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# Utilizing Digital Platforms in Social Justice Education for Students' Transformissional Learning

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## **About the Author:**

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## **Abstract**

Educators are beginning to realize that teaching in the digital environment is possible and advantageous for facilitating student learning on issues of social justice. More than absorbing content, learning must involve transformation. The transformist paradigm is a new, holistic approach to leadership development that holds promise for the field of mission education. Four areas of focus guide instructors toward holistic course designs. Extant approaches for teaching social justice online featured here involve selected readings, service learning experiences, critical reflection and writing, and group discussions.

## **Introduction**

With the recent advent of online learning in the higher education industry, research and writing on curricular approaches to facilitating social justice education online are less than two decades old and remain in the nascent stage of development (Ullman and Rabinowitz, 2004). Some have helped chart the course forward but we have much to learn as we strive toward becoming subject matter experts.<sup>1</sup>

Strait and Sauer (2004) develop the term E-Service to describe a type of experiential service learning within the online learning environment. They feature an e-service model called DLiTE, or Distributed Learning in Teacher Education, for faculty training at Bemidji University in Minnesota. They report a number of benefits and challenges for faculty and students in adopting an e-service model for online education. Strait and Sauer offer five suggestions for faculty seeking e-service learning opportunities: start small, train the students, plan for community partner contact, plan extra time for unexpected outcomes, and include a reflection component.

Guthrie and McCracken's (2010a) qualitative study of social justice facilitation through online delivery systems involves students' perceptions of their involvement with local service-learning projects. Service learning is understood to be a

“...form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning” (Jacoby and Associates 1996:5)

They write, “Instruction in the virtual classroom, when coupled with on-site service experiences, creates opportunities for a unique combination of learning activities constructed to be individually and collectively relevant to real-world problems (2010:79).” The online course used for this research helped students gain understanding of service learning theory by studying historical models of leadership within social change movements. Students also engaged in ethics

and values clarification activities, leadership best practices for social engagement, team-building, and the exploration of specific strategies for social action that foster local and global change.

In another study, Guthrie and McCracken (2010b) feature the benefits and challenges of facilitating social justice learning online at the University of Illinois at Springfield. Using case study methods (Yin, 1994), their findings suggest that, with a robust learning management system in place, students who participate in social justice projects and then critically engage with the experience personally and among peers will usually have a deep and rich learning experience. Likewise, the community and/or receivers of the service-learning projects benefit from the students' commitment to mitigating social problems in the community. Challenges with the format include: ineffectiveness at capturing and managing student learning, large class sizes, difficulties with faculty adapting to new technologies, and socio-economic inequality among students since some students are disadvantaged because they cannot afford the newest and latest technology.

Scholars and practioners in the field of religion recognize the value of facilitating social justice education through service learning experiences for students. They affirm that Judaism and the incipient Church of first century Palestine demonstrated the intentionality by which God designed for society a reigning ethic of justice and compassion for all (Hayes, 2006:90; Deut. 15:4; Acts 2:40-45). The prophet Jeremiah admonished the nation, "Also seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jer. 29:7). Even Rauschenbusch observed,

The multiplication of socially enlightened Christians will serve the body of society much as a physical organism would be served if a complete and effective system of ganglia should be distributed where few of them existed. The social body needs moral innervation; and the spread of men who combine religious faith, moral enthusiasm, and economic information, and apply the combined result to public morality, promises to create a moral sensitiveness never yet known (1907:357).

With this in mind, this paper specifically examines the question, “How might professors of mission effectively leverage digital environments to facilitate growth in students’ social justice learning with a view to the broader impact on student’s transformissional learning? To answer this question, we will explore the following. First, we will consider a new paradigm for leadership learning and development emerging from the field of leadership coaching called the Transformissional paradigm (Ogne and Roehl, 2008), one that has relevance for any Missiologist, professor of mission or student who desires a more holistic and tailored approach to learning and leadership development.

Second, with that in place, the paper will feature curricular approaches currently used in the course I facilitate at Asbury Theological Seminary, CD 501 ExL Vocation of Ministry, where one of the curricular objectives is for students to develop a plan for growth in a life of social holiness.<sup>2</sup> Before we can explore best practices, however, we must address a more fundamental concern.

## **Online or Sidelined?**

For professors of mission, extending impact to students beyond traditional campuses is even more feasible with the advent and growth of Course Management Systems circa 1997 (Ullman and Rabinowitz, 2004). Recent growth in the overall movement toward digital learning is astounding (Allen and Seaman, 2013).

