

## Introducing Design Thinking & Practical Theology: A New Interdisciplinary Partnership

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### ABSTRACT

This paper will introduce design thinking and practical theology as promising new interdisciplinary partners that can enhance their respective methodological and pedagogical approaches. Both share a focus on problem-solving, innovation and transformation and as such a partnership can be quite amenable. The paper will introduce design thinking to a practical theology audience by providing a review of its history, methods, and distinct academic and business discourses and contributions. Key similarities and correlations are explored in relation to their definitions, practical approaches, methodologies, and academic disciplines. Drawing on design theory research, it shows how design offers unique epistemological strengths that are vital in developing innovative solutions to multifaceted and complex 'wicked problems.' Concrete examples are discussed that specifically engage how the two can enhance one another in regards to professional practice and pedagogy.

### *INTRODUCTION*

**I**n this article, I will introduce design thinking and practical theology as promising new interdisciplinary partners. As I will show, they share a focus that circulates around problem-solving and transformation, which makes such a partnership quite amenable. Their unique strengths can make methodological



in the accomplishment of their individual and collective purposes.”<sup>5</sup> Design is something all people do, as design educator Robin Vande Zande explains: “design is a profession with particular skill sets and theories that are taught, but on another basic level, designing is an innate facility apparent in humankind.”<sup>6</sup> Buchanan further clarifies that “design is an art of invention and disposition, whose scope is universal, in the sense that it may be applied for the creation of any human-made product.”<sup>7</sup> The products of design can be varied such as domestic objects, visual communications such as logos and brands, strategic planning, buildings, urban planning, as well as experience design such as the flow of traffic through an airport.<sup>8</sup> As Vande Zande notes, “design is both a verb and a noun, which highlights the essential need to take into account both processes and final results.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, design speaks to both the process of design and the products of design.

Though practical theology is not typically described in terms of a problem-solving activity, in many cases it does have this focus as it can seek to guide change in practices, theologies, religious communities, and even cultures. Bonnie Miller-McLemore explains that “practical theology’s objective is both to *understand* and to *influence* religious wisdom in congregations and public life more generally. Many would argue that practical theology is, in fact, not complete without a move from *description* to *normative construction and action*.”<sup>10</sup> These moves to *understand* and *influence* or *describe* and *construct* is very similar to design methods that seek to *define problems* and *transform* them. Practical theologians describe this in similar ways with the nuance of their particular perspectives. For example, Dale P. Andrews states that the core of practical theology from an African American context is “how to *shape* faithful religious, moral, social, political, and communal practices that in turn shape human thriving, community, and faith traditions.”<sup>11</sup> Discussing an empirical practical theology approach, Richard Osmer states, that practical theology, “seeks to learn from the present context, as well as to *guide and even transform* the current context.”<sup>12</sup> As Joyce Mercer explains, foundational to feminist and womanist practical theology is “*imagining alternative futures* in which women together with others may flourish. Feminist [and womanist] practical theology thus works toward the *transformation of present injustice* in light of these alternative visions.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Rebecca Chopp explains that feminist theology, in general, can be understood as a form of practical theology because it “is oriented to what *may be*, to the *promise of hope*, [and] to the *transformation of the present*.”<sup>14</sup> My own definition of practical theology, from a feminist perspective, is a method of doing theology (either as an academic scholar, religious leader, or layperson) that emphasizes describing human practices as they *are*, imagining how they *could be*, and seeking to *transform* or *design practices* to shape particular outcomes. For me, practical theology is a design process.

However, it is also important to note that practical theology is a broad, multivalent term that can take on many meanings depending on particular contexts and certain approaches may not be oriented towards transformation.<sup>15</sup> To speak to this complexity, Miller-McLemore develops a four-fold definition of practical theology: it can be an *academic discipline*; *activity of faith*; *method* for studying theology in practice; or a *curricular area*.<sup>16</sup> In this paper, I will mostly be referring to practical theology as an academic “*discipline* among scholars” as one of the four areas defined by her. Even within these particular areas, there is still no broad consensus around approaches to practical theology within the field. However, at the heart of these shared interests and concerns is a focus on practices, particularly the theory-practice-theory relationship



During the last century, design has been researched and studied in an academic context, by design theorists from a variety of perspectives and approaches.<sup>25</sup> Design first became a theoretical topic around the 1920s as the industrial era complexified the ability to manufacture products. It was assumed that pre-industrial artisan and craftsman methods were not complex enough to deal with these new modes of production.<sup>26</sup> This became the impetus to discover a scientific method of design that could be replicated to design better products, thus the start of design thinking research. World War II brought both pressing problems and also novel technologies that needed to be integrated into civilian life. This furthered design method inquiries. In 1962, *The Conference of Design Methods* held in London, “marked the launch of design methodology as a subject or field of inquiry in the western academy.”<sup>27</sup> Behind this movement was a desire “to formulate the design method—[as] a coherent, rationalized method, [just] as “the scientific method” was supposed to be.”<sup>28</sup> However, this received criticism because of its positivistic approach. Design theorist Donald Schön argued that it assumed designers only worked on solving well-formed problems. In contrast, he observed that designers deal with “messy, problematic situations.”<sup>29</sup> Another theorist, Horst Rittel explicated this further by arguing that designers typically work on what he named, *wicked problems*:

A class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing.<sup>30</sup>

Richard Buchanan explains that *wicked problems* have a fundamental *indeterminacy*. That is, “there are no definitive conditions or limits to design problems,” in contrast to *determinate* problems, which exhibit precise conditions that engender concise solutions.<sup>31</sup> Simply illustrated, discovering a leak under your kitchen sink is a determinate problem, with a precise condition causing it—a hole in a rusted pipe. However, indeterminate or “wicked problems” are not as simple or linear. Racism in the United States is a wicked problem. It is intersectional, part of a broad range of interlocking systems and it cannot be solved in a simple linear way but must be approached from a variety of different perspectives.<sup>32</sup> While these are over-simplifications, they illustrate the fundamental differences between these different types of problems. Because designers work on indeterminate “wicked problems” Schön proposed a search for “an epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners . . . bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict.”<sup>33</sup> Design practices were explored with a variety of methods to determine epistemological design features—that is the analytical and creative thinking processes that designers use to develop their work. Several of these key features are discussed below.

