Contested issues in training ministers in South Africa

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AFRICAN LEADERSHIP VIABILITY
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DIVERSITY SPIRITUALITY formation biblical
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city culture
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pastors

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EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGIES: EXPLORING THE AMBIGUOUS EFFECT ON THE TRAINING OF MINISTERS

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Introduction

The advent of technology in theological education, and specifically the training of ministers, has surely stirred much discussion on why we educate and how we educate, as well as the theological nature of theological education. Although previous research suggests that there is no significant difference (Russel 1999) between online or face-to-face education, research on the topic continued as there is still the drive to explore and demonstrate the benefits or dangers thereof in education (Condon 2014:23). As Kelsey (2002:2) rightly notes, unexamined practices are not worth engaging in and, therefore, technology in higher education calls for critical assessment. Van der Laan (2012:242) notes that although we are surrounded and dependent on technology, the effects on us remain poorly understood. Therefore, this chapter will highlight the contested nature of technology as medium by identifying and discussing a few ambiguous effects that the use of technology has on theological education.

The most important frameworks that guide the current discussions on technology and training of ministers, seems to be focusing on pedagogical issues and the theological nature of training of ministers (Delamarter 2004; Delamarter 2005; Delamarter 2005; Hess 2002; Ascough 2002; Kelsey 2002). However, a broader understanding of the effect of technology and how it is intertwined with human existence could provide a helpful framework for this ongoing discussion and its impact on the training for ministers. Therefore, this chapter firstly situates the use of technology in theological training in a broader understanding of technology as part of living in a digital age (with specific reference to the South African context). This discussion will highlight the fact that technology is much more than merely a tool that could be used – it also represents a culture whereby humans are co-creators of different digital spaces for connection, community formation, meaning making, identity formation, and learning. A summary of the use of technology in the training of ministers, as well as responses thereto, is offered. In the last section, the ambiguous effect of technology will be demonstrated by discussing how the medium could simultaneously offer opportunities and challenges to the training of ministers. This discussion will focus on the cost associated with the use of educational technology, the digital divide, disembodiment, and the role and status of knowledge in a technological age.

Training of ministers in a digital culture

The world in which we are living today is characterised by the pervasive presence of technology through which we communicate, work, play and learn. "... we now rely

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on and use technology in every sphere of life: from agriculture, energy, medicines, telecommunication and transport, to business, education, finance, politics and psychology” (Van der Laan 2012: 242). Technology, however, is more than a tool. It also presents a way of living. Social shaping as a theoretical perspective on media, postulates that technology is created by humans as part of a social context, but also affects being human and the context we are living in (Wessels 2010: 31). Therefore, technology says as much about us as it says about the societies we live in (Baym 2010:23). Several years ago, Murphy (1986) argues, technology did not have autonomy and logic of its own, apart from that given by human agency, as technology is created and sustained by humans. Although technology creates the illusion that it operates without the human agency, it is not possible (Murphy 1986:140), as human action should be understood in order to be at the centre of technology (Murphy 1986:144). However, the mediatization theory proposed by Hjarvard (2011:123) differs, and postulates that technology does in fact have a logic of its own to which institutions have to adhere to. This means that technology is no longer just in service of institutions, but that institutions need technology to communicate effectively in the present day. Technology, therefore, nowadays mediates communication between people, as is also the case with educational technologies. This implies that new worlds are created as digital platforms, and become the primary locations of communication and symbolic connections (Soukup, Buckley and Robinson 2001:370). Medrano (2004:147-148) is of the opinion that digital technologies represent a culture, a way of living, in which the internet plays an integral part. According to Wicker and Santaso (2013), the use of technology is so important these days, they even argue that it should be considered as a human right. Kerr (2005:1006), however, is of the opinion that the enthusiasm for using technology for education is not because there is conclusive evidence which improves student learning, but because internet communication technology (ICT) is a generator of contemporary culture (2005:1007). Against this background, the use of technology in education seems inevitable, although not without the need for an examination of what it really means for being human and, in this case, for theological education.

