Hermeneutics and Communications

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Assignment #4 – Course Learning Journal The journal is a written reflection of your learning journey while working in each course. The Learning Journal integrates the essential elements of the course within your professional field of interest. The objective of the course journal is to produce a degree of acculturation, integrating new ideas into your existing knowledge of each course. This is also an opportunity to communicate with your professor insights gained as a result of the course. The course learning journal should be 3-5 pages in length and should include the following sections:

1. Introduction –Summarize the intent of the course, how it fits into the graduate program as a whole, and the relevance of its position in the curricular sequence.

2. Personal Growth - Describe your personal growth–how the course stretched or challenged you– and your progress in mastery of course content and skills during the week and through subsequent readings – what new insights or skills you gained.

3. Reflective Entry - Add a reflective entry that describes the contextualization (or adaptation and relevant application) of new learning in your professional field. What questions or concerns have surfaced about your professional field as a result of your study?

4. Conclusion – Evaluate the effectiveness of the course in meeting your professional, religious, and educational goals.

The course Hermeneutics and Communication provided insight into the theory, methods, and principles involved in interpreting and understanding information from written, spoken, and symbolic forms of communication from various fields of study. The course helped to clarify interpretation principles and develop critical thinking. The course facilitated an awareness of how cultural, linguistic, and social contexts impact understanding. This learning resulted in skill development specifically to apply hermeneutical methods to social research providing a clearer understanding of a topic, facilitating effective communication, and enhancing interdisciplinary dialogue and academic and professional work.

This course was very enjoyable and rewarding. Having a philosophical background and being first introduced to hermeneutics over 30 years ago, re-engaging the subject helped to clarify previous understanding and bring me up to date on more recent research and insight. Twenty years ago, I began to examine the impact of cultural change on the life of the church. In this course, I focused on the development of hermeneutics in the past twenty years as well as examining a range of writers in the broad area of Critical Theory. I found the rejection of absolute truths and grand narratives diagnosed around the turn of the century had taken root and reshaped many of our social disciplines including education, sociology, psychology, political science, and more. This trend is providing a substantial challenge to the Christian Church as it attempts to engage in conversation with non-believers to present the faith.

The study of hermeneutics suggests important insights, tools, and methods, not only for understanding these cultural changes but also for formulating first thoughts on a productive responsive, and proactive strategy for engagement. The insight from Gadamer that has become seminal in the past 30 years that all understanding involves a fusion of horizons lays a foundation for understanding and communicating with others. One should not expect another person to open the boundaries of their worldview to genuinely hear where the speaker is coming from if the speaker is not willing to do so likewise. It is valuable to understand that when I engage another person or text I bring with me my values, experience, and preferences. Even when engaging Scripture, we tend to read past passages that don’t resonate with our previous understanding. Recognizing this can serve as a corrective when reading another’s positions or speaking with another so that genuine understanding, not necessarily agreement or assimilation, but understanding can occur. This is a less combative and threatening approach to engagement which could help others lower resistances and suspicion of Christians seeking to share their worldviews. This insight regarding the fusion of horizons integrates well with an understanding developed in my philosophical studies that human life is co-relational, that is we make our lives together within the circumstances handed to us. This course helped to clarify and expand the importance of this insight.

As I examined this fusion of horizons the significant role that common ground plays in such understanding became clearer. Gadamer focuses on the necessity of a tradition for understanding, a common language, and a common toolbox of shared ideas. An insight, now in its early formation, that I would call the “tridactic” seems to apply. A fusion of horizons is not just two horizons of pre-existing understanding colliding and impacting one another. There does seem to be the necessity of some third point, some mediating and facilitating common ground. This is something I need to further ponder and research, but if accurate, opens a possible strategy for effective engagement across our increasingly polarized culture. The fact that communication still does occur implies that there is much yet in our diversity and polarization that is common to all in our human experience. These commonalities could serve to focus and anchor our conversational engagements in a way that facilitates a better understanding, and in a way that may help to gain a hearing for the Christian faith.