## **DESIGN INTELLIGENCE**

In Nigel Cross’ qualitative research on expert designers, he finds that design thinking is a multifaceted cognitive skill and that expert designers exhibit a type of ‘design intelligence:’

Rather than solving merely ‘the problem as given’ they apply their intelligence to the wider context and suggest imaginative, apposite solutions that resolve conflicts and uncertainties. They have cognitive skills of problem framing, of gathering and structuring problem data and creating coherent patterns from the data that indicate ways of resolving the issues and suggest possible solution concepts . . . Good designers also apply constructive thinking not only in their individual work but also in collaboration in teamwork.<sup>34</sup>

Cross shows that experienced designers approach problems with a ‘breadth-first’ method. This involves broad exploration and the development of many sub-solutions as opposed to a ‘depth-first’ approach taken by novice designers. Novices will identify a problem and immediately begin to explore one in-depth solution, slowing the process down and typically not generating a successful resolution. Whereas expert designers widely examine the problem, drawing on the experience they have in their domain and reframing the problem as they go along. Cross shows that experts tend to stand back from the specifics of the problem and form abstractions, looking for underlying principles, rather than focusing on the surface features.<sup>35</sup> Cross notes that expert designers deal with ‘ill-defined’ problems as ‘ill-behaved’ problem solvers—they do not take the problem at face value but impose their view of the problem that directs the search for solutions.<sup>36</sup> He finds that design intelligence is similar across different fields of design—from graphic design to architecture to name a few.

Richard Buchanan’s research clarifies the integral connection between *problem naming* and *solution creating* by discussing a key feature of design, what he names *the doctrine of placements*. He argues that designers reframe problems from a different perspective, opening up a different vista to view the problem, which can reveal solutions inconceivable before. He calls this conceptual repositioning of problems *the doctrine of placements*:

The doctrine of placements provides a useful means of understanding what many designers describe as the intuitive or serendipitous quality of their work. Individual designers often possess a personal set of placements, developed and tested by experience. The inventiveness of the designer lies in a natural or cultivated and artful ability to return to those placements and apply them to a new situation, discovering aspects of the situation that affect the final design.<sup>37</sup>

This is one-way designers can break open fresh solutions for ossified problems.

Designers are also astute at reaching across disciplines and finding relevant knowledge for solving a particular wicked problem. Buchanan calls this skill a *principle of relevance*.<sup>38</sup> Because of this, he argues that design carves out a unique place within the academy, as a liberal art that has no subject matter of its own. In solving problems, it gathers and integrates, with relative depth, disparate knowledge across fields. This is a much-needed skill in the current technological era of specialization where “subjects contribute to the advance of knowledge, [but] also contribute to its fragmentation.”<sup>39</sup> Others have made a similar argument that design is uniquely suited for cultivating a much needed ‘meta-disciplinary’ collaboration amongst disciplines and professions to help balance extreme specializations in knowledge fields.<sup>40</sup> They argue that there is currently a dual trend in modern science disciplines:

On the one hand, specialization is brought to an extreme; people excel in ever more minute fields of expertise. On the other hand, our interest in a ‘big picture’ endures. Given the increasing focus on details, mono-disciplinary work is less and less capable of meeting that demand for big-picture thinking.<sup>41</sup>

Design thinking is a big-picture or meta-disciplinary thinking in that it often ignores “the restriction of admissible questions or analytical schemes typical of mono-disciplinary thinking” and instead uses “strategies that help to develop a common ground of knowledge and agreement between disciplines.”<sup>42</sup> These strategies can be transferable to solving wicked problems in any field or discipline. This makes design “a valuable methodology for interdisciplinary creative work as it specifically compliments mono-disciplinary thinking.”<sup>43</sup> It can be a way forward for more integrative knowledge production.

In sum, designers exhibit a wide range of epistemological skills that make them adept at reframing problems, integrating disparate knowledge across disciplines, and generating novel solutions particularly to wicked problems in a variety of contexts. But how do designers become adept at honing these skills? Cross shows that to achieve a level of expertise in design thinking:

A novice needs lots and lots of practice, guided by skillful teachers. The novice designer also needs exposure to many good examples of expert work in the domain, and needs to learn to perceive and retain these examples . . . Like learning a language, it is a matter of immersion and internalizing different levels of understanding and achievement.<sup>44</sup>

This research casts doubt on whether non-design professionals trained in design thinking will be able to achieve the same creative and strategic results as designers. However, even a novice understanding of design thinking can help people become aware of their problem-solving processes and hopefully improve their skills with practice.

As I will show below, the business world has leveraged both design thinking methods and expert designers to improve its own innovative and strategic practice.