The path travelled with technology and training of ministers

The use of technology in or for training of ministers could be ascribed to several factors. These include advanced technology – the demands of an increasingly mobile and diverse population and dissatisfaction with traditional models, seem to be some of the most important factors contributing to the need thereof (Naidoo 2012:1). In South Africa, education is one of the rights that is enshrined within the Constitution. Therefore, the demand for access to basic and further education also rises. One of the ways of providing access to education (especially at tertiary level) is online distance learning, whereby learning is mediated through technology. Print-based correspondence courses marked the earlier stages of distance education, but with the ongoing development of telecommunications, distance education has several new opportunities (Ascough 2002:17). The University of South Africa (Unisa), the only fully distance-university in South Africa, positions itself as an

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institution that embraces and harnesses the potential of information and communication technologies (ICT) in Africa in providing students with an inherently online teaching and learning experience. The teaching and learning process is further strengthened and enhanced by support facilities and services like counsellors and volunteer peer helpers (Chetty 2014:54). An example of a smaller private institution that specifically provides theological training through distance, is the South African Theological Seminary (SATS). Different online platforms are created through a central hub called MyStats, where study material is obtained and communication with a course facilitator and other students are possible.²² One of the main supporting elements of theological training at SATS is the prominence of partnerships with the various churches where students are located. This means that learning is embedded in a specific local context that assists and compliments the online learning experience.

The use of technology as the basic medium to guide the learning process, is always in direct relation to other developments. Declining enrolment at residential institutions, specifically for theological studies, makes online distance education a favourable option to attract new students (Ascough 2002:20). The growth of open distance learning (ODL) in Africa resulted in distance education becoming the policy option in Africa, with significant enrolments in South Africa, especially at the University of South Africa (Unisa), being the largest provider of distance education in South Africa (Naidoo 2012:1). Ascough's (2002:18-19) explanation of online distance education – by pointing out the characteristics thereof – is helpful. The characteristics of online distance education could be summarised as follows:

- It has the sponsorship of a reputable educational organisation.
- Teachers and learners are separated from one another.
- It requires special technical skills.
- The nature of the medium changes the social dynamic of the learning environment, class, race and gender issues.

The presence of technology in training of ministers currently has basically two forms, namely distance education and the use of technology in combination with face-to-face teaching, referred to as the 'hybrid model'. The hybrid approach is pointed out by some as being the most effective, as it has the best of both worlds – the online as well as the traditional classroom situation (Naidoo 2012:5; Delamarter 2005:52; Delamarter 2004:138).

Based on the results gathered from interviews with theological educators from 45 different seminaries in North America, Delamarter (2005) gives a good overview of the path travelled with technology and theological education. Initially, staff members used personal computers merely to send emails and gain information for research and teaching. However, within the short span of a decade, it became almost unthinkable not to use the World Wide Web for obtaining information. And since information literacy became

²² *The South African Theological Seminary* – www.sats.ed

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a necessity to function effectively and efficiently as a citizen living and operating in the information era, faculty members had no choice but to develop certain technical and computer skills (Delamarter 2005:52). From there the use of technology became part of face-to-face instruction. “Perhaps the most significant development in technology for theological education, was the use of web-based tools for asynchronous teaching and learning” (Delamarter 2005:52). The road ahead points to an increasing need for the use of technology, since the potential students enrolling know only a world filled with technology and will, therefore, expect technology to be a part of how they are trained (Delamarter 2005:53-55). This could lead to criticism of lecture-based pedagogies and could lead to where technology is no longer viewed as a helpful tool for the educator, but rather as a necessary and responsible aid for the sake of the student (Delamarter 2005:53). This implies that educators who stick to the classroom-based approach will be held accountable for explaining why they do not make use of or neglect the powerful tools provided by technology (Delamarter 2005:53).

Responses to the use of educational technologies

Delamarter’s (2004) typology of the use of technology in theological training provides a helpful description on the responses of especially theological educators to the use of technology. Delamarter (2004:136) differentiates between three types of reactions: Stage one, where technology is used to teach together with electronic library management; stage two, in which educators try to replicate what they do in class to some online mediated form; stage three, which includes responses on individual and institutional level. Educators in this stage claim to have made some useful pedagogical findings and have started to transform the classroom with a more sophisticated use of technology (Delamarter 2004:138). On an institutional level, new pedagogical discoveries have been reported in a way that would enhance the training of ministers (Delamarter 2004:138). It seems important for theological faculties and seminaries to have some idea of how educators view the use of technology, and how the relationship is between technology and the institutional expectations with regard to the use thereof. It also seems important to get feedback on how students experience the use of technology, or lack thereof, within the educational process. It will be irresponsible to assume that all students want and find the use of technology helpful in their learning process.

