

Forming Lifelong Learner-Practitioners

Theological Literacy Across the Ecology

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Spoiler alert: in this chapter, I am concerned not simply with the thriving of lifelong learning programs. Instead, I am concerned with the impact of theological education as a whole, including what usually qualify as core programs (accredited degrees) as well as continuing education or lifelong learning (for example, CEUs, certificates, and micro-credentials). At Acadia Divinity College (ADC) in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, we are leveraging a Pathways for Tomorrow grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. to track emerging congregational and cultural trends and to conduct leading-edge research in education. Emerging insights from this work guide *all* our teaching and learning efforts, from our MDiv to our newest micro-credentials. We are wondering: how can we future-proof theological education?

First, a confession. Even as I work at a seminary whose primary constituency is a particular denomination (in our case, the Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada), and even as we have recruited our largest entering class of MDiv students in years, I remain committed to the broader role and possibilities of theological education in the public square. Originally from the United States, I cannot help but notice

what feels like the gross misrepresentation of Christian traditions in national, state, and local conversations. Theological education matters because it cultivates the next generation of leaders for our churches. And theological education matters because it shapes how we relate well to each other in our communities. It shapes how we embody what Jesus asks us all to do: be good neighbors. Cultivating beloved community, as Martin Luther King Jr. called us to try, involves what happens not only inside churches and seminaries but everywhere. Theological education is at the heart of beloved community. I wonder: what is the role of theological educators in this cultural moment? What do our churches, schools, and communities of the future need from us right now?

During ADC's 2020–2021 accreditation process with the Association of Theological Schools, we refined the program outcomes for our MDiv. Outcomes include, for example, to “interpret and apply Scripture to Christian faith and practice with critically informed exegetical and hermeneutical skills” (ADC 2025, 60). These program outcomes funnel down toward learning outcomes for each course, and faculty build a variety of learning outcomes based on the domains outlined in Bloom's Taxonomy and the Medicine Wheel (Centre for Teaching Excellence n.d.; Hogle n.d.; LaFever 2016). They imagine ways to form students for ministry through four domains of learning: cognitive, affective (emotional), psychomotor (performative), and spiritual. In this work, we reflect on the nature of theological literacy. How do we know when our work is “done”? What does our “ideal” MDiv graduate look like?

Our students arrive with diverse backgrounds and depart to serve in diverse contexts. In our context of Nova Scotia, we must reckon with the histories of Indigenous peoples, Acadians, and African Nova Scotians. Increasingly, we receive immigrants from Korea, India, and African countries into our churches and seminary. We realize we cannot curate a single experience for multiple diversities. Instead, in keeping with larger trends in theological higher education, we must imagine how to serve diverse students well.

This chapter invites theological educators to reflect on the essential nature and function of theological literacy across the ecology of theological education, including the ecotone of lifelong learning. I advocate for a broad definition of theological literacy that connects with the public square and involves not simply static content but rather a dynamic, wise posture. I contend that cultivation of robust theological literacy requires educators to include more heutagogy in their work (compared to pedagogy and andragogy), organizing disciplinary content to help

students develop facility with the pastoral cycle. I conclude with two tools we use at ADC to foster theological literacy in a time when students and the public desperately need theological education to be its best: Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry and generative artificial intelligence.

Nurturing Theological Literacy in Church and World

It seems straightforward to presume churches, denominations, and theological schools might work together to nurture theological literacy. “At its best, theological literacy is borne by the church, promoted by structures of ecclesial organization, and supported by church-related and other schools” (Petersen 2002, 93). In distinct yet interrelated ways, these institutions form leaders who continue the conversation that has unfolded since the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Though we interpret that history through unique ecclesial lenses, we have a common goal: to hand on the faith. What seems less straightforward, however, are the possible connections of theological literacy to broader publics and concerns outside church walls. Does theological literacy involve simply describing the Christian faith well amongst various value-laden identities in a postmodern world? Or does it also entail a more normative capacity of leveraging the Christian faith as a resource to address the needs of civil societies?