Statistical studies support the conclusion that higher education institutions are adopting digital learning in droves (Allen and Seaman, 2011). A 2005 survey of over 2500 academic leaders, *Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States, 2011*, reports over 6.7 million consumers linking to online environments for their education needs; an increase of nearly one million students from 2010, or 9.3% (Allen and Seaman, 2011).

However, what of those institutions and faculty trapped on the sidelines, in “analog mode?” Nearly 60% of those offering Baccalaureate degrees stated they remain “undecided” about creating

MOOC's (Allen and Seaman, 2013). Unfortunately, some educators are troubled by the growth of online learning; online education is sub-par, has quality issues, or is the vehicle of last resort for learning.<sup>3</sup>

Case in point: A professor taught regularly about the need for leaders to be culturally relevant. By the clothes the professor wore and the manner in which classes were conducted, however, the message sent was a much different one. While the institution promoted the necessity and value of leveraging the digital environment for the educational process, the professor was unwilling or perhaps unable to adapt to this digital world.

Another significant challenge to embracing the online environment for some professors of mission is the misconception that missiology is practical ministry training only, which is best done in real time, head-on, in a traditional campus environment.

The intent of this paper is not to argue for or against online learning. Rather, it proposed that we take advantage of the opportunities afforded through online learning to inculcate Missiological theory, principles and best practices. In this increasingly competitive environment to secure and/or maintain one's position in higher education and maintain economic viability, those willing to adapt to and embrace online learning will remain viable in the marketplace, reaping the economic and vocational benefits of job security and the personal benefits of knowing that they are able to make a difference from almost any vantage point in the world.

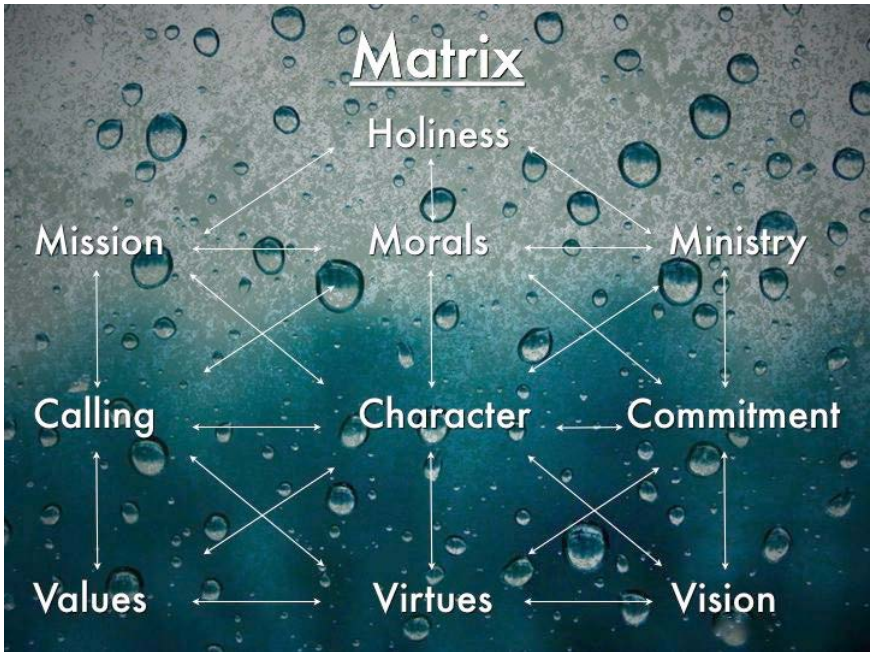
## **One Online Context – CD 501 Vocation of Ministry**

By way of background, the ideas for this paper emerged from my experiences as facilitator for an online course, CD501 Vocation of Ministry, through Asbury Theological Seminary.

The course was originally designed by a team of professors and launched in 2001. A pool of resources, including writings and video lectures, was developed, made available and continuously updated for those facilitating the class. However, facilitators are free to develop resources ad hoc. It is a required course for all students early in their

seminary experience, usually within the first two semesters. The course explores key foundational aspects of one's calling in a Matrix of Vocation for Christian ministry (Dinkins 2005).

**Figure 1: A Matrix for a Vocation of Ministry**



Asbury Theological Seminary uses the Moodle Learning Management System for online delivery of course content. A wide variety of customized facilitation tools exist within the Moodle platform, including technology to convene live, synchronous video learning classrooms with professor and students.

Assignments for the course include readings, weekly forum discussions on assigned topics, leading a spiritual formation group in their geographical context, and the writing of three reflection papers dealing with issues of calling. Students are required to participate in two shorter experiential learning activities as a means to promote curricular objectives, one experience being participation in a cross-cultural worship experience and the other a four-hour social justice experience. A one-page reflection paper is required following each experience. Drawing on these assignments and experiences, the paper features practices and procedures for facilitating student formation and engagement for social justice learning.