The developments with regard to technology and theological education, however, were not without some rather divergent responses – especially on the part of educators, resulting in adherents and opponents of the new approach towards education. It should be noted that responses originate mostly against the backdrop of the existing, classical classroom-based approach to education, which means that the new approach is valued or questioned on that grounds. Delamarter (2004:135) notes that the classical paradigm entails theological training which includes full immersion of at least three years of training in a residential programme with face-to-face, lecture-based pedagogies, supported by library research and writing. For decades this has been viewed as the best pedagogical paradigm for reaching

the goal of training ministers. Although the use of technology is evaluated in the light of the classical, face-to-face, classroom-based pedagogy, it does not mean that the classical paradigm necessarily accomplishes everything that is now questioned in the new paradigm (Delamarter 2004:137).

The concerns and preferences of educators with regard to technology and training of ministers, could be understood within at least two broad frameworks, namely pedagogical and theological (Delamarter 2005; Naidoo 2012; Ascough 2002). Delamarter (2005:131) has done empirical work in seminaries in North America in order to find out what the concerns of theological educators are by establishing their attitudes towards the use of technology for teaching and learning in theological education. These concerns were sorted under practical and personal, pedagogical, educational, philosophical and theological (Delamarter 2005:131-143). The different concerns listed under the different frameworks were interrelated, as could be expected.

The ambiguous effect of technology on theological education

According to Ascough (2002:17), the nature of the medium needs to be understood before it could be conceptualised and designed in the educational environment. Although technology could provide us with creative and endless opportunities for quality education, it could also lead to poor pedagogical practices if the medium is not understood.

1. *The digital divide and cost associated with the use of educational technologies*

It seems that one of the most valuable contributions of online education is the creation of greater access, especially for marginalised groups. Although there seems to be a misconception that all countries have access to technology. Roos and Jordaan (2006:2) indicate that internet access in South Africa has increased, but at a diminishing rate. South Africa still has a long way to go when it comes to making the internet widely available and affordable. This is directly linked to the digital divide that refers to the divide between those who have access to technology and technological skills, and those who do not. The narrow and broader definitions of the digital divide are noteworthy as the former refers to the lack of access to computers between racial groups, while the latter includes sufficient training and relevant content on the web that will enable users to use the internet effectively (Roos and Jordaan 2006:4). The digital divide further implies that people who have the financial means already have access to technology and skills to use it, while the majority have no access and are, therefore, marginalised and unable to participate in an information-based economy. In an empirical study done by Chetty (2014) on the integration of ICT at the College of Human Sciences at Unisa, similar findings emerged as in the study done by Delamarter (2005) with regard to the opportunities and challenges that the use of ICT poses to learning and teaching. Inadequate infrastructure like server capacity, down times, and interruption of connectivity, is singled out as the most challenging factors in the process of integrating ICT in teaching and learning practices. Almost half of the respondents in the study (59 out of 130) pointed out that ICT in

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teaching and learning disadvantages students who are already in a disadvantaged position, since most of these students have limited access to the internet as well as limited skills to participate in the ODL process. Closely linked to this challenge is the cost factor which is implied in sustaining and upgrading infrastructure and continuous training of staff and students (Chetty 2014:58).

The digital divide thus entails much more than access or skills, but includes stable infrastructure across different sectors. It is, therefore, closely linked to the cost factor of using the internet. Naidoo (2012:1) and Ascough (2002:20) confirm that in order to be able to use technology to its full potential, certain infrastructure, the socio-economic viability of the end user, and staff development are needed. Although the internet may become less expensive, the infrastructure and software of different programs need to be upgraded continuously at a huge cost. And although older technology may also become less expensive and more accessible, newer versions are pricy and not accessible for the majority in a country like South Africa with its high levels of unemployment. Thus, while technology could give greater access to education, it could also exclude, for instance, students living in rural areas. A person who does not have access to technology, usually also lacks technological skills, which means even if they have access to education through distance, they will not be able to participate due to the lack of technological skills. Barraket and Scott (2001:209) provide a helpful explanation of information literacy, namely an awareness of the kinds of information available, possible sources of this information, the means of retrieving the information, and an understanding of information required in relation to existing knowledge. Information literacy, therefore, does not simply refer to the ability to use a computer or surf the net, but entails a variety of interrelated skills. Training to obtain these skills implies additional cost as the lack thereof could compromise the educational process. Ascough (2002:20) adds an important factor, namely that the use of technology in education could be time consuming, as educators have to manage two platforms – the classroom as well as the online platform. As universities become more competitive and expect staff to be involved in community interaction, as well as to teach and deliver higher quality research outputs, the use of technology in teaching could place an extra workload and pressure on academics.

