

Modules: Systematic Theology 421 and 444: Modern and Contemporary Theology
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Learning activity:
Digital presentations

Learning technology:
Podcast or video recording

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Context

Background overview

Systematic Theology 421 and 444 are first and second-semester classroom-based modules that thematically follow on each other. Building on the different loci of systematic theology that were presented in the first three years of study, these modules aim to introduce students to some modern and contemporary theologians. The first-semester module (Systemic Theology 421) focuses on historical theological thinkers and trends of the modern landscape whilst the second-semester module (Systemic Theology 444) exposes students to contemporary theologians and their theological address of the current theological context. Both these modules focus on bringing students up to date with the theology of their own time and on students positioning themselves within the theological discourse.

Subject area

The first semester focuses on historical theological thinkers and trends that have contributed significantly to the above-mentioned systematic theology loci and on other theological themes. It also focuses on situating these theologians and trends within the broader theological landscape. The aim is to make clear how specific theological viewpoints link up with other viewpoints held by specific theologians or with trends and how these may be regarded as contributions within a continuous theological discourse. The background to the work of all these theologians and trends, their important publications and the central contents of their theology are discussed, with due account of criticism on their work and of the questions that this evokes, as is their influence on other theologians and theological trends.

The second semester has a slight thematic shift, with the aim of this module to expose students to the person, work and legacy of a number of living contemporary theologians (including South African theologians). Where possible, these theologians come to address the class regarding their own theology. The second part of the module addresses some important theological themes in contemporary theology, such as theology and religion(s), theology and the arts, and theology and science.

Intended learning outcomes

The intended learning outcomes focus on students' capacity to identify

some of the most influential modern and contemporary theologians and theological trends and indicate their position within the broader theological landscape, to give a cursory account of the background, publications and theological contents of some of these theologians and theological trends, including their various views on the nature and task of theology, and to discuss important theological themes (e.g. theology and religion[s], theology and science, and theology and the arts) critically and in depth.

Established practice and the challenge

The two modules, although separate in grading and in credits, are thematically linked in their focus on modern and contemporary theologians and are structured in such a way as to complement each other and create an integrated view of the overall topic and of systematic theology in general. The challenge was to find a short summative assessment to help facilitate the creation of a cohesive bridge between the modules. The students did weekly summaries regarding the featured theologians and theological themes and the aim was to find some activity that did not expect further writing or repetition of what they had already completed. In order to encourage the high-order thinking of fourth-year students, the activity would also do well to include an element of creation, creativity, reflection and critical thinking.

Advantages associated with the integration of technology

In order to address the challenge, students were asked to create their own videos (both audio and video) or podcasts (audio only) of one to two minutes on any theologian not discussed during the first semester. In using this activity, the ideal was that it would help students think of different ways to engage their content form, not simply in the usual typed text and formulated textual argument. In other words, the use of video would invite them to think differently about what was important in the life, work and resources that they would gather about the particular person whom they wished to discuss and how they would convey this information creatively. It would also serve as a feedback bridge for the second-semester module by providing the lecturers with possible themes and persons whom they could discuss in the upcoming module or in the modules of the next year. Therefore, although the learning activity itself took place only in the Systematic Theology 421 first-semester module, the impact was much broader.



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By using another medium to communicate, different sets of academic skills, including creativity and critical thinking, were elicited. In creating these videos, the students had the opportunity to find ways of conveying their information engagingly and make it interesting whilst being short and to the point. Not only would they have to think about the content differently but they would also have to learn some new skills, such as narrative skills and basic technical skills (how to operate a camera, edit a video etc).



**Figure 1: The task engaged students with the content and taught them new skills

Student overview

The student body of Systematic Theology 421 consisted of 21 students who had completed the previous three years of systematic theology modules in the Bachelors in Divinity (BDiv) programme. Once the fourth and final year is successfully completed, students have the opportunity of enrolling for the Masters in Divinity (MDiv) programme, which focuses on equipping students for ministerial work in congregations. Students can also enrol for a general Masters in Theology (MTh) programme or one that has an applied focus (such as youth ministry or clinical pastoral care).

