

Open Theological Education: Borderless Pedagogy

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Abstract

Is open theological education reducing barriers and increasing access to theological training? Has the use of digital technologies in accessing theological training deviated from or complied with the training criteria? This paper highlights the seminarians' borderless access to theological education and its benefits. Several persons frowned on open education a few years ago, but from March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen many institutions adopting e-learning. Is it a wake-up call for theological education? The study discovered that theological education without barriers enhances theological training, research writing, scholarship, and academic honesty. The accreditation criteria for open theological learning does not alter contents but ensures that the greater populace can access a high standard of delivery of theological training equal to the on-campus programmes.

1.0 Introduction

Studying from home to acquire theological training has been debated in several presentations among colleague pastors, leaders, and scholars. I was motivated to reflect on this theologically by submitting this work to Academia Letters as an article on September 8, 2021. It was peer-reviewed and accepted by four scholars on September 10, 2021. Over one hundred more academics joined the initial publication discussion. The contributions of some of these academics are included in this reviewed paper. Lyndon Gorle, on September 10, 2021, commented, "This paper addresses a pertinent issue - the legitimacy of e-learning, specifically in the academic discipline of Theology." Emmanuel Sarbah responded on September 11, 2021,

“I will describe this paper as an excellent piece. In times like these (Covid-19 pandemics), a theological education without borders is apt.” Similarly, Tettey endorsed this view:

”This article is relevant for our day when rapid change pushes our theological skills-set to the margins. A rethink of theological education is imperative for Africa. I think this article invites scholars to join this debate.” [S. F. K Tettey, September 10, 2021].

These positive feedbacks stimulated me to revise this paper. My perspective is if education is the basis of national progress and empowerment, why should theological education be restricted to on-campus training? Can we rethink the mode of theological learning to enable as many people as possible to take advantage of this affordable, convenient, and relevant theological educational opportunity in their endeavours?

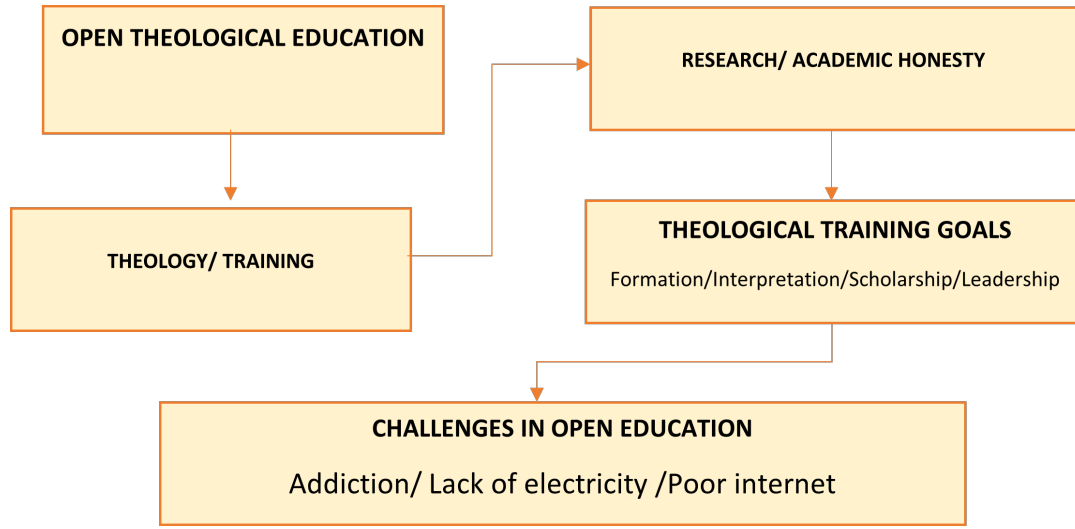
In the past, biblical history records the home and the extended family as the foundation for child education. Children’s progress and talent development were the absolute obligations of parents (Malherbe 2019:1). The traditional form of education spearheaded the advancement of nations, instruction, and humanity in general. However, this preferred face-to-face learning opportunity has, to some extent, limited the institutions geographically to specific communities, depriving other parties of the “population” of accessing education (Ossiannilsson, Altinay & Altinay 2016:163). In a dialogue with Renshaw, he echoed,

“My concern is with the method in theology. It is a theological task to formulate the gospel tradition for our contemporary culture. So, the goal is not so much to have the students think like Jesus but rather to think critically like members of our contemporary culture who can critique our culture and express the Christian life, challenges and message in ways that respond to their questions.” [Renshaw Richard, September 10, 2021].