Barraket and Scott (2001:204) identify the digital divide as a key concern, “which has the potential to create disadvantages that mirror traditional inequalities.” Students with particular disabilities are also vulnerable to the economic cost involved for modified hardware and adaptive software (Barraket and Scott 2001:207). The increased cost associated with the use of technology could lead to unreasonable price increases of education fees, which could compromise the right of access to education. Education is viewed as one of the weapons to eradicate poverty, but if the cost of technology compromises that, we surely have to scrutinise the effect of educational technologies. The costs associated with the use of technology pose a significant challenge to the training of ministers, as many theological training institutions are faith-based with limited budgets and, therefore, cannot engage fully in technological infrastructure development. Hence, in a country like South

Africa with the highest division between rich and poor, anything like the digital divide that increases inequality, should be examined and critiqued beforehand.

2. *Disembodiment as part of educational technologies*

Education that is mediated by technology is characterised by bodily absence. This virtual reality is believed to provide an increased possibility of irresponsible conduct of students, like developing fake online personae (Delamarter 2005:135). At the same time it is argued that it could lead to deeper learning as students have more time to reflect, whereas in a traditional classroom an immediate response is needed (Delamarter 2004:137). Furthermore, students who seldom participate in class, could participate online, which could lead to greater student participation. The underlying question that seems of importance is whether the virtual reality and face-to-face reality are the same, and whether the same outcomes could be accomplished in both? In other words, is the virtual reality real and authentic? The physical togetherness created by residential face-to-face pedagogy has been viewed as community in a theological sense, where educators carried out their work under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Delamarter 2004: 136) and where students could be transformed (Delamarter, Alanis, Haitch, Hofmann, Jones and Strawn 2007:64). Isolated individuals in virtual reality made possible by technology, is seen as non-conducive for what is key to theological education, namely spiritual formation (Naidoo 2012:3). Questions like how people could be formed outside the learning community, and when they are absent and isolated, arise (Delamarter 2004:137). These questions suggest that community is not possible in the virtual reality created by educational technologies. Disembodiment, therefore, seems to pose a great pedagogical and theological challenge to the training of ministers. Campbell (2013:59), however, claims that online communities still entail the basic act of social exchange, although these communities are often viewed as inauthentic and unreal (Campbell 2013:63).

Condon (2014:24) raises her concern with online education by asking if this engagement through technology really creates a sense of presence. She argues that, especially for the nursing profession, it is important for students to learn the art of being and knowing how to be present with patients. Could it be that theology students could unlearn the art of being present with people, which is such a vital component of being a religious leader? Kelsey (2002:3) is of the opinion that the training of ministers brings with it a particular type of critique which is centred on the theological nature of theological training. According to him, the theological nature is in line with the purpose of theological training. He plots his theological critique around theological anthropology with specific reference to the fact that it is humans who undergo theological training (Kelsey 2002:6). Kelsey (2002:7) further points to the incarnation according to which "Christ came amongst us as one of us, joyfully created, sustains and affirms us as human beings." The bearing of this on theological training is that students and educators should not be viewed as spiritual souls contained in a body, but rather as complex personal bodies with an extraordinary range of powers. This personal body and the corporate body of the Church are further understood

