

Dialogue as a Learning Method in Theological Education Evangelical Theological Seminary as a Case Study

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Abstract

The text discusses the possibility of the application of dialogue as a method of learning in theological education. As the author comes from a Protestant milieu, the focus of analysis will be on Protestant theological education in the Republic of Croatia, and more specifically, the use of dialogue as a method of learning at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, which is the case study. To this end the author conducted a pilot study among the employees of the college and the results confirmed the use and effectiveness of dialogue as a method of teaching in theological education. The conclusions suggest that the dialogue model is based on the relationship between God and men, and within the triune nature of God Himself; that it leads toward joint action-fulfillment of the Kingdom on earth—by both man and God as partners; that it also impacts positively the students, easing the adoption of new knowledge, seeking their active involvement in the class by reflecting on their past experiences; and that it encourages independent critical thinking and the application of acquired knowledge in the context of society.

Key words: *dialogue, method, theology, education, reflection, involvement, contextualization.*

Dialogue as model and method

Dialogue can be defined in several ways. It can be a model and a pattern according to which something is set, presented, imagined, or improved upon; an approach based on cooperation and participation; the goal which should be at-

tained; but also a method, a way, a path, and a procedure which helps in reaching correct conclusions and understanding.¹

As *dialogomai* (to understand, get involved a conversation) it points to the ability of the logos to become the word, to articulate itself and through the language, complete the project called “man”. Namely, man is being completed through language that “helps man to relieve the burden of the here and the now” (Gehlen 1990:255). This process begins with the thought which possesses intention and is directed at things, but also at the other person, i.e. the listener as the interlocutor. In this way, the self is being enriched with a new word (i.e. thought) which stemmed from the dialogue, while the existence of the interlocutor confirms my own existence. The dialogue has both cognitive and ontological functions. Ontologically, it is the central point in which the being becomes fully realized via the activity through which it reveals both itself and the others (Bakhtin 1973:213). Epistemologically, dialogue is expressed through the language and is fully realized by avoiding monologism and the tendency of imposing the truth (Bahtin, in: Kristeva 2002:63). Dialogue is both the space and the condition of creation. Through dialogue, we are open for the “power of trust”; this leap of faith is what inspires others for “thinking and observation, those powerful human reactions which lead to understanding and reconciliation” (Šarčević 2011:28). This “new” world of language once created becomes a parallel, virtual world in which man becomes a being of a relationship, but also a being which is on a distance from the world. This distance is essential for constructing our “I” which embraces the potential “you” and provides the experience of fullness (Gehlen 1990:267-279).

In terms of education, dialogue is by no means an aimless discussion (i.e. informal, friendly chat), but a direct, subject-oriented, goal-focused exchange of opinions, attitudes, and impressions. It is also not a lecture in the narrow sense of the word (expounding knowledge *ex cathedra* to be accepted and repeated), but includes the knowledge and experiences of the other party (cooperative, dialogical learning), which is aimed at new discoveries through nurturing listening, patience, and trust. This is why it is said that the main purpose of dialogue is to become aware of our own selves, to be more faithful to our foundational values, and its goal is understanding, enriching, truth, and respect (Gioia 1997:611). Dialogue is an interactive tool which enables us to better direct others to new things through an exchange (of knowledge and experiences) between the teacher and the students. Its basic guidelines are: teaching through encouraging reminiscing, connecting and reasoning; acquiring new knowledge through learning and active participation (cooperation), as well as contextualization of what is being learned

1 See: Vladimir Anić, *Veliki rječnik hrvatskoga jezika* (2006.) or Hrvatski jezični portal, <http://hjp.novi-liber.hr/> as well as other encyclopedic and vocabulary sources.

(Vella 2002). As a teaching method it is a “form of communication between teachers and students, or between students themselves, through which experiences, understanding and attitudes about the curriculum content are exchanged.” The emphasis is on questions and answers, which go “two-ways,” i.e. “multiple ways,” and through which we problematize, actualize, but also verify that which is existent, but also reveal what is undiscovered (Zorić 2008:27). Dialogism is a complex process. It is closely connected with reflection (Edwell 1997), and thus becomes a teaching about the new, which is based on creating new links between known (as well as unknown) concepts, on assumptions and deeper understanding, during which it requires the use of critical thinking in verifying the data and its validity, as well as continuity in order to explore potential solutions for the presented problem. Finally, it involves understanding concepts, as well as the context for the application of new knowledge. Thus, dialogue can be said to be related to metacognition (Georghiades 2004:365-383) as a process which leads to conceptual changes in learning and which helps in a longer retention of that which has been learned. It also helps build skills which lead toward accomplishing desired teaching goals and a way of following what has been accomplished, but also of transferring knowledge (Donovan, Hannigan and Crowe 2001:221-228), because it promotes easier acceptance of new insights and upgrading existing knowledge, a comparison of what has been learned with what was known before, as well as a new context, thus facilitating the application of new insights in new situations and solutions.

