and relevance to the development of flexible and on-line courses in theology in secular and religious tertiary settings. The data will also add to the few studies which have evolved in the field of self-education in New Zealand academic institutions.

From the beginning of the study, it has been clear that self-education is difficult to define

and its boundaries have been puzzling. According to Gerald Grow (1991) "few people have ever defined self-directed learning with precision; and even when they do, its meaning unexpectedly shifts to a new location." Alongside these difficulties, many have agreed that the proposed study would be worthwhile. There have been times when it would have been easier to have extended the parameters of the study to self-educated teachers from any discipline, and it became apparent that the group of self-taught theologians selected may have formally studied another academic subject. Indeed, during the interviews participants frequently deviated from talking about their theological studies to a broader discussion about their self-directed learning

My interest in this field of education has arisen primarily from memories of my childhood in rural New Zealand, where few people in my sub-set of New Zealand culture held degrees yet I encountered many remarkable individuals whose study of biblical doctrines went far beyond their educational status. My parents were hospitable and throughout my early years our home provided accommodation for many visitors, both from around New Zealand and from overseas. The vast majority of these were employed as teachers of theology, either through missions, in churches or in theological institutions. In the main, these people were self-educated. The second thing that has sparked my interest in self-education has been my experience as an educator of adults in South Auckland, many of whom bring with them considerable knowledge gained outside formal learning situations.

1.2 The research problem

The overall reason for the study was to investigate the effectiveness of self education as opposed to formal education, particularly with respect to teachers of theology who have achieved some degree of recognition or success.

The exploration sought to challenge the notion that formal education is superior to self-education and to investigate whether the individuals concerned had put in place any systems to guide their learning.

Because a postmodern stance has been taken which recognises the significance of the individual, it has been considered relevant to use case study qualitative methodology. In

the 1970s, when case study method first began to emerge, it was not considered a proper educational research method. It is now one of the most widely used forms for studying educators and educational programs (Stake, 1995) and has been selected to answer the question “What is going on here?” with regard to the self-educated professional theologian.

1.3 Rationale for the study

Several factors indicate that it is timely to carry out this research. Firstly, it is now almost forty years since New Zealand universities started to re-evaluate theology as an academic discipline. Secondly, since the development in 1990 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), any individual organisation supplying education and/or assessment services can become a registered provider. In a conference paper by Bruce Knox (2000), the following statistics are given:

In 1998, the estimated total number of private and public students in the theological sector was an estimated 5000. These students were spread over 86 providers. Comparison of this data with the 1982 figures demonstrates significant growth in the sector.

ESTIMATED TOTAL NUMBER OF PRIVATE AND PUBLIC STUDENTS IN THE THEOLOGICAL SECTOR				
Year	Est. no. of students	No. of providers	No. of closures	No. of new providers
1982	450	30	-	-
1998	5000	86	11	56
2000	?	89	15	3

Table 1.1

The first objective of the research is to determine whether there has been a pattern of self-educated theologians in New Zealand who have made a significant contribution to teaching and perhaps to theological publications.

The second objective is to ascertain whether current educational theory and practice, particularly as it relates to flexible delivery and on-line learning, is relevant to the needs of learners.

Benefits to participants are having the opportunity to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their independent learning and others are able to gain from these reflections. The research provides documentation of the ten participants' educational experiences during a period of rapid proliferation of New Zealand's theological providers.

The findings may also help to clarify some of the reasons for the continued under-representation of fundamentalist theologians in the statistics of qualified teachers of theology.

Information will also be provided to the executives of theological colleges to enable them to address more comprehensively the flexible pathways to qualifications that they are offering.

1.4 Outline

The original intention was to structure the thesis in three parts – profiles of self educated people, links to adult education theory, and implications for flexible delivery of courses in polytechnics. It became obvious, however, that this approach should be abandoned in favour of a more rigid structure and the original structure is now discernable only in the second and fifth chapters. Within the other chapters there is a mix of theory and research into practice.

In general terms, the second chapter focuses on the evolving nature of adult education theory and why it is more relevant to talk about adult learning. The final chapters deal with the research, and challenges to adult education theory.

The intention of Chapter One is to provide a background to the research, to locate self-education within the period of the research, that is the past twenty years in New Zealand.

Chapter Two is a review of relevant literature and explores some of the key ideas behind self-education and self-directed learning, with specific reference to contemporary theories of adult learning, and the influence of politics on the currently popular concept of 'lifelong learning'.

Chapter Three outlines the research design used. The themes that were prominent in the literature prompted eight research questions which in turn led to the most appropriate design for the study. Ethical issues are considered and the research methods used are discussed.

Chapter Four profiles the primary respondents in the study whose stories are examined in separate case studies.

Chapter Five records the data gathered from the secondary respondents who shared their knowledge of other self-educated theologians, also in separate case studies.

Chapter Six pulls together the threads from the previous two chapters and attempts to analyse the data.

Chapter Seven presents conclusions from the study and considers learning opportunities for adults in New Zealand. Its aim is to crystallise observations made about the pros and cons of formal and informal education and to reflect on the implications of those observations.