



2019 ATFE Biennium

**CONTEXTUAL EDUCATION AS
THEOLOGICAL ACTION
RESEARCH**

Dan Rhodes

Association of Theological Field Educators
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Contextual Education as Theological Action Research

This session will engage theological action research (TAR) as a promising and emerging model for ministry education during this time of significant shifts in the profession. As an orientation toward inquiry that is community-based, collaborative, and aimed to generate practical knowledge, TAR is interdisciplinary and seeks to bring theological tradition into dialogue with indigenous knowledge for the purpose of fostering rich collective discernment and action that promotes the flourishing of our communities. A description of the implementation of this model is also offered.

Intro:

Hope is:

- to introduce you to Theological Action Research
- to offer an explanation of how it works and why I think it offers a promising orientation to Contextual Education in ministry
- to describe how we've begun to implement it at LUC/IPS as well as provide some examples for its exciting possibilities
- to name the challenges we've encountered
- to get you thinking on how you might engage it where you are and with your students

I. Action Research

- a. Begin with an introduction to Action Research—gained some prominence in disciplines of education, anthropology, and sociology as well as other sub or associated social sciences. It can pass under other names—Community Based Participatory Research or Socially critical action research or, less formally, social research facilitation.
 - A. The Sage Handbook of Action Research defines action research as “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in

participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.”

- B. A better definition, I think, is offered by Romand Coles—who has pioneered it as a form of democratic education at Northern Arizona and Catholic U in Sydney, AS and introduced me to the process and has been instrumental in coaching me through how to think about and begin to build out the curriculum I’ll describe later. According to him, “Action research is a relational approach to generating knowledge, practices, communications, and powers necessary to respond effectively to challenges like [the neoliberalization of education and life—and we might add ministry] and countless others. When done well it is NOT a form of what commonly flies under the rubric of ‘service learning’ *for* communities, but rather a form of deep democratic engagement *with* communities. It is not a practice of ‘applying’ academic knowledge, but rather of bringing various kinds of academic knowledge into dialogue with various kinds of knowledge in broader communities and listening well, to produce new forms of knowledge and practice that greatly exceed the sum of their parts.”

- C. It seeks to knit action with research accompanied by regular intentional reflection as a way of generating knowledge that is both close to the ground and readily pertinent but also well-informed.

- D. So to reiterate and highlight some of the key characteristics of AR:
 - 1. Brings academic and local knowledges together in dialogical, democratic mode of knowledge production aimed at addressing real needs.
 - 2. It is intensely participatory rather than merely engaged in application or doing for.
 - 3. Requires attentive listening practices but also collaborative leadership practices.
 - 4. Involves formation and ethical development within the process of learning, research, and collective engagement because it sees these as a social process.

5. It's aim is collective discernment and co-creative problem solving so as strengthen community decision-making and self-determination as well as to deepen and expand the community's knowledge particularly as it confront emerging problems.

E. The roots are, of course, in Paulo Friere's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and the Catholic Social Action movements associated with Latin American liberation theology (we'll come back to this). It also draws off of theorists and practitioners in radical democracy, community organizing, and activist qualitative research methodologies. But this is to already suggest that there is a certain transformational nature to this mode of inquiry itself—one that increases the political and social power of those involved but for the purpose of collective wisdom, action, and betterment and not merely for individual advantage.

II. Theological Action Research

a. Definition

A. If action research is a relational approach to generating knowledge that brings academic knowledge into conversation with local forms of knowledge in textured, collaborative inquiry as a way of addressing pressing issues and questions, then Theological action research ups the ante on this as a way of bridging formal theological education with congregations and communities in their shared pursuit of knowing God and in discerning what it means to be faithful in their locations and amid the issues they face. The aim here is to engage in dynamic forms of co-learning through the creation of social learning systems that invite participation, are deeply relational, and engage in collective theological discernment.

B. Theological action research then refers to a process of learning that draws off of tradition and its repertoire of shared practices as well as theological teaching but puts them in a communal mode of inquiry characterized by collective analysis and investigation to develop a shared theological vision of what faithfulness means in this situation. At the same time, it allows for a deeper understanding of who God *is* to emerge.