Renshaw advocates pedagogical discourse on open education to build seminarians capable of discernment through systemic and analytical skills. If so, this presentation will consider some elements in open theological education, such as theology, training, research, academic honesty, and the goal of theological education.

Figure 1

Framework for open theological education



The framework for Open Theological Education

2.0 Open Education

Over the years, the means of teaching and learning has undergone tremendous transformation due to improved “digitisation.” Education is reachable in a split second because of continuous innovative and “open” education (Ossiannilsson et al., 2016:161). Malherbe (2019:9) supports the idea that the judicious use of digital technology has been the instrument of scholarship for theology and the world of knowledge in recent times. The Open Education Consortium, 2016 explains that virtual education achieves educational targets using “digital technologies” to make learning within the reach of the highest population possible (cited in Ossiannilsson et al., 2016:161). It aids the complex process of “learning” and “knowledge” distribution using various platforms to render formal and non-formal education accessible. From the definition, learning becomes readily available to the majority via digitalisation in which different “routes” are used to share information and build skills for transformation. Open education brings learning closer to a more significant population globally. It hosts limitless numbers of students at a time and is more interactive (Kipimo 2019:5). Another respondent, Musa K Xulu, confirmed that,

”open education reaches more people than in-person education.”

Perhaps Kanwar, Kodhandaraman, and Umar (2010:9) were right in insisting that institutions should develop an ICT policy to sustain digitalisation to promote the use of Open Education Resources.

3.0 Theological Training

One respondent, Anita Dailey, could not agree more strongly to open education and added, “to me e-learning has definitely reached a lot of people especially during this Covid-19. I believe it will continue to reach more and more people and that it is truly here to stay. If open education goes beyond borders, I will discuss theology, training and research writings and academic honesty.”

3.1 Theology

Smith (2013:17) asserts that all Christian leaders practise theology in one way or another each day. Invariably, a Christian leader does theology every day, and the Christian is “a theologian” for either a good or bad reason. If so, then the Christian leader has no option other than to be active in theology (ibid., 17, 148).

In response to doing theology, two crucial questions, “what” and “how,” are pursued responses; they include: What are our obligations, and how are we to “live”? (ibid., 33). Knowing what to do and how to do it is a way to survive in theology. How then can this mission of theology be achieved? One can attest to the fact that offering the believer sound biblical instruction or training is ideal, while limiting the candidates by distance is a disservice.

3.2 Training

Open education makes training accessible to the majority regardless of location. God’s people require direction vis-à-vis the do’s and how to live in the do’s of life to reflect “God’s nature, will, and purposes.” Stott and Wyatt (2006:24) argue that Jesus had a dual ministry. He preached and cared for the people. Jesus’ ministry was all-inclusive; it maintained the soul, body, and spirit in his public ministry as he went about teaching and preaching (Matt. 4:23; 9:35, NIV). Therefore, the Church has kept the tradition of equipping its leaders in accredited seminaries regardless of location. Smith (2008b:145) classifies this instructional period as theological training. The seminarian models, practises, and lives with integrity to depict a Christ-like attitude through the training. In this direction, Kipimo (2019:5) alluded to the fact that every PhD candidate is expected to undertake a thesis to add innovative ideas or improve a current body of knowledge. Thus, training through research has sustained scholarship. As a result, theological education is beneficial for the continuity and advancement of the Kingdom of God. There is a need for both facilitators and trainees to be observant and adhere to the laid-down principles regarding academic honesty in their research writings. The open learning platforms make this process easy.