As I pursued this line of thinking it became apparent that a fusion of horizons is not necessarily positive or even neutral, but can be oppressive, even if congenial to my conservative traditional worldview. It is one thing to make use of common experiences or common ground, quite another to attempt to seize and conquer this ground and remake it into one’s preferred image. Much of the rhetoric and strategy employed by both left progressive activists and right conservative activists rather looks like one horizon of understanding charging across the field as a giant amoeba seeking to devour into itself all opposing viewpoints. This is most especially seen in critical approaches to social issues. My research indicates that the projected impacts of postmodernism put forward twenty years ago have largely come to pass with Western civilization splintering into many competing tribes seeking dominance.

I have observed an increasing focus and promotion of tradition within my church body in the past decade or so, which led me to look more deeply into the role of tradition as a necessary element for understanding. The idea that an accurate understanding of the intended meaning of a text is more likely going to develop within a community with a congenial tradition to the text makes sense. As a conservative traditional minister, this resonates with me. But as I read further, it began to surface that such a focus hardly seems useful for connecting with different communities who have alternative traditions. While I agree that a conservative Christian community with a congenial view of the Holy Scriptures, will most likely hear, respect, and incorporate the original intent of the authors, this may not suggest a way forward in communicating with others. In addition, human understanding is always self-interested and, as Luther taught us from his reflection on Romans, sinfully corrupted. It is just as likely that people will use tradition as it develops and modifies, including picking and choosing from past practices, to justify applying a lens to Scripture that facilitates personal preferences. In this regard a conservative traditional approach would be reading into Scripture, leading to misunderstanding just as dangerous as a critical approach that discounts the original intended meanings of Scripture.

In the past decade, I have trained as a professional transitional minister. My church body heavily utilizes family systems theory to facilitate investigation into congregational processes to enable conversations and productive decision-making by the members. One key aspect of family systems is the integration of a system. This was also a core component of Miller’s Living Systems Theory utilized by OGS some 20 years ago. Some critical theories seek to deconstruct various systems by pointing out inherent contradictions and hypocrisies, a point well taken. Within this background my research into hermeneutics reinforced that genuine understanding should have a degree of integrity, that is faithfulness and affiliation with a text, or dare say a truth. One key problem with postmodernism and the critical approaches flowing out of it is to reduce human interactions as we make our culture and our lives together into a battle for personal preferences, a Nietzschean will to power. It appears if we affiliate with a tribe, it is for pragmatic purposes, to seek out a world that caters to our wants and desires. Civilization needs common reasonable real-life values that enable life within the parameters God designed it.

A key point carried from this term as I consider what approaches may help my church body better connect to a society that is increasingly different and closed in our post-Christian era recognizes that a proper method seeking to generate a fusion of horizons can be transformational. Systems theory talks of the importance of boundaries. Living Systems theory discusses how all living systems have a boundary that preserves identity and life, from the cellular level to the national level. Family systems highlight the importance of healthy boundaries that are strong enough to keep out harmful influences yet porous enough to allow new helpful engagements with others. Our era seems to be of increasingly closed boundaries within our growing tribalism. Hermeneutical approaches with their focus on the requirements for understanding enabling a fusion of horizons may provide a necessary assist to enable conversation across strong boundaries.

One final observation lingers that I need to consider more as my research moves on. Going back to the Socratic dialogues, seen in the Phaedrus, is the idea of the superiority of conversation over reading. On one side is the proposition, (which I don’t completely agree with) that the author is dead to us, and we can never know his original intent. On the other is the idea that in a conversation, if someone misunderstands a point, the speaker can clarify. Regarding the first point, I don’t believe human lives have changed to the point that there is no common ground to enable understanding even ancient texts. Regarding the latter, the point is well taken. Is conversation a superior approach?

This course left me in a different place than where I began. While not causing me to enable previously held ideas, it has refined them. I have seen where conservative approaches may go wrong in ways similar to progressive/critical approaches. I have an increased awareness of the importance of listening to understand if I seek also to be understood which applies to my daily ministry, my leadership at the congregational level, and potentially for a leadership strategy to help my church body become more effective.