- C. Side note: I don't mean to say here that theology asserts itself as some kind of queen of the sciences, but to say that it does engage them more like a yeast—a deep interaction with them, interrogating and gleaning from them, in a way that simultaneously transfigures them.

- b. Situating it with CE

- A. For many years there has been at least some recognition of the importance of including some “practical” aspect into the training of ministers. For the most part this has taken the form of some kind of “field education” requirement mandated for accreditation. As we all know and have expressed our frustration at this situation, this element has frequently remained rather segregated from (or even external in many ways to) the core theological curriculum. Students have tended to see it as something added on to their studies rather than something integrally intertwined and intercalated with the other moments of their education.

Maybe we should even admit that we've played an unknowing role in reifying this situation through the structure of our programs and course assignments. For I would suggest that even the use of case studies can be easily accommodated into this structure, wherein Field ed or contextual ed takes on the form of CPE and tends to stress more the individual disposition and personality of the student as a practice of “processing” themselves and their situation rather than a more robust sense that there is the possibility for real theological and therefore ecclesial, anthropological, ethical, social, political, and active knowledge to be gained and practiced.

- B. At other times, field ed has pitched itself as application—or as I will say, mere application. The idea is that this is where you test theological precepts and see how you might put them into practice or navigate the frustrations of untrained people who can't seem to get it right. Theological Action research resists a sense that field education is merely the application of true theological knowledge ascertained in one's systematic, theoretical, or scriptural courses. Such a view only can continue to reproduce the crude separation of disciplines in our

educational institutions. We should also say that it will only mal-form our students for ministry too, as no pastorate could be simply the application of information learned in reading or listening to someone lecture.

- C. Not simply experiential—additionally, Theological Action Research as a mode of learning resists being equated with mere experience. While it certainly does offer a chance to enter into many practices and roles and even to find some familiarity within these, as I've already mentioned it is not reducible to some kind of pragmatic enterprise disconnected from deeper considerations of how prevailing structures and issues might need to be collectively addressed or changed.
- D. Not just service learning—third, it also resists being packaged into notions of service learning, aimed at offering their abilities to needy and dependent communities while providing students with a chance to exhibit their talents or display the relevance of their pre-constructed interests.
- E. Landscape of ministry—**need** for TAR.

While it may have been possible to get away with more disintegrated forms of CE in the past—the shifting landscape of ministry, I think, makes this even less helpful today.

Given the decline of churches, the changes in the nature of the pastorate, the erosion of denominations as well as the multiple other socio-economic and political shifts around us, our students are no longer being trained for what will be prefabricated roles in the “profession.”

It seems, instead, that not only will they need to learn to minister, but they will more than likely have to learn how to create the places they will minister in the future. They will have to create or rehabilitate the communities in which they are called to serve, not simply show up to be their pastor. And this requires a whole host of new sensitivities, skills, and resources as well as practical wisdom and even political savvy we have not typically

taken the theological school to be responsible for inculcating.

Additionally, we notice that quite the majority of our ministries, parishes, and service or mission organizations seem stuck. In general, while there is a great desire and even sense of urgency around renewal or revitalization, we remain at a bit of a loss as to how to do this. There's no clear path of how to move forward and no shared sense of how we might even commence upon attempting this.

I don't want to paint theological action research as some kind of panacea, but I think as a mode of education it does better prepare students to enter into these kinds of contexts.

F. Seminary as Social project (Also one of the toughest challenges)

Indeed, part of the current crisis in our congregations and ministries is that pedagogy in church has unfortunately patterned itself off of the pedagogy of our theological schools.

Which one of us can't identify with this kid? (IMAGE)

One of the major reasons we are stuck is because, we're not generating dynamic, social learning systems—and this is where Theological Action Research Teams can come in.

Where seminary has in the past been configured around the presumption that education occurs in the transfer of informational knowledge from an individual to other individuals in a formalized, isolating, and separate classroom space, it has not moved to incorporate more participatory and socially embedded forms of education, even some 50yrs after Freire outlined these for us. (And I think why we see such educational energy and transformational power in the kind of base-communities

Friere's work helped launch—something we seem unable to generate in our current educational modes).