Dialogue in theology

When we speak about dialogue at a wider social level, we emphasize that dialogue requires an open exchange of information, compatibility of assets and goals we wish to accomplish, and the equal possibility of participation and acknowledgment and acceptance of participants in the dialogue (e.g. see: Johan Galtung, Jean-Paul Lederer, Gene Sharp, and other authors).

On the other hand, in the context of theological education, dialogue includes God talking with people, dialogue between people, dialogue between communities, and the dialogue of concepts, values, beliefs, a way of life. Therefore, theological education includes teaching about God’s plan of creation, revelation and redemption (the Holy Scriptures and doctrines), as well as exploring people’s responses to the calling directed through faith, but also through acquiring knowledge and wisdom, i.e. discovering the contents and proclaiming what has been said (cf. 1 Cor 12:4-11). When we speak about the first level of dialogue in theology—i.e. God’s discourse with humans—it is important to understand that it is impossible to accept the classic demand for equality of positions of partici-

pants in the dialogue. Basically, this is about “God’s initiative of self-revelation” (Šporčić 2003:7) and about the meeting between the Creator and the human being, as determined by their different positions (or a vassal-sovereign relationship, as emphasized by Šporčić 2003:26). This attitude can be seen in the document from the Second Vatican Council, which is seen as a foundational turning point in the history of this church in its relationship toward the world, man, and society. Here, the word “dialogue” is used for conversing with others (with outsiders, i.e. *ad extra*), while the conversations on the inside (*ad intra*, inside the church) are described with the term *colloquiu*, because at this level, “the position *par cum pari*—that of the equals—is not possible” (Šporčić 2003:21). The same can be applied to the dialogue between God and man, which is described as *colloquium cum Deo*, and it is emphasized that, “in a torrent of love, the invisible God starts a conversation with humans as His friends (*tamquam amicos alloquitur*) and spends quality time with them (cf. Bar 3,38) in order to invite them and embrace them into fellowship with Himself” (as quoted by: Šporčić 2003:21). Here we see that dialogue is also used to express “a special form of witnessing and evangelism,” which is supposed to be conducted in a brotherly way” (Šporčić 2003:21).

On the other hand, starting with the attitude *Sola scriptura – fide – gratia – Christus – Deo gloria* (see: Luther, 1954 and other sources), Evangelical theology, which is studied on Croatian soil as a form of Protestantism (I am particularly thinking about the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek), persists in returning to the “Scriptures, but also to the first ecumenical councils,” where theology becomes not only “the helper to preaching, but worship as well... [and] proclamation” (Hammond 1994:240-243). In this author’s opinion, the message and content of the Gospel need to be “adapted to terms and categories of this day and age” while retaining its contents; the only thing that is changed is the form of communication “in respect to the cultural and historical situation which the church is in” (Hammond 1994:243). Luther’s *oratio – meditatio – tentatio* as an instruction about the correct way of studying theology also brings us back to the teaching of the Word, not only due to the need to understand and know it, but also in order to be able to experience it as reality and in life’s trials. For Luther it is the “real, true, how sweet, how dear, how powerful and comforting Word of God, the wisdom beyond every other wisdom” (Luther, cf. Hammond 1994:235). This return to the Word is a reminder that it is not just any word, but the “word of the cross” as the criterion for truthfulness and the criticism of untruthfulness (Moltmann 2005:10). Communication and contact between the words proclaimed by the church and the world makes impossible the hardened dogmatism and absolutism of one’s own standpoint, and the beginning of this dialogue is found inside the church through understanding the

“relationship between one’s own standpoint and others” and “living in specific circumstances” (Moltmann 2005:19).

So the human element needs that “other”—divine, and other people—because its self-cognition is rooted in dialogue. The boundary between different (human) subjects is not just a demarcation line but also the space in which mutual (re) construction, creation and self-creation happens (Bahtin 1986). And although it is obvious that the conversation which man is having with God and God with man is crucially different from the way people speak with each other, it seems that even this relationship has all the characteristics of dialogue insisted upon by Martin Buber, which are further formulated by Maurice S. Freedman, namely fellowship, direct communication, presentability, intensity, and holiness (Freedman 1976:57). This relationship also includes all of the elements insisted upon by Mihail Bahtin. As an ontological condition and an ethical ideal Bahtin holds that dialogue supersedes the correlations between space and time, or cause and reason; it is not conditioned by object and requires no mediator (Bahtin, according to: Sidorkin 1996), which can be taken as a frame of reference for some future analysis of the human-divine dialogue. And although the very word “dialogue” does not appear in either the Old or New Testaments in the way we use it today, its variations are present, predominantly in the New Testament (e.g., the word *dialogizomai* appears as many as 16 times, while the word *dialogismos* appears 14 times, cf.: Šporčić 2003:14), in the sense of a conversation, having a conversation, arguing or quarreling.