The core of theological education is a theological literacy containing many facets. A theologically literate student should be a competent congregational leader. They should embody theological understanding, spiritual maturity, and interpersonal responsibility amidst other congregational leaders, scholars, and laity (Cannell 2006, 28–33, 262–63, 279). *And* they should have skills to navigate religiously diverse public spaces in ways that contribute to civic life. They might work toward the latter by helping shape a common language for civil society, which I would call a “universalist” approach; or they might do so by representing the best of a particular religious tradition in the public square, which I would call a “communitarian” approach.¹ Essentially, I presume cultivating theological literacy entails preparing students from diverse backgrounds to minister, even sometimes prophetically, in various contexts both inside and outside the church. It involves shaping spaces of belonging in ecclesial contexts and beyond (Jennings 2020). It inspires asset-based approaches to trauma-informed community wellness efforts (Pommert and LeBlanc 2022). It leverages “*cabos*

sueltos” (loose ends) from oft-marginalized traditions to transform churches and communities (Conde-Frazier 2021).

The challenge is to nurture theological literacy for public arenas in which the most prominent versions of Christianity often seem not very Christlike. How do we push back against what feels like a theological illiteracy and raise up wise leaders who can shepherd beloved communities? As I write this chapter, the headlines include more tragic stories of school shootings and political assassinations in my home country. Shockingly, my Facebook feed evidences more outpourings of Christian concern for a murdered prominent, conservative political voice who regularly defended gun rights than for the simultaneous continued mass murders of our children through gun violence. I firmly believe that droves of Christians are getting public theology massively wrong these days, and our children will continue to pay the price (Porter 2021; see also Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove n.d.).

Unreflective support for any single political party cannot count as theological literacy. This is the world for which seminaries in North America must train bold voices for God’s good work. Deep familiarity with our Christian biblical and ecclesial traditions, coupled with ways to express that familiarity inside our church families, cannot be the only or even primary goal for our programs. At ADC, our mission is “to equip Christians to serve the mission of God in church *and world* with transformative impact” (*emphasis added*, ADC 2026). To fulfill that mission faithfully, we must be concerned not simply with the cross-shaped vertical relationship between God and individuals but also those cross-shaped horizontal relationships among individuals in community.

We must support our students not only to disciple followers of Christ within their churches but also to embody Christ, and empower others to embody Christ, within their local neighborhoods. This task is the most important one theological educators face today, whether we teach core programs or offer traditional continuing education opportunities or facilitate anything in between: the task of forming beloved communities. And we have no small task set before us. How do we help students connect biblical interpretation to public crises? Theology to community development? History and practical ministry skills to neighborhood needs? All efforts across theological education must point toward the ongoing growth of leaders for church, academy, *and* society who are critically reflective and flexible. Theological literacy, in this view, encompasses a lifelong journey of honing skills for theological reflection and action in church and world. Most importantly, it requires

not simply accomplishment of key, static content but rather formation into a holistic, dynamic posture of *phronesis* (practical wisdom). If ever our idea as theological educators was to graduate “sages” who know most of what they need to know for lives of ministerial service, that idea will not work now.

Cultivating Lifelong Learner-Practitioners Through Heutagogy

The future of work across all industries will require less specific content and more skills with built-in mechanisms for adaptability, including skills in global citizenship and creativity (Kim 2022; World Economic Forum 2023; see also chapter by Andreolli-Comstock in this volume). Churches and schools are welcoming ever more diverse populations, and students are expressing a desire for more flexibility and personalization in education. Students need to be prepared for real-world impact in a rapidly-changing world with evolving job markets and bivocational ministry models (Futuring Hub for Theo-Futures Research 2023; Gin, Deasy, and Peña-Camprubí 2025; Stephens 2022). In view of these trends, theological literacy cannot be static.

Theological literacy also does not have to be a moving target. Theological educators must imagine their programs as pieces of ongoing formation for diverse ministerial leaders who can access content easily but who must nurture lifelong muscles for utilizing that content well. If we drill down on the capabilities we cultivate, if we aim to form “lifelong learner-practitioners” who are thoughtful and nimble wherever they serve, our theological education efforts will have a much longer shelf life and ongoing deeper impact. However, the challenge for any seminary faculty—mostly composed of specialists in traditional disciplines like Christian history, biblical interpretation, and theology—is to utilize their content expertise not to reproduce content experts but to shape adaptive leaders.