Churches have merely followed suit, seeing their own catechetical formation or initiating educational components as formalized units of informational instruction banked by new or developing members in isolated distance from their lives. They have been happy to continue as Sunday schools instead of becoming Highlander Folk schools.

To follow some of the current movements in Theological education more intentionally, then, in order to begin to recover the seminary or theological school as a social project is, I think, essential and really what's at the root of TARTs.

- G. Here we can begin to envision the discipline itself anew. Between either blueprint or overly theoretical and contemplative modes of theology or even current trends toward ethnographic approaches to theology, TARTs allows us to understand theology as social activity: It is, as one colleague has put it, to enter intentionally into a collaborative process of **ETH-O-GRAPHY**¹ or, the collective construction of an ethic among a community of people as they actively engage and address the social, political, theological challenges they face so as to allow their way of life to become more fully shaped by the identity of God. The church is not an academic—practical or systematic—body but a living body when best engaged in an ongoing act of social learning. While drawing off of both of these—TARTs tends to decenter the role of the academic or professional in a mode of radically democratic production of knowledge that forms the community at the same time.

- H. Jesuit Contemplation in Action—TARTs

There is, for us, a happy connection between this approach and our own institutional identity and heritage. As a Catholic Jesuit institution, the TARTs program we're constructing draws off of

¹ Thanks to Lia Haro who introduced me to this term and way of understanding action research work.

Ignatian Spirituality to understand as, the Irish Jesuit David Coghlan says it, that God is active, creating, and busy in the world. Following God, then, we seek “to act as God acts” positioning us to see a strong link between prayer and action. Hence, we take TARTs as a real embodiment of “contemplation in action” as a rhythm of deep reflection and prayer with that of thick participation and collective practice. Hence, as Coghlan states, “For Christians formed in the Ignatian tradition, the reflection in question here is an inquiry into how God is at work in their lives and in the world, and into how God might shape appropriate responses and reactions for here and now” (Coghlan 2004, 101). Such allows for a process of theological inquiry that involves all three audiences for research: first person, second person, and third person audiences. To quote Coghlan again, “In its essence the Ignatian approach to spirituality views God as one who is active in the world and who invites individuals and communities, a) to seek and find God in the experience of their own lives and of the world and b) to respond in action” (Coghlan 2005, 95).

As a place-based, participatory and relational, and attentive mode of inquiry, TARTs is an extension of Ignatian Spirituality into a form of social learning system. Learning is a collective practice, making education itself a mode of ministry.

- i. Key here is to see that TARTs moves to get us unstuck in our theological education and in the communities we inhabit. To return to the notion of the church as a social project by recovering the idea of the seminary as a social project.

III. The Vehicle for Building Communities of Practice

- A. The stuck reality of our institutions and ministries I described earlier requires a catalyst, or vehicle, for the activity of generating new learning and co-creative learning arrangements. Active learning arrangements are key because on a most basic level learning is a social activity. To learn is to be involved in a social process, because sociality is a fundamental reality of human life. That is to say, we seem to have lost a sense that learning comes through participation in a social process, such that, as Etienne Wenger says, “being active in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to

these communities” is really the essence of dynamic learning. It is also key I think to reinfusing and reinventing ministry.

B. The key to creating such social learning systems are **communities of practice**. And these can be the social learning arrangements capable of jumpstarting the kinds of collective learning initiatives in our communities so necessary to revitalizing them and to the nature of ministry itself. Involving the creation of thick relational webs, practices of deep receptivity and improvisation, CoPs allow for organized collective inquiry that is capable of learning with the unexpected and capitalizing on surprises while incorporating accountability and patience. They can be the “smart flexible platforms” that allow for the kind of “serendipitous sagacity” outlined by Jean Paul Lederach necessary for moving beyond intransigent situations.

