

COMPETENCY-BASED THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION: ORIGINS OF THE *IMMERSE* MDIV AT NORTHWEST BAPTIST SEMINARY

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As seminary enrolment in North America declined through the early 2000s, a small Canadian school, Northwest Baptist Seminary, struggled to survive. Accepting that its conventional model of education was not producing the type of leaders needed by the denomination it served, school and denominational leaders collaborated on a new model of training pastors that applied principles from in-house learning, just-in-time learning, experiential engagement and mastery learning. This new model, which they called, “Competency-Based Theological Education” (CBTE), extended many aspects of technical vocational training and licensure into the Humanities. It was outcomes-based and mentor-driven, utilized direct assessment, and was delivered in the learner’s context. Despite opposition from academic peers, the Immerse Master of Divinity program launched in 2013. Skepticism turned to curiosity when Northwest’s specialized accreditor, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), granted experimental approval of the model in 2014 and featured it in a three-year project on emerging educational models and practices. Refinement and expansion of CBTE as an educational model continues to grow as a result of promising early results, annual CBTE conferences, continued support from ATS, and adaptation and adoption of CBTE by other seminaries and service organizations.

The Need for Change

Outcomes-based approaches to learning can be traced back hundreds of years to craft guilds and, since the 1950s, to apprenticeship, workplace training, and licensure programs. Conceptual models of competency-based education (CBE) in American higher education began with vocational training in the 1970s, with a shift in priority toward the identification of learning outcomes, assessment of outcomes through student performance, flexible timelines and individualized instruction (Nodine, 2015).

While early programs adapted traditional course and credit-hour systems to include learning outcomes and performance-based assessment, advances in online learning technologies and operationalization of direct assessment models were needed to make flexible timelines and individualized instruction feasible (Ford, 2014). In the 1980s and ‘90s, schools like Western Governors University in the United States were created to provide competency-based education to working adults, replacing courses with demonstrated mastery, faculty with mentors, and credit-hour based tuition with subscription models (Laitinen, 2012). However, these types of programs were niche experiments, and the conventional residential course and credit-hour model continued to dominate most forms of higher education, including theological education.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, enrolment rates at North American seminaries enjoyed a slow and steady increase, limiting the perceived need for innovation in theological education. However, by 2005, momentum had reversed direction. Enrolment decline continued until 2015, by which point full-time equivalent (FTE) numbers had dropped by 13% in the US and 25% in Canada. Enrolment in Master of Divinity (MDiv) programs, the professional designation for pastors, was hardest hit with FTE dropping by 18% overall in the US and 26% in Canada (Association of Theological Schools, 2004, 2008, 2014, 2019).

By 2008, a small Canadian school, Northwest Baptist Seminary in Langley, BC, was struggling to survive. Established in 1934 as a training center for pastors in Western Canada, it had become the official theological education and leadership development agency for the BC region of the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada, known as Fellowship Pacific. It was also a founding member of the Associated Canadian Theological Schools (ACTS) Consortium, a partnership of four Canadian seminaries working together to form and equip men and women to serve God in the church and the world, each one jointly conferring degrees with Trinity Western University.

Since its inception, Northwest had been the preferred training and recruiting ground for Fellowship church pastors in Western Canada. However, as enrolment declined, Northwest's leadership noticed that many graduates were not being offered pastoral positions in the Fellowship, or anywhere else. In Spring 2009, Northwest graduated only three MDiv students, one of whom was placed in a church. With only two MDiv students enrolled in the program for the Fall term, a sense of urgency settled in.

At the same time, Fellowship Pacific was facing its own crisis of survival. Its churches were shrinking, some were closing, and there was very little growth. The leadership engaged a consultant who warned that Fellowship Pacific could be gone in 10 years without significant change. One issue at stake was that its churches were not being effective at gaining and keeping members. Fellowship Pacific leaders began to wonder if pastors being trained by Northwest had the leadership skills and qualities needed to grow and sustain churches in the 21st century. They noticed that theological education and ministry success did not always correlate, and many of the best pastors had been developed in other disciplines. Many Fellowship churches were hiring from within, and larger networks and churches had begun pastoral development through internal training rather than working with seminaries.