## **DESIGN THINKING AND BUSINESS**

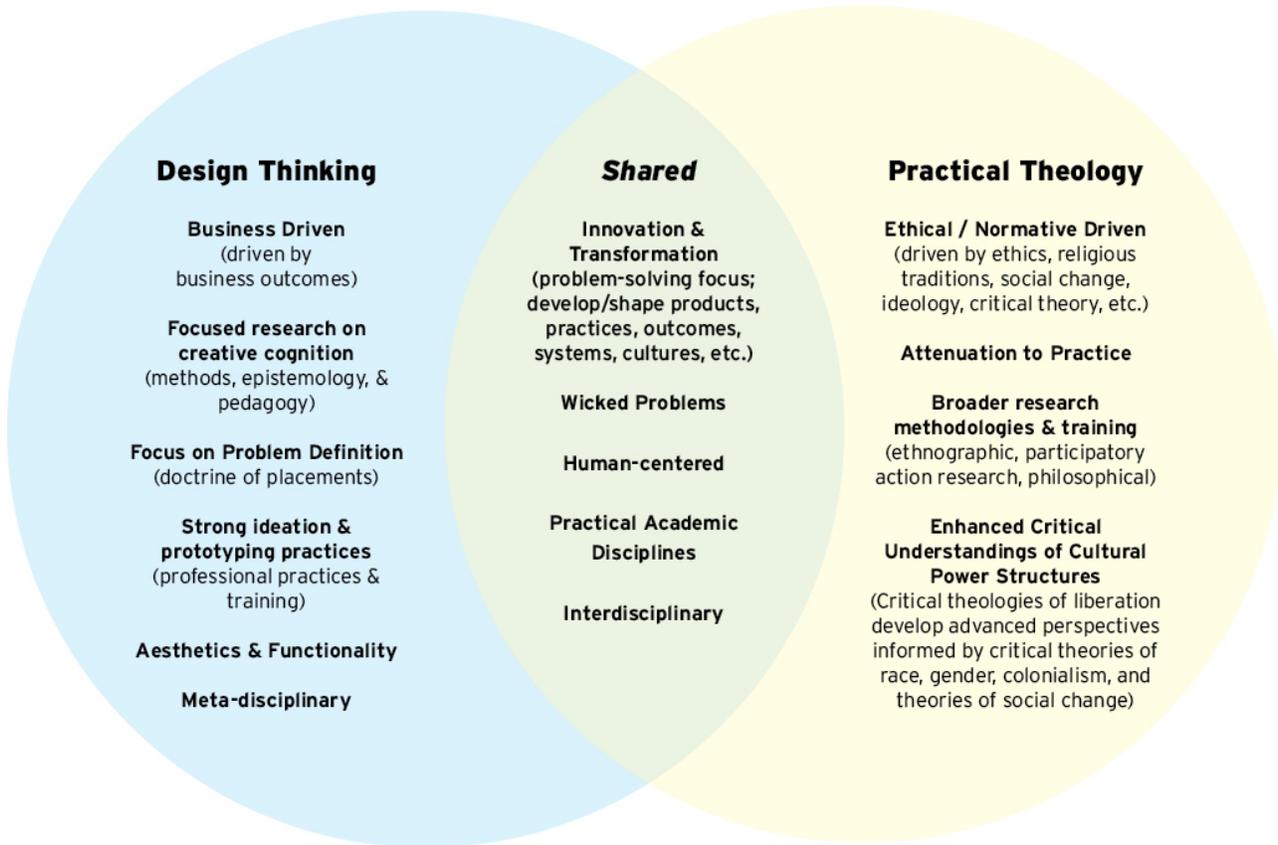
Design thinking emerged in the business world after the ‘dot-com’ bubble burst in the early 2000s, driving many floundering companies to focus on innovation techniques.<sup>45</sup> Global design strategy companies like IDEO began to see that design methods could help organizations at any level as explained by CEO Tim Brown, in his book *Change By Design*:

Rather than enlist designers to make an already developed idea more attractive, the most progressive companies are challenging them to create ideas at the outset of the development process . . . it pulls “design” out of the studio and unleashes its disruptive, game-changing potential. It’s no accident that designers can now be found in the boardrooms of some of the world’s most progressive companies. As a thought process, design has moved upstream.<sup>46</sup>





**Figure 2:**  
**Similarities & Differences between Design Thinking & Practical Theology**



As the above diagram shows, there are significant places of overlap between the two. Below I will briefly discuss these shared commonalities and differences.

**SHARED ASPECTS**

As discussed earlier, both design thinking and much of practical theology are oriented around *innovation* and *transformation* and as such are fundamentally focused on problem-solving. Secondly, the design thinking concept of ‘wicked problems’ also applies to the types of problems that practical theologians often contend with—they may be ill-defined and based in religious communities or larger cultures, where there are multitudes of issues and stakeholders. Thirdly, both can be considered *human-centered* in their approaches. For design thinking, particularly in the business literature, there is an emphasis on empathy and human-centered design. Designers are encouraged to put themselves in the position of end-users and see if the solutions are beneficial for them. Within practical theology, there is an implicit focus on the needs of particular communities as well as on being guided by religious norms or ethics that emphasize seeking to generate greater flourishing for all. Lastly, as academic disciplines, they both engage with topics of practice

or practical knowledge (*phronesis*), and they operate with *interdisciplinarity*. They both draw on a variety of disciplines to effectively complete their work.

In this next section, I will highlight areas of divergence between the two fields, which I see as their unique strengths. These provide the foundation for places they can help one another, which I will discuss in further depth in Part IV.

### ***PLACES OF DIVERGENCE***

A significant place of divergence is found in the driving forces behind them. Design thinking processes are typically leveraged for business outcomes. There are many exceptions to this statement, such as designers working for non-profits, political campaigns, or social justice movements, however, the design fields are typically harnessed for business objectives and design thinking has most significantly been leveraged as an interdisciplinary partner in business to help achieve market success. On the other hand, practical theology projects are not typically driven by explicit financial outcomes (though that can be a consideration). Rather than the financial bottom-line making some project successful, practical theologians may look at factors derived from religious convictions or ethical norms to analyze success. For example, they might ask whether a particular project created more gender or racial equality within the leadership of a faith-based community.

Other areas of differentiation point to the unique strengths of each. One design thinking strength is the research that has been conducted on the creative process, both exploring “design intelligence” (that is cognition or epistemological features), methods, and understanding design pedagogy. This research can help other fields such as practical theology, more thoroughly understand and improve their creative practices. Secondly, related to design intelligence, is the focus on *problem definition* and the ability to shift the landscape of the problem through the practice of ‘the doctrine of placements.’ A third strength is *strong ideation and prototyping practices*. In design school, designers learn to ideate and prototype quickly—taking a ‘breadth-first’ rather than a ‘depth-first’ approach, which allows for a broader repertoire of solutions. Design thinking has emerged from the visual arts and so solutions are typically geared towards both *aesthetics and functionality*, typically within particular constraints. This ties back into a human-centered approach because design thinking aims for aesthetics, which ultimately lies in the realm of the human good. Lastly, a major strength in design thinking is that it is *meta-disciplinary*. This is different from interdisciplinary, that is, using methods from other disciplines—rather meta-disciplinary speaks to the process of spanning disciplinary boundaries in a breadth-first approach to gather relevant knowledge to solve problems. These are all particular strengths I have found in design thinking that are different from particular strengths within practical theology.

