
TEACHING AND LEARNING LEADERSHIP AT McCORMICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

DEBORAH KAPP

“We are called to nurture the gifts of women and men for faithful Christian ministry and leadership through rigorous academic study, practical experience, and spiritual formation.” This statement from the mission statement of McCormick Theological Seminary sounds good, but how does it unfold in McCormick’s curriculum? How does McCormick form religious leaders for the 21st century church, a church whose realities are unfolding before our eyes?

One of the interesting developments in educational theory in recent years deals with understanding the three types of curricula that are at work within any teaching and learning process. These include the implicit, explicit, and null curricula.¹ This framework is helpful in reflecting on the teaching and learning of leadership at McCormick Seminary. In this essay, we will first address McCormick’s implicit curriculum, which is the richest, at least in the M.Div. program, and will then explore the explicit and null.

IMPLICIT CURRICULUM

An institution’s implicit curriculum consists of the formational opportunities it affords its students alongside formal educational offerings. The implicit leadership curriculum at McCormick has many facets. These provide role models for religious leadership, involve students in the practice of leadership, and/or equip students with skills essential for the everyday practice of religious leadership.

Role Models

Whether we like it or not, we faculty and administrators are models of religious leadership for our students. Our demeanor, interaction with colleagues, availability (or lack thereof), and levels of commitment to and involvement in the church speak volumes about our deepest understandings of religious leadership. Our actions speak much louder than

¹ Elliot Eisner, *The Educational Imagination* (New York: Macmillan, 1979).

words to students who struggle to define their own sense of appropriate and faithful leadership.

The unspoken content of McCormick's role modeling includes a respectful leadership style, a commitment to inclusiveness, the imparting of a denominational ethos, and faith in God's presence and power in the world. Faculty and administrators respect one another and work together collaboratively at McCormick, with little visible conflict. While such a working style may not equip students well to work in a conflicted environment, it shapes a style of leadership that is kind, respectful, and straightforward.

McCormick also honors and nurtures the leadership capacities of all persons, including people of color and women; this is reflected concretely in the composition of the seminary's leadership. Of the current faculty, 37% are people of color, and 42% are women. McCormick's administrative cabinet (president and vice-presidents) includes two persons of color (40%) and two women, one of whom is McCormick's president. The diversity of McCormick's leadership is an aspect of the implicit curriculum that promotes the inclusion of broad human diversity in the church's leadership.

Only 58% of the faculty is Presbyterian, which also includes a Jewish scholar. However, a Presbyterian ethos pervades at McCormick, and this ethos shapes both its style of governance and its style of involvement. Through its implicit curriculum, McCormick prepares Presbyterian students to function effectively in their denomination. It also raises the consciousness of non-Presbyterian students (approximately half the student body) about their denominational politics and procedures.

Finally, through its implicit curriculum, McCormick imparts trust in God. McCormick understands teaching as ministry, and all its faculty members and administrators share this understanding and commitment. In teaching we serve God. In teaching we trust God. In community we experience the presence and goodness of God. Our faith, stated and unstated, stands behind and informs our work together as a teaching and learning community.

Practice of Leadership

Fortunately, students learn in more ways than one. Not only do they observe and emulate other religious leaders,

many also practice leadership in the course of seminary life. Through involvement in seminary governance, worship planning and leadership, and opportunities to be educational assistants in courses, students find themselves in leadership roles, and they learn by doing.

Acquisition of Essential Skills

One of the things students do all the time at McCormick is interact with people who are different from them. As a seminary committed to education that is at once Reformed, ecumenical, and cross-cultural, McCormick creates multiple situations in which students, faculty, and staff encounter people whose social locations and theological convictions are quite different from their own. In seminary housing, governance, worship, and fellowship McCormick students develop capacities for listening and learning across cultures. They acquire skills in understanding and respecting difference, and they hone their capacity to express their own convictions and perspectives. They make friends with each other. McCormick's implicit curriculum shapes religious leaders who are capable of forging creative relationships and working with ease in diverse social or religious settings.

EXPLICIT CURRICULUM

McCormick's commitment to theological and social cross cultural education is also reflected in its pedagogical approach and its explicit curriculum of teaching and learning. Introductory classes invite students into genuine dialogue and encourage them to move past their stereotypical understandings of one another. The Learning Resource and Writing Center supports students whose first language is not English or who need remedial support, by partnering them with student tutors from different backgrounds. Traveling seminars expose students to new countries and spiritualities. How do these experiences with people from different backgrounds or perspectives shape religious leaders? Such experiences equip McCormick students to do one of the most essential things required of religious leaders today; they collaborate and build partnerships across the barriers that separate people or impede the capacity of the church to be faithful to its calling.

Both the *Parish Revitalization* and *Executive Leadership* D.Min. tracks rely heavily on organizational theory. The authors and books that faculty have used most consistently include Edgar Schein, *Process Consultation: Its Role in Organizational Development*; Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*; Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*. Background resources that have also been particularly helpful are Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Barry Stein, and Todd Jick, *The Challenge of Organizational Change: How Companies Experience it and Leaders Guide It*, and William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. Although it is not precisely grounded in organizational theory, a final resource that faculty frequently use is Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*.