In the context of all that has been said, the author holds that the term “dialogue” can be used to refer to the communication between God and people, but also to that of human conversation inside the church, among believers, between believers and religious congregations on the one hand, and society as a whole. This is why here there will be no agreement with Šporčić’s attitude and interpretation of documents from the Second Vatican Council (Šporčić, 2003). Rather, we will be looking at dialogue between man and God in a way in which God’s higher stance does not put man in an insignificant position by belittling his contribution, but that it leads toward fellowship and does not preclude mutual participation, and that God’s conversations with Abraham, the establishment of the Covenant, and communication with Moses, David, prophets, and particularly the appearance of Jesus Christ through which He “spoke to us through His Son” (Heb 1,2) as the pinnacle of God’s dialogue with man, are based on partnership, and they include conversation and listening. But first and foremost they require love, respect for truth and acknowledging freedom.

Theological education and the Bologna process

It seems that adopting recommendations of the Bologna process² corrects theological seminaries and schools before they decide on whether they wish to adjust their church mission statements before its implementation and to what extent, and whether these adjustments influence their (former/present/future) theological identity. Further factors which influence this choice, and even the potential rejection of church mission statements and acceptance of the approach which nurtures the religious instead of theological approach to education, are the number of students enrolling the seminaries or schools, religious and socio-political environment i.e. possible resistance within the society toward the minority religious schools/faculties, networks between seminaries/schools with similar institutions in Europe and elsewhere, dependence of the seminaries/schools on the educational market, and many more. In order to be able to speak of them more systematically, further analyses are required.

On the other hand, the Bologna recommendations have the goal of “creating a comparative, compatible, and coherent system of higher education within European higher education space” (MZOS). They also insist on a shift in the current system: namely, the process of teaching and learning should be putting the student rather than the teacher at the center. According to the Bologna method, acquiring knowledge is such that it abolishes the passive model (pupil/student = listener/receiver) and establishes an active and partner-like relationship, wherein the emphasis is placed on the teaching-learning relationship, with the student at the center of attention, and the teaching sessions are based on strengthening their sense of responsibility for learning, which they themselves manage. Thus, instead of being its object, the student becomes the subject in the lesson. The decrease in the percent of *ex cathedra* teaching and increase in the homework load, which requires individual and group work, is thus a necessary consequence:

“According to the Bologna Declaration, the primary purpose of the universities are the students once again, and their creative academic performance... Unlike our common practice, the Bologna system includes the full involvement of the students even for these studies; at least three years of intensive studies with exploratory work as the dominant element, which should point to original results and to enable students, before they reach the age of 30, at the peak of their creativity to reach a level of creativity and independence required for

- 2 Bologna process has been launched in 1999, with an aim “to ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe” creating foundations for the European Higher Education Area, “that became reality with the Budapest-Vienna Declaration of March, 2010.” For more, please see: <http://www.ehea.info/> approached on November 18, 2014.

the most demanding innovative activities, which are a basis of development in every modern society and economy...” (Bjeliš 2005:48).

This means that the student still needs to master the basic subject matter, but he also needs to learn how to study and how to develop critical thinking about problems, how to apply creative solutions to problems, how to acquire the necessary professional competences, etc. This is emphasized in the basic guidelines (i.e. goals) of the Bologna Declaration: the acceptance of the system of recognizable and comparable levels; introduction of additions to the diploma, with the goal of promoting employment of European citizens and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system; accepting the system which is based on two main cycles (undergraduate and graduate); introduction of a point-system (ECTS) in promoting the widest student exchange; promoting mobility by overcoming obstacles to free movement, especially for students, but also teachers, researchers and administrative staff; and finally, promoting European cooperation in ensuring quality with the goal of developing comparable criteria and methodologies, and promoting the necessary European dimension in higher education, especially in developing teaching programs, in inter-institutional cooperation, in schemes of mobility and integrated study programs, training and research (Bologna Declaration, MZOS). It is obvious that the integrative, experimental, knowledge- and practice-oriented educational scheme of the Bologna process involves dialogue as the basic method of communication inside and between institutions, as well as a method of education.

This is why we encourage that the path of dialogue be continued at the level of constructive conversation between the Croatian state, which is one of the promoters of the Bologna process, and church institutions, which are the founders of theological schools and seminaries. The continuation of the dialogue is necessary, considering all the adjustments which theological schools and seminaries need to make in order to be in line with the Bologna regulations, considering the specifics which stem from the duty to follow one's own internal (congregational) regulations, where the effective application of the Bologna system depends on reaching a balance between both levels (Bologna/state–church).