It became clear to the leaders of both Northwest and Fellowship Pacific that the

traditional seminary education model being used to train pastors was not producing the results needed in the field. Fellowship Pacific churches had stopped sending students to the school, and were not hiring the school's graduates. This led to some difficult conversations. Northwest had to face the reality that its graduates did not have skills and competencies Fellowship churches needed, and the denomination was looking elsewhere to find pastors.

Roots of a New Model

The root ideas for a new model of theological education emerged out of prior research undertaken by David Horita and Kenton Anderson, and their own experiments with educational innovations.

In the early 2000s, prior to his appointment as regional director of Fellowship Pacific, Horita had piloted a participant-oriented, mentor-based lay leadership training program for the church he pastored. This doctoral research project convinced Horita that in-house learning had a key role to play in developing professional leaders for the church, not as a replacement for formal theological training, but rather to supplement it with structured, meaningful experience. His pilot program combined the principles of in-house learning, just-in-time learning, experiential engagement, mentoring and flexible scheduling to train 11 lay leaders over the course of two years. While the program leaders experienced some challenges with mentor selection and engagement and the pacing and sequencing of learning, Horita concluded that effective leadership training could take place inside an ongoing ministry context (Horita, 2003).

Anderson had been faculty, and then academic dean at Northwest before taking on the role of President in 2011. In the early 2000s, while administering Field Education and pastoral internship programs, he experimented with a youth leadership training program (YLTP) that was a unique three-way partnership between the Fellowship Pacific denominational staff, the local churches, and Northwest. Students selected and recommended for leadership development by their churches could earn a master's degree through intensive courses and distance learning while being mentored in context by the church, denomination and seminary (Northwest Baptist Seminary, n.d.). The program produced many successful youth pastors. Anderson took note of the energy and enthusiasm injected into theological education when the academic institution worked alongside churches to select and train promising young leaders in context.

In 2009, as Anderson searched for solutions to the school's problems, then

Northwest president Larry Perkins introduced him to a book called *Blue Ocean Strategy* (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005), which challenged companies to find success by exploring broad, untapped market spaces instead of competing with rivals for the same small space. Its application to the shrinking demand for traditional theological education was obvious. Perkins also introduced him to the concept of Mastery Learning, a strategy which factors a student's available time, aptitude, and ability into the structure of learning so that students can achieve defined levels of mastery at their own level and pace (Block & Burns, 1976). Anderson remembered the success of the YLTP program, and began to consider what a new approach to seminary education might look like: a model that allowed students to achieve mastery of defined outcomes at their own pace, in their own context, instead of being tied to course schedules and locations.

Anderson and Horita brought the school and denomination together to work on a new way forward, leveraging their collective strengths and experience. Renovating the denomination meant renovating the school. Neither leader was aware of the fledgling competency-based education movement underway in the US and it would be another four years till the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) was formed, but they undertook a joint project in 2010 to reverse-engineer Northwest's MDiv program, by starting with the end in mind. Together, they identified the outcomes they believed 21st-century pastors needed to be effective in ministry. At the same time, they re-evaluated the school's educational approach to pastoral preparation and adopted a competency-based, direct assessment, in-context delivery model that would be offered jointly by Northwest and Fellowship Pacific, in addition to the conventional programs offered by Northwest through its ACTS partnership.

Introducing a new educational model is not an easy process. As a seminary with a long history of educational tradition and achievement, it was difficult for Northwest to relinquish full control of its MDiv program and share ownership of academic, curriculum and methodology decisions with Fellowship Pacific. It required what Anderson referred to as "institutional humility, to step back, acknowledge that the school existed to serve the churches, and accept the need for disruptive change" (McGillivray, 2018). As they negotiated the new model, both leadership teams wrestled with deciding what they could let go and where they needed to stand firm.

In 2012, Northwest and Fellowship Pacific announced *Immerse*, a direct assessment, competency-based MDiv program that extended outcomes-based mastery learning from technical vocational training and licensure into the Humanities. They called this new model competency-based theological education (CBTE). The word "theological" differentiated it from competency-based education in more ways than

just the topics studied; it signaled emphasis on the affective domain of learning, longitudinal character formation, and assessment of the soft skills critical for earning trust in pastoral work.

Immerse challenged many traditional practices in higher education.