C. What is a community of practice?

CoPs are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. (Wenger, *Cultivating*, 4). CoPs are human communities engaged in a shared, mutual enterprise which shapes their relationship to one another and to the world. It is based in a constellation of constitutive core practices, established over time and integral to this collective enterprise and the social relations attendant to it so as to sustain it as a prolonged endeavor. Thus, as Wenger describes them, a CoP is a community 1). Organized in pursuit of a joint enterprise, 2). Involved in mutual engagement, and 3). Who share a repertoire of practices, stories, concepts, actions, discourses, and history.

These groups are both flexible and yet stable enough to fit with the living nature of knowledge. Inviting participation while at the same encouraging reification, they effectively balance identity formation with the incorporation of new members and new learning. Moreover, their structure allows for deep commitment and relational connection in the process of knowledge production. CoPs can be catalysts for just such rich, educational and participatory experiences capable of reshaping ministry and engaging in social change. By tapping CoPs we

can begin to move beyond unproductive, stuck modes of traditional learning as information transformation to more promising “inventive ways of engaging students in meaningful practices, of providing access to resources that enhance their participation, or opening their horizons so that can put themselves on learning trajectories they can identify with, and of involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities they value.” A true renovation of our parishes, communities, and institutions may result from just such a redesign of learning.

D. To teach collaborative, co-creative ministry requires engaging in collaborative, co-creative curriculum development—exactly what CE should be helping our students learn how to do and to envision. As such a culture grows and spreads it can gather momentum through the kinds of positive feedback loops it can generate as others catch the bug and begin to learn to envision possibilities where they once saw only limitations.

E. Examples—

1. New within shell of old—parish:

One of our students is working within the rather mundane area of parish life in Milwaukee to attempt to organize a team for taking Eucharist to homebound parishioners. Gathering the team and working together to even do such a simple task, however, she reports has shifted her own view of the Eucharist and has begun to infect others with this similar renewed appreciation. She reports, she is learning to see how the Eucharist ministers to those she serves, giving strength to the weak and a deep sense of restoration and community to those who often experience loneliness and isolation. This may seem rather mundane, but such a recovery of the power of sharing in the Eucharist, she notes, is beginning to make itself felt among her team, rippling outward.

2. Encountering needs of world—Dean and Charles

Two of our MA spirituality students are working together on a TART project on the west side of the city in a middle-school to do restorative justice, spiritual direction, and intervention with at-risk boys. Working

with boys in the 5th through the 8th grades once a week, they are employing the skills of spiritual direction, restorative practices (based on restorative justice) and trauma-informed intervention. As they report, “Over the course of these few months we have worked ourselves into the fabric of the community of students, faculty and staff; creating a careful relationship of safety and trust... We are helping support the Higgins community through Restorative Practices that embrace both Character Education and Self-Esteem Team Building.” As they continue to bring the students in on this work and allow them to lead, they are learning to grapple with these students with the realities of violence in their community and to discover how spiritual growth and interpersonal repair can counter such a conditions.

3. At the nexus of multi-membership and complicated, overlapping endeavors

Finally, one of our students is working with a community health agency called Proviso Partners for Health (PP4H) to focus on the issue of racial health disparities. As the focus of her TARTs project she began working with PP4H’s Design Team, but quickly realized that each of the members of this sequestered team had its own idea of what the issue of racism really was. So, she has been leading them through a process of engaging more with the community to listen and learn. As she reports, “What we realized was that we couldn’t base [the anticipated area of racism] on our own opinions alone and needed to get a pulse on the community to find out their feelings and views.” She also distributed self-assessments to 3rd year med students in Loyola’s med school in their patient-centered medicine course to gain insight on their understanding and sensitivity to the issue. Following up on their listening, she’s now leading the team to develop a qualitative measurement tool that will help them with the community generate further learning on how to engage this problem.

As she reports, “It has provoked Theological learning for me and those involved to show how we can move from brokenness from the negative stories in all of

our personal lives that we may have thought defined us and be able to move to a place of healing.” As she summarizes, “We are learning to build a bridge of racial reconciliation & righteousness by bringing community together with the presence of hope and love.”