In practical theology, a key strength lies in its attenuation to human practices—focusing on the practice > theory > practice relationship. This approach enables a careful analysis of how practices may be guided by implicit theories or theologies. Without such exploration, change may only have a surface level effect, not affecting the theories below the surface of the practice. This attenuation also makes practical

theologians adept at discerning what practices can teach us about theory—learning from the knowledge that emerges from the practice. To do this work practical theology draws on rich philosophical and anthropological resources and methods as partners to better understand practices and how they relate to larger cultural realities.<sup>61</sup> Secondly, many practical theologians are trained as interdisciplinary researchers, particularly in sociological methods such as ethnographic and participatory action research. Experience in these types of methods can gear practical theologians towards better describing and understanding problematic situations. Using methods such as participatory action research can also empower stakeholders in a given situation to become change agents.<sup>62</sup> This may help practical theologians develop more relevant solutions and also generate a level of community support and contribution to the development of solutions. Lastly, particular to liberationist approaches to practical theology (feminist, womanist, post-colonial, to name only a few), there is an emphasis on studying and using critical social theories. These theories carefully parse out the many insidious ways that patriarchal, colonial, and racial systems undergird many oppressive cultural institutions, systems, and ideologies. This knowledge is important if more just and liberative social change and innovation are sought. Because these systems are so ubiquitous and hegemonic, they often go unnoticed and can be mistaken as ‘common sense’—or just how the world works. Because of this, even those seeking social change may unintentionally perpetuate harmful ideologies and practices in their creative solutions. Liberationist practical theologians use critical social theory to help prevent this—pairing critical social theories with innovative practical work. This integrative work can be a useful model for other fields committed to social change, for example, within the for-profit business movement called ‘conscious capitalism’ that aims to develop businesses with just economic practices.<sup>63</sup>

As this comparison reveals, there are many overlapping characteristics of both design thinking and practical theology. At the heart of this comparison is that they are both problem solving and innovation-seeking practices. Although they go about this for different reasons and use different approaches this fundamental similarity provides a strong unity between the fields. I will further elucidate this point through a discussion of methodological similarities below.

### ***METHODOLOGICAL SIMILARITIES***

Like design, practical theology deals with wicked, indeterminate problems and attempts to transform or innovate situations by reshaping or reimagining practices. Both are fundamentally *innovation processes*. To further illustrate this, I have designed a diagram that draws together two methods of design thinking and three methods of practical theology under an overarching *innovation process* schema.<sup>64</sup> The diagram illustrates the close relation between methods and how they each correlate with an *innovation process* that has three basic, interconnected, and looping steps: *inspiration*, *ideation*, *implementation*.<sup>65</sup> The *inspiration* phase is where a problem or need is noticed and described giving rise to the project; *ideation* refers to the solution generating phase; and *implementation* to the execution of the solution. This basic schema can be detected through the different steps in various design and practical theology methods. Some of these methods contain more than three steps. However, these additional steps still correlate to one of the three

basic innovation steps. I have color-coded this so that the correlation can be easily detected. I have added descriptors to the practical theology steps, because some of the terminology may not be understood easily if you are not familiar with the method.

**Figure 2:**  
**Charting Design Thinking & Practical Theology Methods as Innovation Processes**

Innovation Process	Inspiration		Ideation		Implementation
<b>Design Thinking Method</b> IDEO	Empathy	Define	Ideate	Prototype	Test
<b>Visual Communication Design Method</b> Eric Karjaluo	Discovery	Planning	Creative	Application	
<b>Practical Theology Method</b> Richard Osmer	<b>Descriptive Task</b> What is going on?	<b>Interpretive Task</b> Why is this going on?	<b>Normative Task</b> What ought to be going on?	<b>Pragmatic Task</b> How might we respond?	
<b>Fundamental Practical Theology Method</b> Don Browning	<b>Descriptive</b> Study present context	<b>Historical</b> Study tradition	<b>Systematic</b> Fuse present context with tradition	<b>Strategic</b> How can we change practice?	
<b>Liberationist Practical Theological Approach</b> Drawn from feminist, & other approaches	<b>Understand Present Problem</b> Using lens of critical social theory		<b>Imagine alternatives</b> In dialogue with tradition		<b>Implementation</b> Creation of new theologies and/or practices

As this chart indicates there is quite a bit of similarity between these methods even though differences in nomenclature and focus may be present. I will not go into detail of each method to maintain the constraints of the paper; however, I will draw out broad similarities.<sup>66</sup> Each method undertakes an *inspiration* phase that may include problem definition, planning, research into the situation, and/or studies in tradition or theoretical perspectives. This leads to the *ideation* phase where solutions are generated. Again, approaches will be different here, but the overall focus is on solutions. Lastly, during the *implementation* phase, the newly generated or transformed product, practice, and/or system is applied. As already noted, these methods are not linear but each phase will loop back upon itself as the process evolves.

One key difference between the two is that practical theology methods make a dialogical turn towards *tradition* that often occurs as part of the *ideation* phase. What constitutes *tradition* will be variant depending upon each theologian. This connection to tradition is related to ethical or religious conviction theologians may hold themselves accountable to when developing their solutions or strategies. At times, their solutions will reshape the traditions themselves in an on-going traditioning process.<sup>67</sup>

This comparative study has helped me draw out several ways that design and practical theology can share resources and practices, helping to enhance one another. I will briefly explore these ideas in Part IV below.

## **PART IV**

### **SHARING RESOURCES**

A key insight I draw from this comparative study is that practical theology can be understood as a design thinking field within theology. This is an important correlation to make because if practical theologians begin to identify their work in this way, then it opens up new areas of research, practice, pedagogy, method, and collaborative partnerships. With such an understanding, it makes sense that practical theology might consider leveraging design thinking to help hone its innovation skills, as has the business world. This might be particularly useful now within the theological world as there are enormous strategic opportunities as many theological schools and religious organizations are facing institutional shifts and closings. Can design provide vital innovation and strategic help to reorient theological education and religious practice?

In turn, if those located within the design fields are introduced to practical theology as another design thinking field, they may be able to leverage several of the strengths found within practical theology to help enhance their practice. In the sections below, I will draw out several ways that such interdisciplinary exchange could occur. While there is not enough space in this paper to fully expound these approaches, they do point towards promising areas of future research and development.

### **EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES**

One avenue for this partnership could be through education. Just as some MBA programs utilize design thinking within their curricula to train more innovative business leaders, practical theology programs could consider a similar path. How could design thinking or design pedagogy be integrated into traditional academic theological programs or courses? One way could be to research how MBA programs are integrating design into their programs and learn from their curricular development. Another approach could be to look directly to design programs as curricular or pedagogical inspiration, particularly because practical theology can be considered a design field in its own right, as I argue above. As such how can we become better designers? Design theorists have shown that expert designers have a specific design intelligence that aids in solving wicked problems. Nigel Cross shows that much of that intelligence comes through extensive design training and emulating expert designers. How could practical theology programs imaginatively modify and integrate design training into their curricula to help foster greater 'design intelligence' among practical theologians?