- Northwest would no longer train Fellowship Pacific pastors in classrooms. Rather, students would work in a ministry role under the guidance of a three-person mentor team comprised of a Northwest faculty member, Fellowship Pacific denominational representative, and practicing pastor in the student's context.
- Assignments, papers, readings, and projects were no longer ends unto themselves, but rather a means to develop and demonstrate mastery of outcomes. As such, assignments were no longer graded, but evaluated by the mentor team as complete or incomplete. Incomplete assignments were re-worked until deemed complete.
- Program credit was granted when students demonstrated mastery of outcomes as defined by rubrics equivalent to a minimum B+ level of performance.
- The program consisted of 27 integrated outcomes, each roughly equivalent to one three-credit course, plus cornerstone and capstone modules also worth three credits each. Equal emphasis on knowledge, skills, and character formation was built into each outcome, resulting in entire outcomes dedicated to traits like Scripture, Leadership, Church, Humility, Holiness and Hope.
- Evaluation and grading were no longer performed by a single professor on a discrete subject, but rather by the whole mentor team, on holistic and integrated program outcomes. In addition, equal value was placed on theory and applied work in-context.
- Faculty members would mentor and guide a student in the field to mastery in all program subjects over multiple years, instead of teaching and grading students in a classroom on a single subject for a semester. Northwest faculty continued to teach in the ACTS conventional programs but also took on academic mentoring responsibilities for *Immerse*.
- Students could not self-select to be in the program. Rather, they had to be recommended by the sponsoring pastor and undergo a rigorous pre-assessment process before being invited to apply.
- Tuition was no longer calculated by the number of credit hours taken, but based on a 1-year subscription model.

In the same year, the New America Foundation released its report on *Cracking the Credit Hour*, highlighting competency-based programs like those offered at

Excelsior College and Western Governors University. The foundation challenged the US government to shift educational focus from time to learning (Laitinen, 2012).

While the *Immerse* CBTE program promised an innovative way for Northwest and Fellowship Pacific to raise a new generation of proven leaders trained in the knowledge, skills, and character traits needed to prosper in their callings, implementing a radically different educational model required a paradigm shift for Northwest's faculty, staff, leadership, students, churches, and ministry networks.

Broadening Acceptance of CBTE

Northwest faced significant opposition to the new model from its ACTS consortium partners and faculty peers. To establish credibility for the model among its peers in theological education, Northwest applied for accreditation of the program through the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the premier accrediting body for graduate-level theological education programs in North America. Northwest already had accreditation of its conventional programs through ACTS, but to receive accreditation for its new CBTE program, it had to seek membership in the association independent from ACTS.

After a long process of review and evaluation, ATS granted Northwest official experimental approval of its *Immerse* direct assessment MDiv program in 2014 for a period of five years. This endorsement silenced most of the program's critics and gave Northwest faculty additional confidence to support the innovation. Professional integrity would not permit them to support a degree program that could not be accredited. Having ATS endorsement allowed them to keep an open mind without fearing compromise to personal or institutional credibility (McGillivray, 2018)

In 2015, peer skepticism turned to curiosity when ATS launched a three-year Educational Models and Practices (EMP) project with a major focus on CBTE. A Competency-Based Education (CBE) peer group was one of 18 formed to explore and assess multiple educational models and practices. Anderson was invited to be its Chair. Other ATS schools such as Sioux Falls Seminary and Lexington Theological Seminary also had begun integrating competency-based education principles into their programs with similar success, and schools like Grace Seminary were actively preparing to launch CBTE programs. In his summary reflections on the EMP project, Project Director Stephen Graham called out CBTE as "a particularly illustrative example of how a school's mission to serve particular constituencies can remain constant while at the same time the school, in close consultation with its constituents, embraces an innovative educational model to fulfill the mission"

(Graham, 2019).

As part of the EMP project funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., ATS offered grants to schools to support educational innovation and faculty development. As a result of his involvement in the CBE Peer Group, Anderson received an ever-increasing number of inquiries about CBTE and Northwest's delivery model, leading to online meetings, visits to other schools, and hosted visits at Northwest. Believing there was sufficient interest in the model to warrant a dedicated event, Northwest applied for and received an ATS grant to offer a conference on competency-based theological education. CBTE 2018, held in Vancouver, BC, on November 5-6, 2018, featured several members of the ATS CBE Peer Group as speakers, as well as leaders from the US-based Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN). The event was attended by over 100 theological educators from North American and international seminaries, Bible colleges, churches, missions, and parachurch organizations.