Within the last few years the Harvard Business School Press has published collections of articles from the Harvard Business Review. McCormick faculty members are currently using two of these volumes, *The Harvard Business Review on Leadership* and *The Harvard Business Review on Change*. Each volume offers a spectrum of understandings that introduce students to a variety of authors and approaches. These are useful resources, because they give students a taste of authors whose work they may wish to explore in more detail.

In the required courses in the *Parish Revitalization* and *Executive Leadership* tracks, readings about congregations, social context, North American Protestantism, and church leadership supplement the organizational theory. In the latter category, faculty regularly assign Jackson Carroll, *As One With Authority*; Thomas Hawkins, *The Learning Congregation*; Kirk Hadaway, *Behold, I Do a New Thing*; Robert Worley, *A Gathering of Strangers*; and Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*.

Although several books are frequently used, the D.Min. faculty regularly update their courses and utilize new books. Thus, the books that surround the basic readings change from course to course.

Over the years, McCormick has added new D.Min. tracks to its basic offerings, all of which focus on congregational leadership, but which make use of foundational theory other

Leadership Courses

A few courses that directly address issues of leadership are incorporated in the masters' level curriculum at McCormick. The course that accompanies field studies, entitled *Reflections on Ministry*, strengthens students in their capacity to engage in theological reflection, think critically about ministry, and reflect on the challenges of religious leadership.

The urban ministry program at McCormick focuses on the skills and practices that urban practitioners can use to strengthen congregations and social agencies in the city. Historically this program has trained future leaders in community organizing and helped students understand the economic factors that shape urban life, with the intention of equipping people who can lead social transformation.

On an occasional basis, approximately every other year, McCormick offers courses in conflict management or leadership. These courses rest on a foundation of organizational theory about management and leadership. They also draw heavily from congregational studies literature, which is also based on organizational theory.

This is admittedly a rather spare set of offerings. In the 1960s, a much richer array of leadership courses was offered for M.Div. students at McCormick. Such courses were based primarily on organizational theory. In addition, from 1969 to 1972, McCormick sponsored a Center for the Study of Church Organizational Behavior. In the 1972-73 academic year, however, many leadership courses disappeared from the master's curriculum at McCormick and were offered instead in McCormick's new degree program, the Doctor of Ministry. The D.Min. program also subsumed the Center.

The Doctor of Ministry Program

For over thirty years, McCormick has focused most of its explicit leadership curriculum in the D.Min. program. The first D.Min. track offered at McCormick was the one that McCormick currently calls *Parish Revitalization*. The required courses in this track focus on nurturing pastors as leaders of religious organizations; course topics include ministry with groups, understanding, and leading church organizations, and transformational leadership. From this basic track emerged a track on *Executive Leadership*, designed to train judicatory executives in leading religious organizations.

than organizational development. A track on *Pastoral Care* first emerged. Although based more on human development theory, the focus of the *Pastoral Care* D.Min. track is also congregational leadership (as opposed to clinical practice). This track has recently been expanded to include a focus on spirituality. Later a track in *Religious Education* appeared, and educational theory is foundational for this program. Most recently McCormick has established a D.Min. track entitled *Building Beloved Community*. This offering supports leaders who seek more effectively to shape faithful, just communities in their congregations and neighborhoods. Ethics and theology are foundational for this track.

New course requirements in all of McCormick's D.Min. tracks now include a course on ministry in multicultural contexts. Foundational theory in this course varies according to the D.Min. track in which it is offered and the faculty member who teaches it. So, there is more than one version of this course.

The shift in teaching leadership at the doctoral level rather than the masters level was intentional at McCormick. The faculty who made the shift argued that leadership theory is much better appropriated and understood by pastors when they are *in role* than it is by students who have not yet assumed full time pastoral responsibilities.² One faculty member felt so strongly about this that he told a M.Div. student that she was "uneducable" about leadership, because she did not yet have leadership experience. That comment goes a bit overboard, in my opinion, but in my teaching I recognize the heightened readiness of D.Min. students to absorb and apply leadership theory; for them, leadership theory has an immediacy that it does not have for many M.Div. students.³

2 Thirty years ago, McCormick was primarily a residential seminary that trained first call pastors. Since then, the seminary's student population has changed somewhat, with increasing numbers of working pastors in the student body. These working pastors, however, still comprise a minority of the student body. Most of McCormick's students are still not "in role" as full time pastors during their seminary education.

3 Jane Vella notes that for adult learners, the immediacy of a course's content is critical for effective teaching and learning. Her insights help me to understand the dynamics I discuss above. Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

The Place of Leadership in the Larger Curriculum

Courses that focus specifically on leadership, in either the masters or doctoral level curricula, are lodged with the Ministries Field faculty at McCormick. At the masters level these courses are electives and are offered on an occasional basis. At the doctoral level such courses are required; the explicit teaching of leadership is an essential part of all Doctor of Ministry programs at McCormick.