Design theorists have explored the ways in which design pedagogy can enhance creative problem-solving in various other disciplines and it seems this could be the case in practical theology as well.<sup>68</sup> Robin Vande Zande discusses key aspects of teaching design in the following excerpt:

In the problem stage, the student designers identify the parameters of the situation through analysis of the problems and objectives and then research information related to the problem. By following this format, students learn problem identification. *During the creative stage, students use brainstorming and visualization to produce numerous possible solutions, without jumping to the first, most obvious conclusion.* This stage allows them to realize new patterns of thinking or action. Regarding the third creative behavior mentioned in this report, the integration of knowledge, design also lends itself very naturally to interdisciplinary teaching.<sup>69</sup>

I have italicized the creative or ideation stage that Vande Zande discusses because I think it is here that practical theology could benefit its own pedagogical practice. While design students are typically working on some sort of visual project, whether it be for example architecture, graphic design, or product design to name a few, practical theology students are typically focused on abstract problems such as theological problems or communal problems. And while design students may produce prototypes of their products, practical theologians typically produce scholarship by way of research papers. Design classrooms are set-up for iterative approaches to the design process, with tables for sketching and prototyping, and cork boards for pinning up work for professor and peer critiques. Theological classrooms are not typically set up in this way, nor are they oriented towards iteration and critique of ideas. However, some of these practices could be integrated into theological classrooms, particularly in seminars and colloquia designed to train future practical theologians and religious leaders. Or entirely new courses could be designed as a design thinking and theology methods courses. Such a course could implement weekly feedback critiques, as is a staple in design schools, and this could help students approach their projects from a variety of different ways. This type of critical practice enables peers to learn from one another and helps them practice taking a breadth-first approach and exploring a different problem and solution framing (the doctrine of placements). The practice gained in such coursework could stay with the student throughout their career as future academics or religious and non-profit leaders. The creative outcomes for students engaged in such design thinking practices over the length of a course or two would be greater than simply taking a workshop on design thinking, as design research has shown.<sup>70</sup>

This classroom approach could be further enhanced if creative practices from the design world or designers themselves were to come into the classroom to help students work through their projects. Here I draw from an example from my own experience teaching a one-day design thinking immersion class for a Doctor of Ministry course at Boston University School of Theology.<sup>71</sup> For part of the day, we visited several Boston design studios, meeting with their creative directors and designers. One Boston firm, MK3 Creative, had one of our students bring their Doctor of Ministry project forward as if they were a business client.<sup>72</sup> The MK3 Creative team used their creative briefing process to get a fuller account of the project, then had their designers brainstorm, on the spot, through a variety of approaches to the project. At the end of the hour-long session, the student had perspectives and possible solutions they had never considered before. Research has shown that such professional feedback can help novice design thinkers become more adept.<sup>73</sup> And Vande

Zande notes that one-way design is taught is “through participatory activities, field trips, and discussions with design professionals.”<sup>74</sup> Both field trips and/or perhaps a design professional in the classroom as a co-teacher could be an effective way to enhance design thinking in practical theology students and in turn make their projects more innovative.

In a similar interdisciplinary exchange, practical theologians could develop an interdisciplinary course in design schools that bring insights from philosophical studies of human practice, social change, and social critical theories in dialogue with design. Part of the course could be to teach how large oppressive systems operate and are often perpetuated through practices and patterns. Such a course could equip designers to be better adept at designing towards the creation of more just cultures and products. It could help designers reflect on their own ethical or religious norms and how they might develop work that is in line with their convictions. It could also be a place to introduce designers to liberatory research models such as participatory action research, which allows various community stakeholders to be part of the process of change.

### **ENHANCING APPROACHES**

A second way that design thinking and practical theology could work together is by helping to enhance particular approaches. For example, design thinking and practice could also enhance a poetic or aesthetic approach to practical theology, which draws on poetic mediums as a powerful means for communication and transformation. For example, Heather Walton argues that poetic mediums express what is “unspeakable” through rational discourse.<sup>75</sup> As such they can help feminist practical theologians re-imagine oppressive religious traditions into more just ones through a ‘poetics of resistance’—that is a theological process that is transgressive, political and literary.<sup>76</sup> She also argues that the task of creating new metaphors is a vital part of Christian practice.<sup>77</sup> Here is an example where design could enhance this approach—theologians could partner with graphic designers who are experts in creating simple and impactful metaphors to represent complex information. When businesses need complex stories or information distilled into a powerful metaphor, they work with graphic designers. For example, designers, can take the complex identity of a business and distill it into a simple visual metaphor—a *logo*. In a similar exchange, designers could work with theologians, like business clients, to help them develop their complex theological constructions into metaphoric form. For example, helping a feminist practical theologian concept a liberative religious symbol or metaphor for God based on their research and theological constructions.

Roberto S. Goizueta and Bernard Reymond also advocate for a poetic or aesthetic approach. Goizueta shows that participating in poetic rituals like the dramatic retelling of the Virgin of Guadalupe story can be transformational for oppressed people. For example, playing the part of Juan Diego who discovers his subjectivity during the course of the play can help the actor go on their own journey to discover their own subjectivity. As Goizueta explains, “the narrative and fiesta of Guadalupe thus reveal and affirm a new way of *being* human.”<sup>78</sup> Thus, this poetic practice can cultivate individual transformation. Reymond argues that a poetic work, such as a piece of music could be considered practical theology in and of itself and therefore,

“a theologian should also be able to express in the form of musical composition or interpretation the parts of his [sic] thinking or research which cannot be expressed appropriately in the form of words.”<sup>79</sup> However for this to be possible he states that practical theology would need to “revise its methods, enlarge the scope of its references, [and] question what it has considered as maybe too established.”<sup>80</sup>

Goizueta and Reymond’s perspectives open up other areas where a partnership with design could enhance a poetic approach, even beyond the educational examples I cite above. Practical theologians interested in poetics could train in specific design methods to complement their other research and analytical training. Just as a student interested in quantitative research might take a statistics course to become adept at their interdisciplinary approach, a student interested in a poetic approach could cross-register in a graphic design course on logo development, where they could become more practiced at creating poetic rituals or aesthetic compositions *as* their theological work. These are just a few examples of how design could enhance a poetic and aesthetic approach to practical theology.