Enter my new favorite concept: heutagogy.² Heutagogy connotes the word “heuristic,” meaning to inquire and learn something for oneself (Parslow 2010). The most amenable strategies for shaping students who will succeed in the future are those that are student-driven, inclusive, problem-based, collaborative, and lifelong (Kim 2022; World Economic Forum 2023). And they must emphasize learning how to learn (Gatopoulos 2025). Heutagogy, or self-determined learning (Blaschke

2023), is exactly this type of learning strategy. It emphasizes student agency for diverse students, a nonlinear “choose your own adventure” method connected with real-world environments and challenges, collaboration skills, and self-reflection on learning. Heutagogical approaches are democratic, not advocating a “correct” understanding of disciplinary content but a “correct” approach to it: no learner is inferior to another, and all learners must not be docile (Msila 2014, 217). Heutagogy shapes students with lifelong capacities to leverage learning in new contexts. Students who become heutagogical learners can reflect and lead change wherever they find themselves:

Instead of passively receiving information, heutagogical learners engage in self-directed exploration and problem-solving.... Complete consciousness occurs when an individual transforms themselves into a lifelong learner by utilizing knowledge as a product for changing who they are and their surrounding society (Reisdorfer et al. 2024, 597 and 600).

Heutagogy meets learners where they are, invites them to bring their contexts to the learning, and encourages them to explore their interests toward constructive applications in neighborhoods they serve. In the case of theological education, heutagogical approaches form students as public theologians. Heutagogy nurtures theological literacy in robust ways that connect well with the public square. Heutagogical learners develop the facility to connect Christian traditions with public circumstances in faithful, adaptive ways. These students shape lifelong muscles not only to disciple congregations inside church walls but also to embody prophetic voices in broader communities.

How does such a learning strategy compare with more well-known approaches, or other “gogies,” such as pedagogy and andragogy? Pedagogy, often synonymous with learning for children but not limited to that age group, can be quite helpful for students with little academic or practical knowledge of a topic (Stoten 2022). Pedagogy helps students gain the basic building blocks for later work via courses that emphasize the disciplinary canons, guide students through some logical linear sequence of those canons, contain a significant number of lectures, and assess for acquisition of knowledge. Andragogy, often synonymous with adult learning, and heutagogy both invite learners to take more control of their learning. These approaches may work best with students who already have some academic or practical knowledge of a topic (Stoten 2022). Teachers utilizing andragogy or heutagogy in the

classroom provide guidance and resources while allowing students some choice in how they will navigate their learning journeys.

The key difference between andragogy and heutagogy is the extra layer of self-awareness nurtured in heutagogical learners (Table 1). Heutagogical approaches afford the most control to students, inviting them to co-design learning outcomes, syllabi, activities, and assessments with their teachers (Blaschke 2012, 2021, 2023). Most importantly, heutagogy involves self-reflection on the process of learning and subsequent utilization of that same process for similar or different results as needed in new contexts. In andragogy, students develop *competency*, or “proven ability in acquiring knowledge and skills” (Blaschke 2012, 59). Students can retrieve knowledge and repeat skills. But in heutagogy, students develop *capability*; they are not only competent in knowledge and skills, but they also can adapt that information for unfamiliar situations. This approach can work for all age levels. For example, heutagogy resonates with the child-centered Montessori method of education, emphasizing discovery and reflection, creation of new content, and collaboration with others.

Table 1
Differences Between Pedagogy, Andragogy, and Heutagogy

PEDAGOGY	ANDRAGOGY	HEUTAGOGY
teacher-directed	self-directed	self-determined
role of instructor: “ sage on the stage ”	role of instructor: “ guide on the side ”	role of instructor: “ partner in the process ”
Focus on disciplinary content . Courses support knowledge transfer and acquisition .	Focus on disciplinary content . Courses support competency development , or demonstration of specific knowledge and skills.	Focus on processes of learning . Courses support capability development , or preparation for leveraging specific knowledge and skills in new contexts.
Courses comprise goals, objectives, and activities along a linear path .	Courses follow a general linear structure but allow flexibility for learners to direct or organize their own learning.	Courses are non-linear and allow learners to decide what and how they will learn.

Adapted from Blaschke (2023, 247–52).