Theological education and dialogue – Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek

The Evangelical Theological Seminary (VETU) has chosen the path of aligning its calling and mission (i.e. mission and vision) with the mentioned guidelines of the Bologna declaration. Its calling and mission mirror both its Evangelical beliefs as well as sensitivity for the overall socio-political reality.

VETU strives for excellent education and professional training of future church workers, but also sees the need for proclaiming the Gospel message in the contemporary context of “globalization of culture, democratization, increase and migration of population, explosion of knowledge, available information, communication and technology, global polarization of riches and knowledge, concentration of global power centers of decision-making and management, urbanization, morality crisis, local and regional conflicts and wars, as well as the exponential intensification of the rhythm of life.” In that sense, this seminary wishes to “offer theological education, to nurture and promote theological and scientific disciplines, and be involved in other related activities,” but also emphasizes that it is “for helping the people of God in the strengthening of their faith” by following the Apostolic Creed, the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, and the Lausanne Pact. This seminary has received a positive opinion from the Agency of Science and Higher Education during the initial process of re-accreditation, and is now continuing with the steps which were recommended in this process that are also in accordance with the guidelines provided by the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports.³

In the words of Peter Kuzmič, dean of VETU, this seminary has been applying the Bologna standards for years, which is evident in the “mobility of our students and the way they are involved in their local churches and NGOs, where they apply their knowledge and test it in practice,” as well as in the way the teaching sessions are conducted. Namely, the teaching sessions at VETU are basically dialogical: at the center of attention stands the student and there is an emphasis on a personal relationship with the instructor. In this context there is an insistence on the acquisition of knowledge and nurturing of religious practice, as well as those skills which help the student in his further work, particularly “skills of leadership, of communication, of conflict resolution, of creative problem-solving, etc. Furthermore, because the seminary is interdenominational and international, this “contributes to its multicultural and ecumenical openness. Confessional schools and seminaries are often theologically and pedagogically handicapped due to the obligation to indoctrinate their students. At VETU greater emphasis is placed on education which is framed with a wider understanding of the Christian outlook and a Bible-based system of values, which are not being doctrinally imposed, but are rather recommended in open discussions.” (Kuzmič, excerpt from the inter-

3 It is necessary to emphasize that, during the writing of this article, VETU was still undergoing the process of re-accreditation, and it is uncertain whether the process will ever be finished, or if they will be forced to find a different solution for their future existence. This state of affairs is a result of a longer period of internal turbulence, which resulted in replacements in leadership and other (i.e. teaching) positions, which is why more time is required to find an adequate solution.

view for this case study, 2014.)

The calling and mission of this higher education institution start with the excellence of education and professional training of future church workers and other ministers as a key prerequisite,

"without which the Church is no longer able to effectively proclaim the Gospel message in the contemporary context of megatrends: culture globalization, democratization, growth and migration of population, explosion of knowledge, available information, communication and technology, global polarization of riches and knowledge, concentration of global power-centers of decision-making and management, urbanization, morality crisis, local and regional conflicts and wars, and exponential intensification of the rhythm of life. Such contemporary social context places additional serious challenges before the Church and all Christ's followers as they strive to effectively implement their mission in executing Christ's final commandment, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations'" (VETU, 2014).

Co-founders of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek are Christian churches from the Reformation heritage. This seminary bases its mission and vision on biblical teaching and a Christian world view. Its Christian, i.e. Evangelical, views are expressed through five main characteristics: trans-denominational awareness, interdenominational dialogue, multicultural and multi-ethnic education, influence on the modern society, academic excellence, and Christian spiritual formation. In this sense the very focus of the school is thorough knowledge of the Bible, in a way in which it becomes the backbone of knowledge, and also action, because the Bible is not just a word, but it is a word which must *become flesh* on a daily basis as it meets with reality (Gnakan, 2013:3). This happens through constant and open dialogue, as well as through engaging the students in reflecting on and understanding the complexity of the reality which surrounds us. Education at VETU strives to be in constant touch with experience, because this is what leads the students toward "deeper reflection" and "direct involvement in events or activities which transform the individual and influence the world and people around us" (Gnakan 2013:5-6).

Guided by these assumptions, theological education at VETU is closely connected to good education from other (related) areas, with the overall goal of forming future workers for ministry. A review of the specialized graduate studies in theology, as well as strategic documents of VETU, reveals an emphasis on educating future pastors, priests, church elders, theology teachers who are required for educating candidates for priests, religious education teachers for the nurturing of children and young people (primary and secondary), as well as theological education of adult believers (life-long learning) in church congregations and parishes, Christian pastoral counselors and experts who specialize in public inter-

confessional, inter-religious, and inter-cultural dialogue, promoting Christian values and Christian culture of living. This is why VETU, in accordance with the recommendations of the Bologna Declaration, organizes undergraduate (vocational) theology studies and graduate (specialized) theology studies (Elaborat 2013: 20).