As for design thinking and professional design practice, they also can be enhanced by practical theology approaches. For example, professional designers working on projects geared towards a positive social change could leverage the practices found in liberationist practical theology in pairing social critical theory with practical work. For example, practical theologians could partner in design projects like those produced from a design group called Project M, described below:

Project M is a program for creative people who are already inspired to contribute to the greater good, and are looking for a platform to collaborate and generate ideas and projects bigger than themselves.<sup>81</sup>

The group has done such projects as creating a *Pie Lab*—a local business in a rural, impoverished Alabama town that is also a community gathering space.<sup>82</sup> Another example is their creation of *Plot 63*, a horseshoe park in an abandoned lot in Detroit that serves as a vibrant community recreation and gathering area.<sup>83</sup> Such projects have community and social justice at their heart. However, as practical theologians have shown, without a strong social critical lens, even those seeking to bring about positive change can sometimes unwittingly perpetuate problematic hierarchical, sexist, and racial systems because our awareness can be lacking, even with the best of intentions. A good example of this found in the work of Xochitl Alvizo, where she studies the emergent church.<sup>84</sup> Her research shows that though many emergent churches are driven by a mission to be inclusive and organic in their structure, after careful feminist analysis, many are still implicitly perpetuating problematic sexist structures. This is to illustrate that sometimes even the best intentions are not enough. Deeper analysis is needed. This is not to imply that Project M is doing this, it is merely to note that any group like this stands to benefit from perspectives from those experienced in analyzing problematic gender, race, and economic systems that often go undetected. It could add another level of analysis and awareness to such groups projects to help them more fully live into their mission.

## **CONSULTANCY WORK**

Lastly, one hope in writing this article is to introduce the fields of practical theology and design to our similarities and our unique strengths—not only to share resources but also to expand our awareness of potential consulting partners when particular needs arise. Just as the business world utilizes the expertise of designers across their organizations, so too could designers directly consult in strategic projects in theological education, practical theology, and/or religious communities. Designers could be included in cross-disciplinary ‘smart teams’ that work directly on ‘wicked problems’ that these institutions might have. Because the strength of design is not in a particular subject matter but in solving ‘wicked problems’ they do not need to be experts in our academic institutions or religious communities to offer vital strategic and innovative solutions. Theorist Charles Owen has argued for the importance of including designers in policy-planning; the same could be said for including designers in re-imaginative or revitalizing projects in practical theology. Designers could be included in grant proposals for projects that are helping imagine the way forward for many of our institutions. Seeing designers as important strategic partners in our research could help to enhance practical theology projects across a broad variety of contexts.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, design thinking and practical theology both work interdisciplinarily and both push at the boundaries of traditional academic disciplines. They are both interested in change and transformation—that is shaping cultures, solving problems, and designing new practices. To do this transformation they engage in a variety of methods, approaches, and often collaborate with interdisciplinary partners in order to help describe their problems and find potential solutions. Because of these similarities, it is evident that a productive interdisciplinary partnership between these two can be cultivated. It is even possible that practical theology might embrace a new identity—or ‘conceptual repositioning’—for understanding itself as the *design field* of theology. Regardless of how the two might partner with one another, their connection opens up a new vista of resources that can enhance practices for both.

NOTES

1 Tim Brown, *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009). 8.

2 Brown, *Change by Design*, 7.

3 [Illegible text]

4 Drawing on examples from the business world may generate a visceral, negative response when many theologians critique global injustices perpetuated by neo-global capitalism and business practices. However, design is a human tool that can be leveraged in just or unjust ways. Just as it is too important of a tool to leave in the design studio, I believe it is too important to cede to the business world.

5 Richard Buchanan, “Design Research and the New Learning,” *Design Issues* 17, no. 4 (2001): 9. Buchanan creates this definition of design with an engagement with Aristotelian philosophy, particularly, in the context of Aristotelian causes. His explanation of his definition of design as connected to Aristotelian philosophy generates further clarity in his definition: “Power” is the efficient cause or agency of action in design . . . It resides in human beings as a natural talent that may be cultivated and enhanced through education. “Conceiving, planning, and making” is the final cause, in the sense that it identifies the sequence of goals towards which design thinking and practice move. “Products” represent the formal cause, in the sense of the formal outcome of the design process that serves human beings. And in the “accomplishment of their individual and collective purposes; represents the material cause of design, in the sense that the subject matter or scope of application of design is found in the activities, needs, and aspirations of human beings.”

6 Robin Vande Zande, “Design Education Supports Social Responsibility and the Economy,” *Arts Education Policy Review* 112, no. 1 (2011): 26–34. 26.

7 Buchanan, “Design Research,” 9.

8 Buchanan, “Design Research,” 9–10. Here Buchanan describes *four orders of design* to categorize the many different products that designers create and the respective professional practices associated with them: *symbols* (logos, brands, photography—graphic design); *things* (material products—fields such as industrial or fashion design); *actions* (design of activities and organized services—interaction design, experience design, strategic planning); and *thoughts* (design of complex systems and environments—engineering, architecture, and urban planning).

9 Vande Zande, “Design Education Supports Social Responsibility and the Economy,” 28.

10 Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Five Misunderstandings about Practical Theology,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 1 (2012): 25. Here Miller-McLemore discusses the misunderstanding that practical theology is not also constructive but rather only attends to practice description.

11 Dale P. Andrews, “African American Practical Theology,” in *Openings in the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, eds. Kathleen Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 11–30. 11.

12 Osmer, Richard. “Empirical Practical Theology,” in *Openings in the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, eds. Kathleen Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 61–78. 61.

13 Joyce Mercer, “Feminist and Womanist Practical Theology,” in *Openings in the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, eds. Kathleen Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 97–114. 97.

14 Rebecca S. Chopp, “Christian Moral Imagination: A Feminist Practical Theology and the Future of Theological Education,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 1, no. 1 (1997): 97–109, 98.