In theological education, heutagogical approaches can emphasize self-reflection by centering—either in individual disciplinary courses or through transdisciplinary experiential and capstone courses—the cycle of action and reflection that undergirds pastoral praxis. Students should graduate from a master’s-level program not only with knowledge of hermeneutics, theology, and practical ministry skills but also with mastery of the tool that organizes all that knowledge into ongoing, iterative cycles of reflective work: the pastoral cycle (or spiral). In my view, theological literacy comprises capability with the pastoral cycle. In the pastoral cycle, leaders try faithful actions; reflect on them considering context, scripture, and traditions; and imagine next faithful actions in a continuously repeating loop of reflective action (Bevans 2002, 70–87; Porter 2025, 84). The cycle forms the core of prophetic public theology. It brings scripture and traditions into conversation with real-time concerns; it involves an ongoing *phronetic* (practically wise) posture for ministry, one that students nurture through accredited programs and lifelong learning. Siloed disciplinary approaches, or newly-emerging competency-based approaches, leave out this important organizing core, this capability with the tool of the pastoral cycle. We do so to our peril. Theological literacy that emphasizes this cycle constitutes the seminarian ready to relate well and innovate creatively in a fluid global community.

Learning Portfolios and the Two AIs

Faculty already busy with full loads of teaching, research, and service may find it overwhelming to feel as though they need to revise their work to respond to any number of emerging trends with congregations or in education. Further, even if we encourage faculty simply to focus on heutagogy as a key for nurturing future-ready seminarians, the task may seem out of reach. Seminaries teach in complex modalities and configurations, including both synchronous (live) elements and asynchronous (on your own time) elements; hyflex mode, with live sessions that include students in-person and online simultaneously; and, sometimes, combining students at different program levels (bachelor’s, master’s) in the same class. These multiple dynamics are complicated enough without stressing over which “gogy” to use for a course or portion of a course. How might we simplify the task of cultivating theological literacy in our complex times?

At ADC, we are imagining how to orient courses, our Mentored Ministry program, whole degrees, and micro-credentials around a learning portfolio. Akin to a portfolio a student might compile to enter graduate school, or a PK-12 teacher might curate during their own learning journey, or an artist might design to garner commissions, a ministry portfolio includes any learning artifacts students want to take with them into their future ministries. Even in the “non-practical” disciplines, students can generate research findings, create works (like art, poetry, or digital media), and write reflections that connect the subject to their personal passions and concrete hopes for the world. They can design their own projects to explore theological disciplines in ways that are meaningful to them and develop their lifelong learner-practitioner skills. Students can set their learning goals, methods, and assessment criteria in consultation with their instructors. Most importantly, the portfolio includes self-reflections on the processes of creating those artifacts, connecting learning with the pastoral cycle.

Through a learning portfolio model, students imagine how to take their studies into future ministries from the moment they begin those studies. The portfolio serves as a resource for recognizing prior learning and informing the denominational ordination process as well, identifying strengths students already have practiced and strengths they plan to develop further. The focus of student learning and praxis is that thread of theological literacy, centered on capability with the pastoral cycle. Students leverage the resources of their own ministry contexts, core programs, and lifelong learning opportunities to continue building their portfolios. They develop that *phronetic* posture that inspires them to add to their portfolios throughout their journeys, whether through their work, further education, or communities of practice with peers.

But how could faculty possibly support *every* student (or even small groups of students) to create their own *unique* journey through theological education?³ Here enter two of my favorite tools, which I call “the two AIs” (Porter 2024): Indigenous Appreciative Inquiry (IAI)⁴ and generative artificial intelligence (AI).⁵ IAI is a process that invites faculty and students to explore topics in partnership with each other. It offers a conversationally focused, asset-based, open-ended way to identify a topic that a class or a small group wants to explore. Faculty can begin each term with an IAI conversation that welcomes a class to discern the theme or challenge they want to explore together within the parameters of the course’s discipline. Or faculty can collaborate to offer one-off seminars or transdisciplinary courses on topics that

students self-identify through IAI. Because IAI is an ancient practice of listening to diverse voices and advancing community concerns positively and collaboratively, it constitutes not only a heutagogical device for classroom purposes but also a process students can use in their work when they graduate. IAI is a *phronetic* framework for global citizenship, innovation, and faithful change. Inviting students to practice IAI both maximizes their educational journeys and prepares them with an essential tool for ministry.