Starting from the foundational guidelines of the Evangelical world view and orientation toward dialogue (both internal and external), the school strives towards a careful balancing of those values, spoken about on a number of occasions by the highly esteemed professor emeritus, Aleksandar Birviš: The basic goal in theological schools is to teach love as “the first and foremost subject matter of a Christian seminary,” teaching all “without regard to their sexual, class or national identity,” through conversation and fellowship, confession and prayer, which are necessary, because they build up and prepare future students for life (Birviš 2011:521-524). This is the kind of use of dialogue as an educational method that we will be addressing below, where we present the results of the initial research conducted with school workers regarding the question of whether the teachers use dialogue as part of their teaching, and, if so, what the results of the application of this approach are.

Case study: Dialogue as a method of theological education at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek

The history of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek begins in 1972 with the founding of a “resident study (Biblical Theological Institute) in Zagreb, preceded by a ten-year long correspondence Bible-school which was started by pastor Dragutin Volf” (Kuzmič 2014). The school continued with its work in Osijek in 1983, and ever since has been actively working in this city on the Drava as an international, inter-denominational, inter-confessional and evangelically rooted school that is “open to all things contemporary,” and which develops “scientific and educational cooperation with numerous theological seminaries and universities all over the world, attempting to help Osijek to become a significant university center” (Kuzmič 2014).

The purpose of this case study was to assess whether dialogue is used as a teaching method, and what the effects are of this teaching model. With this purpose in mind, we conducted a pilot survey among the seminary employees between November 10 and December 20, 2014. We developed a questionnaire containing six open-ended questions, which included one question regarding the recognition of dialogue as a method and four questions about applying the dialogue in class, with an additional question which asked the teachers to assess the usefulness of this method for teaching theology. The questionnaire was for-

warded to the teaching staff at VETU who primarily covered theological subjects (12 teachers), and in the analysis we included the answers from all those who submitted the filled-in questionnaires to the author at a later date (7 teachers, i.e. 84%). The employees involved⁴, among whom was dean Peter Kuzmič, teach the following subjects: Introduction to the Old Testament, Exegesis of Genesis, Contemporary trends in OT theology, Introduction to the New Testament, Exegesis of the New Testament, Biblical Theology of the NT, Hermeneutics, Church History, Introduction to Systematic Theology, Introduction to Christian Ethics, Introduction to Catholic Dogmatics, Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy, Pastoral Ministry, History and Theology of the Reformation, Worship, Ecumenical Theology, Protestant-Evangelical Christianity in the East European Context, Christian Leadership, Church Administration, Foundations of a Civil Society, Social and Non-profit Marketing in Church and Church Organizations.

In the questionnaire, dialogue as a teaching method was described by using the four levels of dialogical education spoken of by J. Vella, P. Freire, K. Lewin, M. Knowels, and B. Bloom, and which are in line with UNESCO's approach to teaching in four pillars. These authors, and Jane Vella in particular, speak about dialogical teaching as: (1) reflection on personal experience, (2) active participative teaching, (3) practical application of knowledge, and (4) understanding the context (Vella, 2002). UNESCO's model also suggests four levels (i.e. pillars): (1) learning for knowledge, (2) learning for being, (3) learning for being with others, and (4) learning for doing (Delors 1996). The compatibility between both models is obvious, because they take into consideration both the importance of acquiring new knowledge and the importance of self-building of students through correlating with others with the goal of practical applicability of knowledge as a skill which introduces a positive change in society. In this way, the dialogical education that Vella talks about is constructional and transformational teaching based on the idea of "accumulation," which is promoted by P. Freire in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Namely, the traditional approach to monologue in educating adults sees the students as *tabula rasa*, i.e. empty chalkboards which are eager for their teachers to pour their knowledge onto. This is why there is a need for a reform in education, which Freire insisted on. The basic principle of dialogical education is that dialogue is both the means and the result of teaching.

4 The statements of VETU employees, which follow in the text, have been taken from the questionnaires which were sent to the teacher, and have been published with their consent. The questionnaire form is available per request: julijana.tesija@evtos.hr. Note: some of the mentioned employees no longer perform their functions for various reasons. They were happy to respond and to participate in this survey, because they either held classes in these subjects for shorter or longer periods of time, or because they remained in touch with the seminary while holding classes as guest teachers.