- 15 Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “The Contributions of Practical Theology,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 1–20. 5.
- 16 Miller-McLemore, “The Contributions of Practical Theology,” 1–20. See page 5 for her fuller definitions of each area of practical theology.
- 17 Miller-McLemore, “The Contributions of Practical Theology,” 3.
- 18 Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 9. Here, Browning argues that all theological disciplines, even theoretical ones such as systematic theology, are fundamentally related to practice based on the premise that all of the theory is practice-laden.
- 19 Buchanan, “Design Research,” 5.
- 20 Schools such as Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) are examples of prominent, independent art and design schools.
- 21 Buchanan, “Design Research,” 6.
- 22 This survey will be a means of introducing the topic to those in a practical theological context. Since the assumed reader of this article is someone already familiar with practical theology, I will not provide an equal treatment of practical theology in order to maintain the constraints of this article. However, for readers unfamiliar with practical theology I recommend the following introductory texts: Richard Robert Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008); Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Introduction: The Contributions of Practical Theology,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 1–20; Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman, “Mapping the Field of Practical Theology,” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), 62–85; Mary Elizabeth Moore, “Editorial: Practical Theology: Bound by a Common Center or Thin Threads?” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 10, no. 2 (2007): 163–167.
- 23 Prominent examples of such texts are: Bernard Roth, *The Achievement Habit: Stop Wishing, Start Doing, and Take Command of Your Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015); Thomas Lockwood and Edgar Papke, *Innovation by Design: How Any Organization Can Leverage Design Thinking to Produce Change, Drive New Ideas, and Deliver Meaningful Solutions* (Wayne, NJ: Career Press, 2018); Tom Kelley and David Kelley, *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All* (New York: Crown Business, 2013); Tom Kelley, *The Art Of Innovation: Lessons in Creativity from IDEO, America’s Leading Design Firm* (New York: Currency/Doubleday, 2001); Tim Brown, *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).
- 24 Nigel Cross, *Designerly Ways of Knowing* (London: Springer, 2006). 54. Nigel Cross’ qualitative research suggests that there are particular ways that designers become expert, and simply applying a method does not garner what Cross calls ‘design intelligence.’
- 25 Design theorist, Nigel Cross, explains that there have been four distinct trajectories to this academic discourse that include: *scientific design*, *design science*, *science of design*, and *design as a discipline*. Each one has slightly different methods and approaches to the study of design. He explains these in his short essay: Nigel Cross, “Designerly Ways of Knowing: Design Discipline Versus Design Science.” *Design Issues* 17, no. 3 (2001): 49–55.

- 26 Cross, "Designerly Ways of Knowing," 52.
- 27 Cross, "Designerly Ways of Knowing," 49. This desire to formulate the design process is roughly replicated by the business world's recent embrace of transposable design thinking method to aid non-designers in more innovative thinking.
- 28 Cross, "Designerly Ways of Knowing," 52.
- 29 Cross, "Designerly Ways of Knowing," 54.
- 30 Richard Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking." *Design Issues*, 8, no. 2 (1992): 16.
- 31 Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," 16.
- 32 An example of a wicked problem in a design field would be an architectural challenge to design a building to fit in a particular location with geographical factors in mind. For example, the architectural task of designing a building that will withstand earthquakes and hurricanes and aesthetically integrate into a historic neighborhood in Boston. The design of the building is a wicked problem because there is no one right solution to the design of this building, various designs could be drafted depending upon the specific approach the architect would like to take.
- 33 Nigel Cross, *Design Thinking: Understanding How Designers Think and Work* (Oxford: Berg, 2011). 54.
- 34 Cross, *Design Thinking*, 136. In this book, Cross presents a series of in-depth case studies developed from qualitative observation of expert designers that show evidence of how they think and work.
- 35 Cross, *Design Thinking*, 146.
- 36 Cross, *Design Thinking*, 147.
- 37 Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," 13.
- 38 Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," 18.
- 39 Buchanan, "Design Research," 6.
- 40 T. Lindberg, C. Noweski, and C. Meinel, "Evolving Discourses on Design Thinking: How Design Cognition Inspires Meta-disciplinary Creative Collaboration," *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research* 8, no. 1 (2010): 34.
- 41 Lindberg, Noweski, and Meinel, "Evolving Discourses on Design Thinking," 34.
- 42 Lindberg, Noweski, and Meinel, "Evolving Discourses on Design Thinking," 35.
- 43 Lindberg, Noweski, and Meinel, "Evolving Discourses on Design Thinking," 35.
- 44 Cross, *Design Thinking*, 147.

- 45 Ulla Johansson-Sköldberg, Jill Woodilla, and Mehves Çetinkaya, “Design Thinking: Past, Present and Possible Futures,” *Creativity & Innovation Management* 22, no. 2 (2013): 121–146.
- 46 Brown, *Change by Design*, 7. IDEO is described as a “global design company committed to creating positive impact.” See “About IDEO: Our Story, Who We Are, How We Work.” Accessed August 24, 2019. <https://www.ideo.com/about>.
- 47 John Bielenberg et al., *Think Wrong: How to Conquer the Status Quo and Do Work That Matters* (San Francisco: Instigator Press, 2016). Thinking Wrong is an idea developed by the design firm Future. I had an opportunity to meet Future’s founder John Bielenberg and discuss design thinking with him at the Process Theology Conference at Claremont University in June 2015.
- 48 Idris Mootee, *Design Thinking for Strategic Innovation: What They Can’t Teach You at Business or Design School* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013). In this book, Mootee does not advocate for a clear method of design thinking but rather for recognizing its key principles: action-oriented; comfortable with change; human-centric; integrates foresight; a dynamic constructive process; promotes empathy; reduces risks; creates meaning; brings enterprise creativity to next level; and the competitive logic of business strategy. This is one of the few business texts that reference the design thinking academic discourse.
- 49 Mootee, *Design Thinking for Strategic Innovation*, 63.
- 50 Mootee, *Design Thinking for Strategic Innovation*, 59.
- 51 Nigel Cross, *Design Thinking: Understanding How Designers Think and Work* (Oxford: Berg, 2011).
- 52 Brown, *Change by Design*, 26.
- 53 “Design Thinking: People First,” *The Economist*, accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/whichmba/design-thinking-people-first>.
- 54 Description of IBM’s design thinking approach found on their website: “We think the systems of the world should work in the service of people. At the heart of our human-centered mission is Enterprise Design Thinking: a framework to solve our users’ problems at the speed and scale of the modern enterprise.” Design Thinking Courses and Certifications,” Accessed August 24, 2019. <https://www.ibm.com/design/thinking/page/framework>. I recently connected with St. George’s school in Providence who hosted IBM design thinkers that led workshops for St. George’s high school students as part of IBM’s high school design thinking outreach program.
- 55 “Revs Program at Stanford | Connecting the Past, Present and Future of the Automobile,” accessed August 24, 2019, <https://revs.stanford.edu/about/people/557>.
- 56 Johansson-Sköldberg, Woodilla, and Cetinkaya, “Design Thinking.” 128. For other MBA programs that integrate design thinking, see: <https://www.darden.virginia.edu/online/design-thinking-innovation>; <http://designmba.cca.edu>; <http://www.philau.edu/strategicdesignmba/>, accessed July 10, 2019.
- 57 The popularity of design thinking among Rotman’s MBA students is evident in that “a recent bootcamp attracted 220 of . . . 350 MBA students, and the design student club has overtaken the finance club in popularity.” Found in: “Design Thinking: People First,” *The Economist*, accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/whichmba/design-thinking-people-first>.