These TAR projects are only in their nascent stages but the students are beginning to see the possibilities opening up before them and learning along the way how to work within a community what faithfulness means where they are. Again, it’s not just that the students engage in such ministries, but also that they are learning how to organize, launch, and lead them as well.

IV. IPS/LUC Theological Action Research

- a. I want to show you now how we’ve constructed the course in order to facilitate TARTs as well as to mention at the end some of the challenges we face and are trying to work through.
- b. To begin, as I mentioned earlier, I’ve designed the CE course to follow the rhythm of Contemplation in action, drawing off our Ignatian heritage and as a basic mode for Theological Action research. So there are two main units: contemplation and action—within which there is a regular repetition of action and reflection. The idea is that they practice and learn to embody this disposition.
- c. Prior to the course, we engage them in preparation. As part of this preparation, I introduce them to Theological Action Research and provide them with some literature to read on it. We also get them to write a vocational narrative along with brief statement on how their own vocational identity connects and participates in the work of God—*missio Dei*. Additionally, we ask them to develop learning goals for themselves while guiding them through a search for internship sites where they can engage in TARTs. Finally, we have them sketch out a draft of the TARTs project they anticipate pursuing there while they are working with their site supervisor to finalize the details of their position.
- d. Having done the prep, we can look at the details of the course and curriculum we run with them—recognizing that it is still a work in progress. We have recently stretched our CE requirement from one semester to the entire year, though it has remained a 3 credit hour course, consisting of 250 total hours of site work. It is organized into

4 movements or subunits: Oratio (Prayer); Lectio (Reading); Iudicium (Discernment); and Opus (work)—Prayer and Reading falling in the Contemplation Unit and Discernment and Work falling in the Action unit. The structure of the course then follows a rhythm of workshops and reflection with asynchronous teaching units plotted in along the way. So the course has the feel of being multidimensional, allowing for some instruction, a good bit of engaged—workshop style learning, and consistent, ongoing self and group reflection.

e. Here is a list of some of the workshops and teaching components:

	Teaching/ Instruction Components	Workshop Components	Huddle/ Coaching Sessions
Unit 1: Contemplation	1). Ecology of Ministry 2). Landscape of Ministry		
A). Oratio (Prayer as Paying Attention			First Huddle
	Understanding the Enneagram	Take Enneagram/ Self-Inventory	
			Second Huddle
	Building Relational Culture	One to ones Listening Sessions	
			Third Huddle
B). Lectio (Reading as Interpretation and Cultivating Sensitivity	Understanding History to see the Future	Organizational Timelining	
			Fourth Huddle
	Creating a Community of Practice for TARTs		
			Fifth Huddle
	1). Family Systems 2) Cultural Analysis	Power Analysis	
			Sixth Huddle
Unit 2: Action			
A). Iudicium (Discerning Gifts and Making Community Decisions)	1). Cultivating Leaders—From Volunteers to Leaders 2). Chaordic Leadership	Asset Mapping	

			Seventh Huddle
	1). Conflict Resolution and Discernment 2). Storytelling to Cross Divides	Conflict Resolution	
			Eighth Huddle
B). Opus (Work as the Service of Mission)	Learning from Failure	Prototyping for Ministerial Innovation	
			Ninth Huddle
TARTs Symposium and Celebration			

f. Hopes going forward

My hope is that we are able to begin to build a tradition of theological action research at IPS such that students will be able to build off of the work of prior student and that we, as a school, will be able to deepen our footprint in the Chicagoland area. I also hope that this process continues to inspire students to take some risks and to think about the kinds of new and creative ministries we are going to need in the future—from my examples above I think you can see some of the possibilities this generates. Overall though, my hope is that students will learn how to cultivate participatory learning communities capable of engaging with communities themselves in identifying and addressing the issues they face. And to do this with a theological bent that spurs the community and them to go deeper.

V. Challenges of admin and shift in school/student

Now, of course, there are some huge challenges we have faced and continue to face.