Basically, anyone can introduce their own experience into the dialogue with the teacher regarding any issue, and the best way to learn is to connect the subject matter with the student's past experiences. Students need to be active participants in the teaching process; in this way, the teaching process gains an additional component and becomes results- and goal-oriented, while homework consists of open-ended questions that require answers, and which are reached through reflection and critical thinking, as well as being oriented toward problem-solving. Dialogue which is thus applied is seen at four levels: as a reflection on past experiences (reminiscing and meditation), it is a basis of critical thinking; as an encouragement of active participation of students in the teaching process, dialogue helps in the accepting of new insights more easily; through involving students in applying new insights, it promotes future practical implementation of acquired knowledge; and finally, dialogue helps in understanding the context from which the students are coming, but also the context inside which this new knowledge should be used in the future.⁵ In dialogue the emphasis is placed on the students' participation in class, in building and nurturing a sense of security, an atmosphere of trust and support, building good relationships and respect, repetition and exercises during the acquiring of new knowledge, practical application of new insights with constant reflection on past experiences and the possibility for action that is beyond the "or-or" framework, relevance and necessity of action, clarity of roles, cooperation and group work, group support, involvement of all parties involved with respect to their potentials and wishes, and responsibility for the undertaken responsibilities. Evaluation indicators are: measuring learned knowledge, transferring knowledge in the context of application, and the influence of learned insights (Vella 2002:216-219).

All seven employees responding agreed that all four levels of dialogue in class that are in line with the model proposed by Vella are present in VETU: lectures in this school are interactive, with active involvement of students, where the main starting point is the student's reflection on past experiences (reminiscing and meditating), and the goal is developing critical thinking. The idea of dialogue in class is "natural" to Evangelical Christian education. The teacher who is personally involved in dialogue with God needs to lead a dialogue with his students, and to nurture the same spirit in them, which stems from the very nature of God, which is trinitarian and dialogical, and which invites us to continue walking this path (Kraljik, Miličić, Magda, Balog, Kuzmič). When understood this way, dialogue is a preparation for the students' future involvement in building

5 Originally, we are talking about the four I's, i.e., induction, input, implementation and integration. See also: Jane K. Vella (2002), *Learning to listen, learning to teach: the power of dialogue in educating adults*. New York: Jossey-Bass books.

God's kingdom on earth (Magda, Walker, Milić, Balog, Kuzmič). All the teachers have agreed that the students are actively involved in class and that activism and involvement are encouraged through individual and group work, seminars and writing papers, but also through participating in projects. These tools are used with the purpose of easier acquisition of new insights, as well as taking responsibility over learning, where students' personal involvement encourages more lasting adoption of new insights and their application in a new context. The teachers also emphasize that it is extremely important to understand the context which the students are coming from, which is why they are asked to speak about their experiences, because reflection encourages both critical consideration and creative thinking about the future practical application of the acquired knowledge.

Ksenija Magda emphasizes that "the very theology of the New Testament requires a dialogical approach, not just for students, but for teachers as well," and that she personally learned a lot "by listening to my students as they elaborated in a peer-to-peer dialogue with me." Magda considers this approach to be very important, because "New Testament theology begins with the text which is read and re-read, and which (accordingly) requires entering into dialogue with one's own self, the text, and the context of the time during which it was written. In such a critical-dialogical way, we also enter the dialogue with dogmatic theology by questioning its settings/foundations." In all this, the contextualization of what has been learned starts with the personal experience of the students, while the bilateral character of the dialogue insists on the inclusion of all four elements in teaching: "We learn about what is new by reading through the text; we reflect on what we have learned through individual work and reflection and exposition; we contextualize what we have learned, comparing the practices we come from with other practices; we reflect on the possibilities for change and about other, better alternatives; we connect the text with the situation and apply it in a given context," Magda adds. On the other hand, Antal Balog emphasizes that the application of all four approaches requires a certain level of (prior) knowledge, and that they can be more systematically applied at higher levels of studies. The specified approaches are, in his opinion, "a brighter side of Bologna, although they were also present in the former, pre-Bologna, educational system," while he finds that the shortcoming of the Bologna process is in "shorter teaching cycles, which prevent from gaining insight into the entire complexity of both subject matter and the different contexts of application." Balog also claims that dialogue can only be present in teaching theology if the teacher himself is prone to dialogue. "The teachers who are good at teaching theology by method of dialogue also lead their own internal dialogues regarding certain theological themes. Besides, a random speck of yet unformed doubt is welcome in order to keep the Christian faith and theological convictions from becoming hardened and dogmatized. Because

when that happens, teaching theology via dialogue no longer seems viable. And even when it does happen, it is then less sincere, which can be recognized sometimes by a good student, but is always recognized.”