- 58 As *The Economist* reports: “Since it was first introduced into business schools in 2006 it has become more popular on MBA programmes around the world.” See “Design Thinking: People First,” *The Economist*, accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/whichmba/design-thinking-people-first>. See also: Melissa Korn, “Forget B-School, D-School Is Hot,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 7, 2012.
- 59 Cara Wrigley and Kara Straker, “Design Thinking Pedagogy: The Educational Design Ladder,” *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 54, no. 4 (July 4, 2017): 374–85.
- 60 Brown, *Change By Design*, 8.
- 61 Here I am thinking of the fields drawing upon Alasdair MacIntyre, Pierre Bourdieu, and Charles Taylor.
- 62 Elizabeth Conde-Frazier explains the benefits of this type of research here: Elizabeth Conde-Frazier “Participatory Action Research: Practical Theology for Social Justice,” *Religious Education* 101, no. 3 (2006): 321–29.
- 63 Rajendra Sisodia, *Conscious Capitalism Field Guide: Tools for Transforming Your Organization* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2018); John Mackey, *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013).
- 64 I have chosen these methods as examples and they are not meant to be an exhaustive representation of methodologies in either field.
- 65 Tim Brown discusses this schematic throughout his book *Change by Design*.
- 66 Those further interested can explore the methods from the sources I drew them from: IDEO’s model found in Brown, *Change by Design*; Eric Karjaluo, *The Design Method: A Philosophy and Process for Functional Visual Communication* (Berkeley: New Riders, 2014), 62; Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 4; Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 6–7 and 55–58; I did not cite a particular source for the Liberationist Practical Theology Approach. See Mercer, “Feminist & Womanist Practical Theology” as one example that talks about this method.
- 67 A good example of this is found in feminist ecclesiological work that often seeks to reshape patriarchal practices within churches. See for instance, Rosemary Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).
- 68 Robin Vande Zande, “Design Education Supports Social Responsibility and the Economy,” *Arts Education Policy Review* 112, no. 1 (2011): 26–34; Cara Wrigley and Kara Straker, “Design Thinking Pedagogy: The Educational Design Ladder,” *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 54, no. 4 (2017): 374–85; Stephanie Elizabeth Wilson and Lisa Zamberlan, “Design Pedagogy for an Unknown Future: A View from the Expanding Field of Design Scholarship and Professional Practice,” *International Journal of Art & Design Education* 36, no. 1 (2017): 106–17; M. Ann Welsh and Gordon E. Dehler, “Combining Critical Reflection and Design Thinking to Develop Integrative Learners,” *Journal of Management Education* 37, no. 6 (2013): 771–802; Robin Vande Zande et al., “The Design Process in the Art Classroom: Building Problem-Solving Skills for Life and Careers,” *Art Education* 67, no. 6 (2014): 20–27; Robin Vande Zande, “Teaching Design Education for Cultural, Pedagogical, and Economic Aims,” *Studies in Art Education* 51, no. 3 (2010): 248–61.; Adam Royalty, “Design-Based Pedagogy: Investigating an Emerging Approach to Teaching Design to Non-Designers,” *Mechanism and Machine Theory* 125 (2018): 137–45;

McLuskie, Peter. "Design Thinking: Pedagogy and the Promise of Utopia." *European Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship* (2017): 819-22; and Roy Glen et al., "Teaching Design Thinking in Business Schools," *The International Journal of Management Education* 13, no. 2 (2015): 182–92.

69 Zande, "Design Education Supports Social Responsibility and the Economy," 29.

70 Cross, *Design Thinking*. Cross' qualitative research suggests that there are particular ways that designers become expert and simply applying a method does not garner what Cross calls 'design intelligence.'

71 Twice I taught a one-day immersion session on design thinking as part of Boston University School of Theology, Doctor of Ministry course: *Leadership and Innovation Practices*, taught by Dean Mary Elizabeth Moore (August 2016 and 2107).

72 See <https://www.mk3creative.com> to learn more about the studio and their work.

73 Cross, *Design Thinking*, 147.

74 Vande Zande, "Design Education Supports Social Responsibility and the Economy," 29.

75 Heather Walton, "Poetics," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 173–182. 180.

76 Walton, "Poetics," 175, 180. Here Walton cites Bonnie Miller-McLemore's call to challenge limitations of imposed frameworks through a 'poetics of resistance.' She also draws on Rebecca Chopp's idea of a 'poetics of testimony' that occurs when oppressed groups find 'narrative agency' after engagement with literature, poetry or autobiography and are able "to envision life, be it personal, interpersonal or social in new ways."

77 Walton, "Poetics," 180.

78 Roberto S. Goizueta, "Practicing Beauty: Aesthetic Praxis, Justice, and U.S. Latino/a Popular Religion" in *Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions*, ed. Wolfeich (Paulist Press: 2014), 149–167. 161.

79 Bernard Reymond, "Music and Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 5, no. 1 (2001): 82–93.

80 Reymond, "Music and Practical Theology." 92.

81 Project M was founded by prominent designer John Bielenberg, after leaving a successful career in the corporate world to create more social justice oriented work. See <http://projectmlab.com>.

82 See "PieLab" for more details: <http://www.projectmlab.com/PieLab>, accessed July 10, 2019.

83 See Plot 63 for more details: <http://www.projectmlab.com/Plot-63>, accessed July 10, 2019.

84 Xochitl Alvizo, "A Feminist Analysis of the Emerging Church: Toward Radical Participation in the Organic, Relational, and Inclusive Body of Christ" Boston University Dissertation, 2015.