## **The Transformissional Paradigm**

Effective educators maximize experiential learning approaches with the end-vision of facilitating life change in students (Taylor 2008). Kolb (1984) suggests adults learn best from a combination of direct experience, or apprehension, and abstract conceptualizations, or “knowing about”, in comprehending a matter. Sophocles was famous for saying, “One must learn by doing the thing; though you think you know it, you have no certainty until you try.” And Einstein posited, “Knowledge is experience, everything else is just information.”

Transformative Learning Theory is instructive in this regard also since it posits that adults cannot learn in new ways until they develop the capacity to reshape pre-existing and perhaps limiting frames of reference (Taylor 2008). Then, through critical self-reflection on various life experiences, transformative learning occurs since adult learners are now thinking autonomously.

For educators who are Christian and thus hold to beliefs such as a stable universe, objective truth revealed by God, a worldview shaped through the lens of scripture, approaches like Experiential Learning Theory and Transformative Learning Theory are certainly valuable. But, it’s unlikely that those educators who espouse a Judeo-Christian worldview will be able to fully embrace these perspectives.

In considering additional approaches to learner education and development, Steve Ogne and Tim Roehl (2008) are advancing what they believe is a new paradigm of missional leadership development from the realm of leadership coaching, the Transformissional coaching approach (Ogne and Roehl, 2008). This approach could be situated within Contextual Perspectives for adult learning development (Caffarella and Merriam, 1999). The following explains the development in the shift to this new paradigm for Ogne and Roehl.

Ogne explains that when he began coaching younger, post-modern leaders he decided he had to change his approach; he realized that leaders had to be engaged or measured beyond the level of outward performance since these leaders placed a higher value on relationships, authenticity, and community. For older, more “modern” leaders, it was all about ministry effectiveness or performance for the

sake of the growth of the business or organization. Rarely did modern leaders require coaching for personal issues, unless those issues impeded their ability to grow the organization.

The concept of “transformission” backs away from older paradigms of mission. Ogne and Roehl compare Traditional Evangelicals, whose focus is most on overseas missions, and Pragmatic Evangelicals, who support attraction approaches to evangelism and church growth, with Younger Evangelicals, who prefer experiencing God in authentic community, engaging culture in mission without fearing one’s culture.

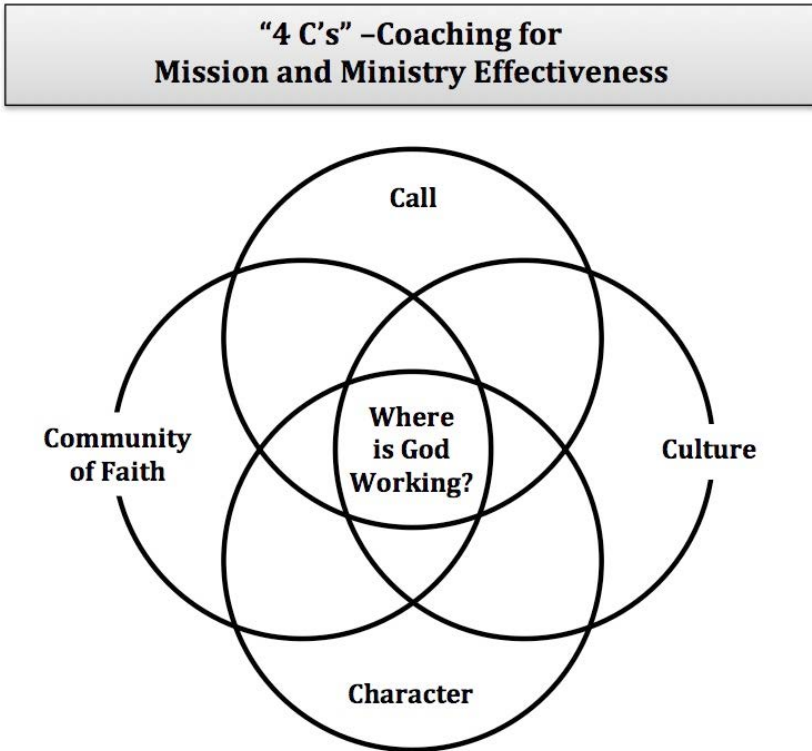
Transformissional Christians have a holistic worldview and broad understanding of the Kingdom of God. They do not support a dualism that separates Christians from non-Christians or the church from the world. Rather, they view the church as God’s agent to unleash God’s Kingdom into the world. Mission for these followers of Jesus is all about engaging the church with the world, reconciling the Kingdom with world.