Dalibor Kraljik emphasizes that his teaching methods are interactive and that he takes the time to encourage the students and get them involved in discussing subjects related to the teaching material; this interaction can be encouraged by him, or by the students themselves (as is more often the case). In his lectures Kraljik wants the students to “reflect on what they have heard/learned and to use it and connect it with the further contents of the lecture; therefore, since my lectures are usually introductions, we can say that they are somehow successive, progressive, and that they start from the simple and move toward the complex, which is why I wish to see the students connect what they have heard so far with what they are encountering at the moment.” Kraljik also emphasizes that the problem of the monotony in certain aspects of teaching can be overcome by coming up with interesting interactive tasks that the students can participate in, and by which the information and that which is learned can be viewed through its “purpose and practical application in life’s situations.” He insists on this in graduate papers in particular, whenever he demands that the students “explore a certain subject,” and that their “effort has a specific application, that the explored and thoroughly studied theme will somehow become a part of the student, and that it becomes usable and applied in their life and in what they do or intend to do.” Branislav Miličić emphasizes that his subjects cover larger areas, and that there is a lot of material to cover, while “the approach has to be adapted, and made more dynamic and interactive” and it has to include “various teaching methods.” Miličić utilizes all four models of the dialogical teaching model, and the basic thing he strives for “is teaching students (i.e. teaching them something new) in two ways: through class sessions (which comprise around 30% of teaching) and through individual students’ presentations, through individual and group research, and surveys which are preceded by a preparation phase through individual work (around 70%).” During class, he often uses different interactive methods, but he also primarily uses “other types of media, i.e. movies and music.” He has noticed that, for illustrating certain periods from history (e.g., the church after the Russian or French revolutions, etc.), “good examples are those which contextualize the subject through, say, music or film. We would listen to some songs from that time period and translate the words, trying to understand the context of the time. For some other time periods I have used movie excerpts.” This teacher’s basic goal is to “awaken the students’ desire for reflecting about why some things happened in a certain way, what was the context which determined a certain historical action, or what were the historical actions which influenced the change in context?”

Alyssa Walker also emphasizes that she has used all the mentioned levels of dialogue, but still puts a greater emphasis on the students' previous experiences and their reflections on them, as well as the need for learning and mastering new things through interaction with the students. Since this teacher deals with subjects that have to do with different methods of approaching Old Testament theology (hermeneutics, exegesis, etc.), the mentioned dialogical methods have proved to be effective, because "they enabled the students to integrate new knowledge within the contexts they came from, with understanding the community and society from two thousand years ago, and with exhortations to reflect on the society of the future: the human-divine cooperation in the Kingdom." There are certain difficulties stemming from the fact that her classes were held in English (with or without interpretation, as needed), where it was very important to listen carefully to what the students were saying during discussions in class or during group or individual presentations, in order to understand the context. Jasmin Milić, on the other hand, emphasizes that during worship studies he exhorted the students to explore liturgics on their own, and "not just through available literature, but also through visiting different churches, by attending different kinds of worship services, and by comparing different church practices." Milić encourages his students to develop their personal prayer life (i.e. life of worship) by trying out various worship methods (Liturgy of the Hours, and the like.). What has proved to be a positive outcome of this approach is "the shift in understanding different approaches to worship practices" and the ability to compare that which the students already knew about and practiced with the new experience, as well as developing "openness, but also a critical attitude toward one and toward the other." The students were also encouraged to explore different religious traditions, explore them through visiting religious communities, explore them individually by using available literature and conversations, and through "direct nurturing of dialogue with other Christian traditions (primarily with Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers)."

Peter Kuzmič, dean and lecturer at VETU, emphasized that "in terms of their content and implementation, some subjects are better suited for the dialogical approach than others," but that "the response we are getting from leaders of churches where our students and graduate students serve is mostly affirmative and complimentary," which serves to confirm the correctness of the applied approach. Kuzmič emphasizes that "many of our students became leaders in their regions and denominations precisely due to communicational and dialogical skills which they acquired at VETU." To illustrate this he mentioned the example of a young colleague, David Kovačević, because of the way he has been applying his knowledge in the Assemblies of God church, and because of the way he has been helping students integrate "theory and practice" in working with them

within the successful project “Valley of Blessings” in Vukovar.

Dialogue in theological education: training for the present and the future

Theological education does, in fact, provide complete and holistic training and development. It is preparation for following; it is education for knowledge and for acquiring skills for promoting and evangelism, leadership and service in bringing the *Kingdom on earth*. This following cannot be mere imitation, but requires the critical ability of judgment and of taking responsibility for one’s actions (or lack thereof), constant dialogue at all levels (internal, with God, but also outward, with believers and non-believers), constant personal (self)determination and acting in accordance with specific situations, as well as biblical text and church instructions.