Feedback from participants indicated a clear desire for further such events. A CBTE Advocacy Group to provide guidance and broader input into future events was formed, comprised of representatives from four schools offering CBTE programs (Northwest, Sioux Falls, Grace and Lexington Theological Seminaries), ATS, the Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE), the In Trust Resource Center, and C-BEN. While attending and participating in CBTE 2018, C-BEN leadership observed many common principles and practices between CBE and CBTE and offered to host a CBTE 2019 as a dedicated track at its annual CBExchange conference. The CBTE Advocacy Group agreed that theological educators could benefit from a shared meeting. In October 2019, CBTE 2019 was held in conjunction with CBExchange in Palm Springs, CA. Participants at that event overwhelmingly agreed the shared event was beneficial and recommended continuing the partnership in 2020.

Early Results

Since the first intake in 2013, Northwest has graduated 32 *Immerse* MDiv students with a 100% placement rate. The first two intakes had a high withdrawal rate (62%), attributed to misaligned expectations of students regarding the level of academic rigor in the program. Many students assumed the *Immerse* MDiv would be easier to complete than a conventional MDiv because most assignments were completed on-the-job, in context. When they realized this was not the case, over half withdrew. Northwest and Fellowship Pacific examined the personal characteristics and ministry setting support of those who remained and refined the program selection process for

2014. Since 2014, the withdrawal rate for the 4-year program has averaged 23% and the graduation rate currently sits at 56%. In September 2009, Northwest had two students enrolled in its conventional MDiv program. Ten years later, in September 2019, it had 79 *Immerse* MDiv students, learning in-context throughout North America and beyond.

Beyond the numbers, there are marked qualitative improvements in the preparedness of *Immerse* graduates for the roles for which they have trained. Both students and employers are well-served by a mentor team model that ensures collaborative partnership in teaching and assessment. By graduation, students have demonstrated mastery (equivalent to B+ or higher) of the competencies needed to be successful in their chosen field. Because they have developed and demonstrated those skills in-context on the job, they understand and have learned to balance demands and expectations of the role. As a result, Northwest faculty, staff and leadership have unanimously expressed higher confidence in the preparedness of *Immerse* graduates for ministry, more so than if they had been trained in a traditional MDiv program (McGillivray, 2018).

At the conclusion of the five-year experimental approval granted for the *Immerse* MDiv, ATS conducted a comprehensive site visit of Northwest in 2019. Following that review, ATS reaffirmed Northwest's accreditation and recommended the maximum allowable period until the next review. ATS also granted ongoing exception status to the CBTE MDiv and endorsed the model, stating: "There is ample evidence that the school's competency-based MDiv has comparable outcomes to a traditionally-delivered MDiv and is particularly strong in personal and spiritual formation and in capacity for ministerial leadership... [It] embodies an educational design that ensures high standards of quality, congruence with the educational mission of the school, and coherence with the educational values and outcomes of theological education" (T. Tanner, personal communication, June 10, 2019).

Looking Ahead

One of the strongest successes of the CBTE educational model has been its ability to extend and center learning in the context of the learner, regardless of where that learner is located. The local mentorship model has yielded a scalable and sustainable financial structure for learners in varying socioeconomic regions, and the focus on assessment of outcomes versus assignments makes it easy to accommodate diversity through context-based adaptation of assigned work.

As CBTE programs mature and other seminaries and missional organizations develop their own programs, CBTE is emerging as an educational philosophy expressed in core values versus a single delivery model. Partnered investment remains at the core of Northwest's approach to CBTE. Its leadership and governance teams share the conviction that Northwest exists to serve, not be served, and its most effective programs are those which start and continue in close collaboration with the organizations or agencies they seek to serve. As the extent and variety of these partnerships grow, Northwest has expanded its CBTE offerings beyond its *Immerse* MDiv to offer a Master of Arts degree and reintroduce undergraduate programming. It has become apparent that different learners and contexts require different delivery models, and the challenge of increasing accessibility, flexibility and adaptability of theological education to meet diverse learner needs continues to drive the school forward.

CBTE has been the catalyst for reinvigorating Northwest as a school, better serving its churches and achieving its mission. The conventional model of higher education was not serving its constituency well, and a return to it for Northwest appears unlikely.

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