3.3 Research

Open education gives easy access to e-library and other academic platforms, such as EBSCOhost, JSTOR, ResearchGate, Springer, Scopus, Academia.edu, Google Scholar, SAGE, Brill, Elsevier, Scribd, and the Taylor & Francis Group that serve as the basis for scientific research. Smith (2008b:116) maintains that “all truth is God’s truth”, whether biblically proven or scientifically authenticated. This implies that irrespective of what has been sealed, day by day, actions are taken to uncover such complications in life and must not be limited by distance. According to Kipimo (2019:1-2), scientific research writings are based on three fundamental scopes of knowledge: “ordinary, scientific, and metascientific knowledge.” Ordinary knowledge is where everyday challenges faced by humanity are solved with the “lay” application of a basic understanding of the issue and devising means of solving it.

On the other hand, scientific research has to do with how knowledge is used to investigate identified “problems” in daily “contexts.” Kipimo (2019:3, 5-6) further argues that metascientific research is the uppermost “level” of study in which innovative discoveries are made through “critical” analysis. This type of research aims at producing new modules, theories, and methodologies substantial to other educational “fields” (ibid., 5-6). One needs to show originality in one’s presentations, which the virtual system detects immediately after submission. Nagi and John (2020:1, 6) and Smith (2008a:73) emphasise that dishonesty affects academic work, and “stealing” is a “breach of trust,” leading to several penalties, including revoking certification.

3.4 Academic Honesty

Open education has several ways of identifying plagiarised work (Nagi & John 2020:6). The integrity of the student is evident in the presentation of assignments, classwork or thesis writing. Fish and Hura (2013:35) classify the situation where “another author’s work” is used without given credit as plagiarism. Smith (2008a:73) believes that in academic work, being disobedient is an apparent “deception,” whereas one’s ignorance is “carelessness.” The warning is that no number of words can be used to explain a plagiarised work. Plagiarism is not justifiable. Failing to acknowledge works consulted is intellectual theft (cf. Nagi & John, 2020:1-6).

Nonetheless, the plan of theological education aims at a “holistic” development where new leaders with “new knowledge” are produced to assimilate diverse perceptions in a single discipline. Smith (2013:149) confirms that by so doing, the people in the community will be enhanced and equipped with original and advanced “knowledge” of Christ, His will and passion.

4.0 The Goal of Open Theological Training

Every institution aims to reach its expected goal. The open theological institution is no exception; its principles, when followed, model the trainees to transform society. Malherbe (2019:10) observes that whenever a student fails to apply what was studied, it is a misused “opportunity”. The central aim of religious training is character formation, leadership, interpretation, and scholarship delivered face-to-face or via virtual. The discussions below justify that learning from home harmonises the overall aim of the theological training.

4.1 First, *Character Formation*

The Oxford Advanced American Dictionary (1994) defines character as the “qualities and features” making up an individual, a group and locations divergent to one another. The features that differentiate how an individual feels and responds to the environment are termed a character, and how such traits are developed is character formation. In response to my work, Wright Doyle, a theologian, said,

“My only question - and it is a major one - is whether online education can substitute for in-person interaction, especially in character formation and ministry training.” [— Wright Doyle, September 10, 2021].

Though Doyle does not oppose open education, he is concerned about “character formation” for the *Missio Dei* via “open theological education”. Malherbe (2019:1) postulates that “knowledge and truth” given by the power of the Holy Spirit is a “revelation.” This indicates that knowledge is possessed when triggered by an upper force that tends to release it. In this case, the Holy Spirit aids in the understanding of Scripture, whereas seminary education purports to make an in-depth study, critique, analysis, and application of Scripture. Is it not possible that the Holy Spirit can help character formation remotely? In a dialogue on Academia.edu, Bryant advocates insights into the process of Christian formation, Christian education, and theological education in general. He said,

“For a unique contribution to our theology and practice, I would be most interested in how the Holy Spirit works through various pedagogies, especially through online deliveries” [— Wray Bryant, September 11, 2021].

Bryant could be right about recommending that the prominent role of the Holy Spirit in the pedagogies of open theological education should not be overlooked. This assertion brings

another debate into the theological setting; how the Holy Spirit is instrumental in character formation.