This is confirmed through analyzing the responses from VETU employees, from which we conclude the following: (a) Dialogue is a theological model, which points to the essence of the relationship between God and people, as well as cooperation with God in accomplishing the Kingdom on earth, that has its foundation in the triune (i.e. dialogical) God. (b) It is a teaching method which is convenient for adopting new insights, that requires the students’ active involvement and reflection on past experiences, encouraging individual thinking and the application of new knowledge within the context of which that which is learned should be applied. Even though not all four principles/levels of dialogical education can be fully implemented for all theological subjects (it seems that the levels of reflection/acquiring new knowledge/contextualization are applicable, while the level of directing toward practice seems to be limited to certain subjects), and to the same extent on all levels of education (undergraduate-graduate, where it seems like the graduate level is more conducive to dialogical participative learning, because the students possess a certain background in the subject). (c) It produces the desired results (knowledge/success— application/skills). (d) It prepares the student for his future work, enabling him to use this tool for his personal growth, and the growth of his congregation as well. (e) It requires the teacher to undergo additional and somewhat more demanding preparations for the class: the examples which were mentioned by survey participants show that they have used individual and group work during class, student presentations followed by individual research, visiting other religious congregations which involved active note-taking in regard to similarities and/or differences in practices, participating in inter-religious dialogues, different multimedia assets (music, film, literary and poetic works, etc.). (f) Teachers were prepared to use dialogue as a method due to the fact that they themselves were open to it. (g) Dialogue provides a significant

contribution in adopting new insights, but furthermore in a true understanding of the material, and in understanding the importance of its further usage. This is why it is important to emphasize that, when we speak of the contribution of this method to adopting new insights and their further applicability, it can only be expressed at a personal and experiential level, and not a quantitative and verified one, which ought to be proven through further, more comprehensive research. However, we do not hold that the mentioned positive experiences of VETU teachers are diminished by this. On the contrary, sometimes these subjectively expressed standards provide a clearer indication as to what is more helpful to the students, because they involve following students during class (and often after the class is over, through final and graduate works), and they consider the positive changes in students, such as strengthening for the continuation of studying and acting in society, applying the acquired knowledge from one subject to other subjects, connecting content, creativity and practical use of learned matter with the understanding of context, concepts, etc.

In conclusion, it can be said that the attitudes of the teachers included in the survey confirm the thesis laid out by this author, who is herself a lecturer at VETU: that dialogue must be used in theological education, both due to its foundation in God's triune dialogical nature, as well as due to its tendency for acting in accomplishing the Kingdom on earth. Theological education must nurture dialogue as much as possible and shift away from monologue as a closed way of transferring claims, without the possibility of questioning or interacting. The transformative power of dialogue is reflected in the horizontal dialogue within the community, which helps sustain its vitality and joy, but it is also a call for dialogue with the outside world, with other congregations and non-believers, while the vertical dialogue directs the congregation and the individual believer to a constant renewal of one's relationship with God, and to the regularity of prayer and the importance of worship. How shall we concretize this? And does this mean that such a state of continued dialogue at all the above mentioned levels is the same as ongoing adapting and aligning? In other words, does it point to compromising solutions which are detrimental to Scripture and congregational practices? Or does it point toward openness, constant listening, and nurturing critical thought in order to keep as close as possible to fundamental biblical values in the light of the contemporary context, where we call for their application?

Faced with these and other similar questions, there is only one thing we know with certainty: we can always come before the Lord and ask Him what we should do, how we should live, and how we should follow Him within the conditions of this age, in our own society.⁶ I believe that the answer will remain the same.

6 Paraphrase of one section from the Gospel by Mark 10,17.

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**Dijalog kao metoda učenja u teološkom obrazovanju:
Visoko evanđeosko teološko učilište kao studija slučaja**

Sažetak

U ovom tekstu raspravlja se o primjeni dijaloga kao metode učenja u teološkom obrazovanju. Kako autorica dolazi iz protestantskog miljea, fokus analize bit će protestantsko teološko obrazovanje u Republici Hrvatskoj, odnosno konkretnije, primjena dijaloga kao metode učenja na Visokom evanđeoskom teološkom učilištu (VETU) u Osijeku. U tu svrhu provedeno je pilot-istraživanje među djelatnicima Učilišta, koje je potvrdilo i korištenje i učinkovitost dijaloga kao metodu u nastavi. Zaključci upućuju na to da je dijalog teološki model koji upućuje na bit odnosa između Boga i ljudi, i suradnje s Bogom na ostvarenju Kraljevstva na Zemlji koji svoj temelj ima u trojstvenom (dijaloškom) Bogu, te da je dijalog metoda učenja poticajna za usvajanje novih znanja, koja traži aktivnu uključenost i refleksiju studenata na prošla iskustva te potiče samostalno promišljanje i primjenu novih spoznaja unutar konteksta u kojem bi se naučeno trebalo primijeniti.