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as an extension of the body of Christ. In short, the body matters a great deal, especially in the Christian tradition. In the technological culture of the day, Kelsey (2002:8) claims "... there is a strongly spiritualising and dualistic picture of being human." Therefore, his central question is whether theological students are seen as personal machines or personal bodies? His well-articulated critique is thus directed towards disembodiment in educational technologies. Bulu (2012) describes several types of presence in the virtual space, namely place-presence, co-presence, and social presence. Kiran (2012:78), however, contends that technological presence is not the same as physical presence, but with the presence of technology there are both actuality and potentiality. However, these different kinds of presence could be seen as artificial and, therefore, not be viewed as similar to physical presence. If spiritual formation is one of the core elements of ministerial formation, we have to make time to reflect theologically on the reduction of the body in educational technologies. Is bodily absence really conducive for spiritual formation, which we believe to be intergenerational and primarily takes place in community? (Cloete 2012) The individual nature of educational technologies could be viewed as being in direct opposition to the communal nature of Christian spiritual formation. Dykstra (2005:95) argues that the life of faith is communal before it is individual. This means that we need each other for spiritual formation. Grenz (2002:95) confirms that the understanding of spiritual formation as communal project is endemic to all Christian traditions. Westerhoff (1976:53) even suggests that different generations are needed as part of the community for spiritual formation. The educational process in theological training should thus contribute to community formation that fosters spiritual formation. Naidoo (2012:2) contends that, for many years, theological institutions were concerned about the end product by asking the question what sort of person the Church needs, and tried to align programmes accordingly. In other words, what is aimed for or is expected of theological training, and what are the best pedagogical methods to deliver that? It could be argued that being is as important as knowing and doing in the training of ministers. Nel and Cook (2010:3) emphasise that the adequacy of the person in theological training is even becoming more important, since the person of the pastor or ministerial identity plays an increasingly more important role in ministry today.

However, disembodiment as part of educational technology, according to Esselman (2004:160), leads to the depersonalisation of the learning process, because it is mainly self-directed through instructional technologies. Esselman (2004:160) also points to the commodification of knowledge in a technological culture and refers to the two competing understandings of the role of higher education today, namely the 'gown approach' and the 'merit badge approach'. The first approach aims towards transforming the whole person into a productive and responsible citizen, while the latter stresses the acquisition of particular skills that will make the candidate more suitable for the labour market. It is argued that the 'gown approach', where the person is being regarded as valuable, is eroded in a technological age which is primarily market-driven and, therefore, directs the educational goals and processes to deliver candidates that will fit the market. Information is viewed as a

commodity and educational processes are packaged and presented as such, too. Therefore, the homepage of a faculty of theology often does not look much different from that of any other educational programmes and services (Esselman 2004:160). Naidoo (2012:2) also alludes to the tension that already exists between the educational goals of public universities and that of theological training, which could become even more complex in a technological era. Communication is central to education and, as is discussed early on in educational technologies, communication is mediated by technology. The fact that the body is absent in this kind of communication is problematic in many ways, as our bodies "... are inherently involved in our efforts to communicate ourselves as persons" (Kelsey 2002:9). Put differently, we need our bodies in order to communicate meaningfully and, therefore, the presence of both the educator and the student is of utmost importance in education. The key question that needs attention here is whether or not spiritual formation, as an integral part of ministerial formation, is being served by educational technologies. More empirical research is needed in order to give insight into this area.

3. Knowledge in a technological culture

It is important to take note of the role and status of knowledge in a technological culture. Mary Hess (2013:13) describes the way of learning in a digital age as "a new culture of learning." In a world where there is a large body of stable knowledge, teaching about the world might be functional and adequate, but in a digital age, knowing is changing all the time and deeply embedded in personal agency and experience. Therefore, learning through engagement is necessary (Hess 2013:14). In a context where there is a large body of established knowledge, an inquiring mind is of essence in order to establish what we do not know. This implies a new way of educating and learning at the same time. Shifting to new paradigms could cause uneasiness and take some time to be implemented and appreciated. If educators in theological institutions have been trained in an age of stable knowledge and teaching-based education, the new learning culture could seem too different and even impossible for them to facilitate.

Despite the fact that the information age is marked by a vast amount of available information, knowledge is regarded as more important than information, specifically for education. Sajjadi (2008:185) points out two developments with regard to knowledge in a technological culture: Knowledge is reduced to information which led to the delegitimisation of knowledge, and quantitative information becomes the authoritative scientific analysis. Both the quantification of knowledge and the minimised responsibility on the side of the knower is problematic for religious education. Religious education requires a qualitative epistemology characterised by understanding, reasoning and critical rationality (Sajjadi 2008:186). Theological training is not only about transferring information, but also requires critical engagement with what is known, is needed in order to transform the knower, and create a responsibility towards what is known. Theological students are trained to be spiritual leaders and, therefore, spiritual formation and religious discipline will be paramount as part of the educational process. Hess (2013:16) thus warns

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that the unlimited access to information does not mean unlimited access to wisdom. Wisdom is closely linked with spiritual formation which refers to an integration of everything that is part of our being.