It can be argued that courses considered to be part of the classical tradition of theological education also address issues of leadership. In courses such as preaching, worship, polity, ethics, theology, and biblical exegesis, students acquire skills and perspectives for effective church leadership. Although many of these courses may not address leadership as a separate issue, they, too, help to fine tune the leadership capacity of McCormick students.

NULL CURRICULUM

An institution's null curriculum consists of what is left out, the absence of essential voices. Sometimes, what is most salient about a curriculum is what is not there. Therefore, it is important to ask, "What is missing from leadership education at McCormick Theological Seminary?"

One missing piece in McCormick's leadership curriculum is critical perspective about how leadership is shaped by factors of gender, race, class, and other social factors. We who teach leadership recognize that these factors are salient, but we do not incorporate a rigorous examination of such factors in our courses about leadership, nor do we equip our students to think about them critically. This lack is due in part to the homogeneous social location out of which much leadership literature emerges, but that is not enough to prevent our pursuing the rigorous conversation we have allowed to lag.

Another missing piece of our curriculum is education that helps students to evaluate popular literature about leadership. I am struck by the shallowness of many resources about leadership, and feel that I, at least, could do more to help students be sharper critics. This would help them in not wasting their reading time on resources that will not be useful to them, or worse, on literature that misunderstands the church, its ministry, and the world it serves.

Perhaps the most egregious aspect of our null curriculum about leadership is the lack of an explicitly theological focus on leadership. I am increasingly convinced that theological clarity and facility is at the heart of strong religious leadership. What are the most successful and healthy congregations I know?⁴ The congregations (of whatever size) that understand clearly what they are doing and that are able to ground their action theologically. I believe we need to equip present and future religious leaders with the capacity to construct and interpret vigorous ecclesiologies, and to engage congregations in the construction and articulation of corporate ecclesiologies as well.

The capacity to construct and interpret vigorous ecclesiologies, whether individual or corporate, is more substantive and nuanced than the capacity to construct and articulate congregational vision. Congregations need to know and appreciate the fundamental theological values and convictions that ground and shape them. Pastors have a unique responsibility to formulate this, and to nurture a congregation as it grows into the vocation to which God calls it. This is a theological task, and leadership education should address this directly as a function of leadership. It should not be left up to the theology departments alone, nor should we hope that individual students will connect the dots, which too often represents our present practice at McCormick.

Emerging Questions

This conviction leads me to ask if we are on the right track when we ground so much of our leadership education in organizational theory. As helpful as organizational development theory is, is it enough to equip pastors for the work they are called to do? We are currently asking ourselves this question at McCormick, as we assess and reassess our curricular offerings, especially in the Doctor of Ministry program.

⁴ I speak of congregations here, but my argument applies to other religious organizations as well.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Whom to Teach

Thirty years ago, we believed we learned that leadership is best taught to people who are already engaged in the practice of ministry, and that M.Div students have difficulty appropriating the leadership learning available to them. From this vantage point, with three decades of D.Min. education behind us, we still agree with the first point. Working pastors very much want and need leadership education, and they are in a position to appreciate and use it. McCormick affirms the strong emphasis on leadership that characterizes our D.Min. program.

We went too far, however, when we eliminated so much explicit leadership education from the masters level curriculum. M.Div. students need this education, too. The challenge is how to make leadership education usable and appropriate for masters students, especially young people who have limited work experience and a sometimes naive understanding of the church and pastoral leadership. This is not as easy as simply retooling a D.Min. course for a younger or less experienced population. Leadership education for first call students needs to be designed in a way that makes learning immediate enough to be useful.

What to Teach

Knowledge about organizational dynamics and insight into organizational leadership is useful for religious leaders; in fact, such knowledge contributes to healthy and health-giving ministry. At the same time, organizational theory is often limited by its tendency to be blind to social forces and structures that also shape the practice of leadership (e.g., gender), as well as by the methodological atheism that characterizes any sociological approach. McCormick needs to attend to leadership education that fills in the gaps of the null curriculum in this area of study.

How to Teach

The implicit curriculum of a seminary is powerful.⁵ McCormick is well aware of this, and attends to it carefully. Perhaps more attention needs to be given to how the implicit, explicit, and null leadership curricula at McCormick work together.

Conclusion

Equipping the saints for the work of ministry is a holy calling. At McCormick we are privileged to participate in the church's work and to serve the women and men who choose to study with us. McCormick's commitment to its calling takes shape in the dialectic between its Presbyterian heritage and ethos, dedication to ecumenicity, openness to the cross-cultural reality and witness of the church, urban location, and hope in God's covenantal, transforming love for the world. We do not know how the fortunes of the church will unfold. In that unknowing, we at McCormick seek to form faithful leaders who know how to care and listen, who can articulate the gospel with passion and conviction, who have a measure of contextual and organizational savvy, and whose hearts are open to God's leadership.

⁵ This point is illustrated well in Jackson Carroll, Barbara Wheeler, Dan Aleshire, and Penny Long Marler, *Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).