The second tool is AI, which ADC utilizes for faculty efficiencies and personalization of student learning. In 2024, we designed a tailored version of ChatGPT trained on ADC's identity and mission, MDiv program objectives, a syllabus template, and frameworks for learning outcomes and grading. Faculty utilize this "ADC Course Content Creator" to review current syllabi, draft new syllabi, brainstorm class activities, and shape assessments. In one of our first AI experiments, we used the Content Creator to design *and deliver* an entire master's-level course on the ethics of AI in Christian ministry, with the support of additional AI tools that create avatars and videos (Faith and Leadership 2024; Cuthbertson 2025; Robbins 2025). We are piloting another version of the tool, "ADC FuturesGPT," that translates our Pathways grant research on current trends into practical classroom implications. We also are experimenting with a customizable chatbot for students to practice their counseling skills or have conversations with historical figures such as Martin Luther (Cuthbertson 2025; Robbins 2025). Faculty can leverage any of these tools to tailor courses instantly—even for individual students or small groups.

ADC is a leading voice in theological education for determining the possibilities, limits, and ethical implications of AI tools amidst the quickly evolving field of generative AI resources (Saleem et al. 2024; Mollick and Mollick 2024) as well as heutagogical approaches with those tools. We believe AI tools will not diminish the theological literacy of our students but rather support their development of it. Instead of shying away from resources our students soon will know well anyway, we are shaping proactively the kinds of tools that best facilitate theological literacy. AI helps us serve more diverse students well, from diverse contexts, headed to diverse ministries, than we could do without AI—because AI helps us lean into individualized, reflective approaches for our growing student body. Ultimately, our students could use tools like these to develop their own personalized lifelong learning journeys. Meanwhile, as with the tool of IAI, facility with AI will serve students well not only in the classroom but also in

the congregation. If we help students leverage AI tools with *phronetic* wisdom, through the lens of the pastoral cycle, they will help their congregants and neighborhoods do the same.

Conclusion

The way to “future-proof” theological curricula for core degrees and lifelong learning must involve more intentional focus on theological literacy, interpreted as a capability to function as a prophetic, adaptive leader for changing contexts. In a season when theological schools may not recognize many purported expressions of Christianity, theological educators must shape public theologians with the wherewithal to embody Christ in ways that nurture beloved community. We cannot change our content fast enough to keep pace with emerging trends and educational research, but we can focus our courses on learning portfolios that emphasize the pastoral cycle and develop lifelong learner-practitioners. A heutagogical learning strategy that maximizes tools both old and new, IAI and AI, can equip students for faithful leadership amidst the cacophony of voices in the public square. The viability and vitality of theological education in all our schools, and beyond those walls, depends on it.

Questions for reflection

- How does your school interpret theological literacy? How does that understanding of theological literacy serve as a through line for your core degrees and lifelong learning programs? Or how might it do so?
- Reflect on the “gogies” you use in your classroom and how they might help (or hinder) development of theological literacy. How might you connect the disciplinary content you usually teach more directly with the pastoral cycle? How might your school leverage the learning portfolio model to cultivate theological literacy?
- How does your school utilize tools such as IAI and AI? What are the limitations of these tools in your context? What are the possibilities they might afford as you cultivate theological literacy?

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Notes

- 1 Gavin D’Costa’s distinction between “public theology” and “public theologies” informs these definitions (2005).
- 2 Here I acknowledge my debt to Shari Russell, former Director of NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community, who introduced me to the concept (conversation with author, November 20, 2023).
- 3 For more on heutagogy in higher and theological education, see Moore (2020); Martinez and Muñoz (2021); Lock et al. (2021); and Hukkinen, Lütz, and Dowden (2023). For additional heutagogical learning ideas and methods, see Martin (2021) and Doyle (2023).
- 4 Acadia Divinity College is learning about the IAI process from NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community in sessions led by Terry LeBlanc, Matt LeBlanc, Mike Hogeterp, and Nichole Forbes. See more about NAIITS at <https://naiits.com>. See also Porter (2026).
- 5 I utilized ChatGPT to support my writing process for this chapter. It drafted an initial abstract in response to prompts that contained my specific ideas and goals, and it drafted a final abstract upon reviewing my completed chapter. It sparked the phrases “lifelong learner-practitioner” and “partner in the process.” It also helped inspire my ideas about the learning portfolio. I am finding that it cannot anticipate the original contributions I want to make nor write in my voice, but it can help organize my thoughts efficiently and suggest phrasing at key junctures.