1). Time design (Help of grant) and resources

The first challenge has been the basic challenge of finding (or fighting for) the time and resources to develop and construct this framework. Like other forms of qualitative research and community building, TARTs takes time to do—it takes time to build local partnerships, to prepare students, to design workshops and teaching units, to manage student issues, and to administrate the transition. We’ve had the benefit of an ATS grant to do some of this, which allowed me to travel to research other places doing similar things, conduct a faculty retreat on TARTs, research and read, design elements of the class, etc. It’s critical to get the administration to see the vision for this kind of

curriculum. But that also leads me to the next challenge—one I've not been able to completely crack.

2). Administrative challenge and imagination (faculty investment)

It's been very difficult getting my dean to catch the vision of TARTs in a way that stretches beyond simply—this is something Dan does as a kind of trend in his research/teaching. To that extent, my attempts to integrate and infuse TARTs throughout our curriculum have been somewhat thwarted. Some of these are do to legitimate concerns over how TARTs style courses would fit with teaching load expectations, whether faculty would be expected to do them, etc. But some of them, to be honest, I think come from an administrative fear to engage in the new—to try something new and to live with the chaos that TARTs education can produce. Indeed, faculty at my institution have seemed to be rather inclined to engage in TARTs but we've struggled to really build out a faculty community of practice—so important for this—because our admin has not been fully on board. At present, given this situation, I'm working with other departments in my university to develop a faculty community of practice in the hopes of getting around this challenge a bit. Yet it remains, and I'd expect you to encounter similar hurdles should you attempt to move in this direction.

3). Chaotic nature of TARTs (I dread and love it at the same time☺)

Now, admittedly, I can understand where my administration is coming from to some extent. TARTs is kind of chaotic by nature. And I always really love a dread doing it with students at the same time. Some students will be frustrated and will fail. Some projects will just never get off the ground. Some will be diverted or sabotaged by unforeseen issues or developments. Workshops are not the easiest to teach and there's a level of constant communication necessary as students attempt to shift into this mode of engagement. It can frequently feel like you're not entirely in control, which conjures up all kinds of fears about course evaluations, assessments, not to mention one's own expertise in these kinds of endeavors. I've felt always over my head and like I'm kind of feeling my way forward.... But I also know, because I worked as a minister and in community organizing for nearly a decade that this is a lot like what ministry feels like these days. Here we are simply trying to create an incubator for students to learn how to face those situations with a sense of how to constructively and actively engage them as opposed to being

frustrated, distraught, and eventually defeated by them. We continue to face the challenge of building a stronger tolerance for complexity and chaos.

4). That said, not every student will get it. Some will completely miss it and/or fail miserably. But starting something new has to allow for failure. Failure can be a place for all of us to learn even as it doesn't make it easy. Moreover, there's a degree of effort and grit required in TARTs—even as this, when done well, is not something one does alone. But because students have generally come to see education as a chore, they bring this predisposition to CE. This means at first they are very annoyed that they may have to engage all of their human faculties for creativity, relationship building, investigation, and collaboration for CE. Encouraging them to see possibilities instead of simply the “extra work” is always challenging. One way I'm working to meet this challenge is with the end of the year TARTs celebration symposium, where students present their work to their colleagues and we host a party to celebrate the work they've done. I'm hoping this will both begin to instill a culture of TARTs while also rendering it in a positive light.

5). Another new issue or challenge has been learning to balance the online move in education with the kind of intense relational aspect of TARTs. I'm still trying to work this out more and would love any suggestions on how folks are doing this. Zoom technology has made this better but I'm still not exactly satisfied and wonder at times how much is lost amid the gains of using online technologies.

6). Finally, there remains the overall challenge of negotiating if it's worth it. I guess this is where I'm hoping we all might help each other, because alone against these challenges it at times seems like it would be easier to just go with the flow and do something less involved. Yet, I think, as I assume this sympathetic ground does, that shifting the paradigm of theological education in this way is absolutely essential to the future of our communities and our ministries. It's not going to be easy to convince the guild to move in this direction but as they say, nothing worth doing is easy. Yet it would be helpful to have a community that helps to sustain the effort in the face of the challenges.