The fluid nature of information in a digital culture is also viewed as both threat and opportunity to theological education, since it means there is no central canon or core of information that all must master to be considered educated (Kerr 2005:1011). Sajjadi (2008:188) explains hypertextual learning as “a nonlinear method of reading and interpreting information that is principally achieved in digital form.” The hypertext took the monopoly of knowledge from elites and created a democratic space where knowledge is made available to all. At the same time it led to the death of the author, as the reader becomes an active co-author or, sometimes, even the primary author of the text. Kerr (2005:1012) describes the fact that information could be altered and updated in radical and subtle ways, as mutability. Although the mutability of information gives agency to students to not only be consumers of information but also producers thereof, it means, on the other hand, that there is no place for an authorised version of any given item. Religious education, however, needs a core or a canon since traditional religious education has a hierarchal component. In traditional religious education, “teachers are considered the authoritative basis of religious information and knowledge” (Sajjadi 2008:187). However, in a technological culture, the teachers and students are on the same level, which means a weakening role of the teacher to transfer or interpret knowledge (Sajjadi 2008:189). Idiosyncrasy makes it possible for individuals to tailor their individual learning experience. This means that there is no common learning experience, because in a technological culture learning could be a solo activity (Kerr 2005: 1012–1013).

Van der Laan (2012:242–244) argues that although educational technologies make use of the imaginary in order to create experience, understanding and the ability to read are limited in a digital age. Educational technologies summarise and reduce content to such an extent that it is hardly possible to have in-depth understanding thereof. The content becomes superficial because “... a technological society desires and conceives its world in terms of graphs, drawings, tables, charts and diagrams. PowerPoint turns everything into those forms” (Van der Laan 2012:245). Language has to conform to the fundamental principle of technology, namely efficiency (Van der Laan 2012:245). This also has a direct bearing on critical thinking, since intellectual processes of reasoning is related to the word which is reduced in a technological culture. The overarching aim of especially tertiary education, is to assist students to be able to read with comprehension, critically engage with material and enable them to present their understanding in a systematic and coherent way. In the light of Van der Laan’s arguments, it seems that educational technologies could jeopardise this aim. The expectation from theological training is no different in this regard, as Nel and Cooke (2010:3) suggest theological students should be able to demonstrate the ability to reproduce knowledge in a conceptual and narrative manner. If reading is not favourable in a technological culture, it could lead to the inability to read with comprehension. This will hinder critical thinking, making it almost impossible

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to reach the above-mentioned aims. Due to the vast amount of information available, selection is not only possible, but is the norm, which contributes even more to the loss of mastering long, complex arguments and descriptions (Kerr 2005:1012).

One of the important questions is how teaching and learning, by using ICT, could be integrated best in order to serve the aim of training ministers. The integration of ICT in teaching and learning implies more than just a medium or tool that carries information (Hess 2002:31). It actually creates a complex process that facilitates meaning-making – not only of theory, but also of the self and the world. The creation and use of technology is, therefore, closely linked to who we are and are becoming (identity), the world that we create through communication, and the way we live our lives (ethics). These elements, namely identity formation, meaning-making and ethics, are at the heart of the training of ministers. Therefore, despite the challenges brought along with the integration of ICT, it could also be of tremendous value to theological education. Questions like how could and should theology and pedagogy interact in cyberspace, could guide the training of ministers using ICT.

Conclusion

The expectations surrounding the training of ministers are very high, as such training is often seen as the most efficient way to influence and shape the leaders of the Church (Anderson 2011:185). Therefore, theological reflection on the training of ministers as well as the mode by/in which the training is done, are of utmost importance. The context in which training of ministers takes place today, is described as a digital culture – making the use of educational technologies inevitable. It will thus be irresponsible for any training institution not to explore and find ways to integrate ICT in teaching and learning. Overall, the change brought about by technology is unpredictable and complex, and at best described as incomprehensible. Hence, it demands adaptability in real time, here and now (Allenby and Sarewitz 2011:162).

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