Learning and assessment activities

Educational approach

The learning activity served as an informal heuristic where students had to apply the higher-order critical thinking skills of analysis, evaluation and creation. By choosing their own topic based on their previous years' experience, reflecting upon it and creatively engaging with it in order to produce a suitable product to display this engagement, the activity demonstrated how learning orientation changes the way in which students think about the content that they engage with.

Learning and assessment activities

Students were required to create a video or podcast (of one to two minutes) individually for the last class of the semester. They could choose what they wanted to record based on the technology available and the skills that they had. Herein, students had to provide a short critical overview of the life and work of any academic theologian who was not discussed in the course but whom the students regarded as an important figure. They also had to provide a short analysis, evaluation and explanation of why they had chosen this specific theologian. These videos and podcasts, in their final form of a neat presentation, were played in the classroom by the lecturers and students.

The videos and podcasts accounted for 5% of the predicate mark, an incentive to participate in the activity. Although the lecturers allocated the final activity grade, students had the opportunity to provide feedback and comments to their peers.

Feedback practice

The students played the videos and podcasts in the classroom to the lecturer(s) and their fellow students. Feedback took place in a discussion format among all those present and focused on the narrative and communication skills in the presentation of the topic chosen within the allocated time. Students had the opportunity to respond to the feedback and discussion in that time but, due to the summative nature of the activity, could not change their product. The aim of the activity was not solely the allocation of a mark (hence the activity amounting to only 5% of the predicate mark) but also to compel students to engage with the activity and provide informal feedback regarding the module content.

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Support challenges

For some students, access to technology or persons who could assist them to learn the necessary skills was limited. In this regard, one can see the inequality divide coming into this learning experience. Some students flourished; others really struggled to do the basics. Scripting and language also proved to be barriers. Those students who felt comfortable writing a narrative, designing a plot or setting up a 'scene' tended to be more comfortable with the activity than those who just recorded a PowerPoint presentation with spoken words.

Student experience

The students generally seemed to enjoy it. Naturally, there were some students who, through their personality type or skill level, did not find such a public presentation easy or fun. However, it seemed that they enjoyed watching one another and felt that they may be able to contribute in a similar way in other forums (such as youth groups and church websites). By participating in the activity, they were also contributing to the module content and helping to create and inform it.



**Figure 2: Student assignments were used in future modules

General

Opportunities

By participating in a video or podcast activity, students had the opportunity to learn new skill sets. Narrative and communication skills were important in this activity, as students had to convey their message in a concise and effective manner. Technical skills, such as the operating of a camera and editing of a video, were developed and honed.

Through this activity, students also provided feedback for and input into the module content, which can be incorporated in the upcoming semester module (or the next year). Lecturers received valuable insights into students' perceptions and interests, which can be directly incorporated or simply inform the lecturers' teaching.

Challenges

Access to the necessary technology was a bit of an obstacle for some students and this influenced their enthusiasm in completing the activity and the quality of the product. Although the classrooms are equipped with desktop computers that have video and podcasting equipment, students had never used them or created their own videos or podcasts and did not have the necessary skill set to complete the activity with ease. In this module, the lecturer, who is an avid vlogger and is technologically capable, could jump in and assist where necessary.

Advice

Lecturers would do well to provide some gold standard examples. One should ideally spell out the expectations and the assessment criteria (in the form of a rubric) and give some clear guidance and advice about the video medium. A few 'worst case' examples (poorly produced, a weak narrative, simply reading a PowerPoint presentation etc) could also serve as a valuable teaching tool.

It is important to identify someone who has some technical skill and can be available to assist students with different creation aspects (recording a video, writing a script, dealing with audio, helping with basic editing, exporting a video etc). This could be either a blended learning coordinator or a capable tutor. Such a person should not only help the students to learn the skill and not to be put off by the technical requirements, but should also ensure that the video quality and the possible success of the activity is higher.