The open theological seminary provides the basis for practical development. With regard to an institution's accreditation mandate, an e-learning theological institution is requested to enhance efficient and sound academic work, which the seminarians are to observe to enable them to graduate. As a result, characters are moulded, and leadership skills are built.

4.2 Second, *Leadership*

Smith (2008b:149) believes that as the seminary nurtures Christ-like graduates, the beneficiary, on the other hand, is expected to disciple their community (cf. Bekker, 2009:7). In a similar vein, Malherbe (2019:10) reasons that theological training focuses on equipping seminarians "to serve others." The empowered transformational leaders are expected to lead the body of Christ in the four focal areas of theological training, namely, interpretation, evaluation, discussion, and comparison. Theology aims to produce genuine Christian leaders and capacity builders to fulfil Christ's mission, and it does not matter the mode of learning. It is about one's character and ability to make followers (cf. Bekker, 2009:7; Malherbe, 2019:10).

4.3 Third, *Interpretation*

Sound theology "interprets" Scripture with Christ as the centre, known as "hermeneutical." Pepler (2012:120) maintained that all scriptures should be 'interpreted' based on what Jesus said, did and revealed. Theology calls for an atmosphere to "discuss" the content of God's word, thereby making it "dialogical." It "compares" and contracts the message of God, therefore making theology "correlational" (Smith, 2013:44-45). The prime objective of theological education is to "equip thinking practitioners" and real intellectuals to convey God's word. Theology brings out the inner thoughts of a person to use the word of God in practical terms, "evaluate," and assess in a "critical" manner (ibid., 148). Can we not achieve this skill in interpretation through virtual learning?

4.4 Fourth, *Scholarship*

A reflective research work brings variety in the outcomes of students' work since it is thematic of the individual candidate's expertise rather than the "intentional" where specific subjects are taught to students (Smith, 2013:151). The supervised scientific research conducted in the seminaries is published in academic journals for universal use, with copies kept in the e-library for reference. They add to the body of knowledge in academia. Apart from character

development, theologians with diverse expertise are produced to fill the gap with scientific research, and this is fulfilled with ease through e-learning.

5.0 Challenges of Open Theological Training

In as much the respondents welcomed the idea of flexible access to theological training, a few raised concerns about the challenges that come with it. In a discussion, Chanza maintained that,

”Open education will depend on the internet, electricity, and technological devices. He questioned, “How can someone in a remote place where there is no internet access benefit?” [— Victor wj Chanza, September 11, 2021].

This comment explains that in places where trainees do not have access to the internet, they are denied the opportunity of open education. Another respondent, Anthony Ichuloi, who was enthused by the discussion, thought technology is becoming a “god” that reconstitutes the entire approach to theological studies. Addition, a lack of electricity and poor internet may limit open education.

6.0 Concluding Thoughts /Recommendations

In determining the position of open theological education, I conclude that it breaks down barriers and supplements on-campus training programmes. Open theological education comes as a blessing to theological education. Today, several on-campus institutions have their “lecture notes online for free” access, as Kanwar, Kodhandaraman and Umar (2010:3) presented. This study concludes that through open education delivery, 1) thousands of Christians, leaders, pastors, and theologians worldwide can access theological education while carrying out other vital responsibilities at their places of residence. 2) Character formation is assured, and trainees’ hermeneutical skills are enhanced as they adhere to the ethics of their studies. 3) More theologians are produced, bringing more scholars and scholarly publications into the academic sphere. 4) The seminarians are at liberty to learn at their own pace and to deliver the life and passion of Jesus Christ correctly. The process of receiving and giving theological instruction should consider open access alongside face-to-face training. Open education trainees observe plagiarism-free work since the institutions’ submission online platforms are set up to check integrity in academic writing. However, it is significant that technological devices, the internet, and electricity must always be available to facilitate this type of training. Therefore, future studies might reconsider, a) hindrances to open theological education;

b) the role of the Holy Spirit within the goals of open theological training; and c) how open education stimulates character formation.

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