This emphasis on reconciliation extends beyond the saving of souls, and includes reconciling communities and nations. Transformissional Christians want to go beyond proclaiming the gospel in word; they desire to serve the culture, provide need-meeting services to the world, and even engage in political agendas. They believe the world is their mission field. Ogne and Roehl suggest, “The church is only truly transformissional when it is able to engage in both the social transformation of the culture and the spiritual transformation of individuals.

With the need arising for a more holistic approach to mission and to reach these Younger Evangelicals, Ogne and Roehl developed Transformissional Coaching, whereby they help “leaders live authentically and incarnationally while leading their churches to connect with the culture and intentionally engage in redemptive relationships” (2008:29).<sup>4</sup> Engaging leaders for transformission involves a distinct process, centering on the question, “Where is God working?” It has four overlapping areas of focus for leaders: (1) to help leaders clarify their call to ministry, (2) to help leaders cultivate personal, godly character so that the leader can be transformed and s/he can help transform their surroundings, (3) to help leader creates and be a member of an authentic community that serves to

help its members grow and be accountable to one another, and (4) to help leaders connect with the secular culture for God’s Kingdom and redemptive purposes, whatever they may be (See fig. 2 The Transmissional Approach). Being transmissional means that leaders are transformed when they are engaged or “coached” in ways that include all four areas. When leaders are transformed, believe Ogne and Roehl, they become transmissional.

**Figure 2: The Transmissional Approach, used with permission**



## **The Transformissional Paradigm and Facilitating Social Justice Learning**

Ogne and Roehl are not learning theorists in the traditional or academic sense, although Roehl holds a D.Min degree and teaches for the academy part-time. However, both men have spent decades teaching, training, consulting with and developing leaders. Ogne and Roehl possess a unique understanding on how leaders change, grow and develop.

The Transformissional Paradigm has not been officially “tested” in a field research study and to this point has not been featured in any other academic writing. It may have limitations for extension or application beyond religious leadership contexts. Some aspects of the paradigm as under, such as the character component, may be difficult to measure in an online environment.

But, the transformissional paradigm does have value for professors of mission, in particular, who facilitate student learning in a traditional campus setting or a digital setting, and who hopefully teach with the end vision that all students have missional impact for God’s Kingdom on earth. The Transformissional paradigm engages believers in mission beyond ministries of word and encourages engaging the culture to alleviate societal ills. Reggie McNeal observes, “The collapse of the church culture means that many spiritual leaders will not serve out their call within the church culture nor be remunerated through payrolls of religious institutions” (200:98). With that in mind, this approach is featured as one more lens to consider in the approach to learner and/or leadership development.

Educators who embrace a transformission paradigm for learning and leadership development will have as their goal the transformission of students within the context of learning. They will embrace holistic designs that include educational content and process that covers the four areas of focus. Facilitating social justice education fits naturally within this paradigm.

## **Curricular Approaches for Facilitating Social Justice Learning Online**

The last section of the paper will feature specific curricular approaches through the online course CD 501 ExL Vocation of Ministry that are used to facilitate social justice education. While the course is not entirely geared to social justice learning, certain aspects of the curriculum address the issue and it is those that will be featured here.

**Readings.** Students in the course engage a variety of readings that facilitates at least a basic understanding of social justice. The term “social justice,” a hackneyism within our religious culture, requires some basic definition for students.<sup>5</sup>

An early reading in the course features Peggy McIntosh’s popular but controversial article, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. Students are advised that they will likely have to “chew on the meat they find” and “spit out the bones” as needed. In some cases reading the article is very upsetting for students. The article is instructive since it helps expose the “colossal unseen dimensions” within our social system and fosters critical self-reflection for students (1990:36). Another helpful reading is called *Test Yourself for Hidden Bias*, available at [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org). Students read about the development and impact of one’s hidden biases and prejudices on one’s behavior. Likewise, students are required to participate in a short activity called the “Implicit Association Test.” The following is from the website and explains something about the meaning and goal of the test:

The categorization task you completed is called the Implicit Association Test (IAT). The task assesses associations between concepts by measuring how quickly a person can categorize, for example, GOOD words with White faces compared to GOOD words with Black faces. The test often reveals associations that are different than one’s conscious beliefs. (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/Study?tid=-1>)

A second and major reading of the course is the book by John Hayes (2006) entitled *Sub-merge, Living Deep in a Shallow World: Service, Justice and Contemplation Among the World’s Poor*. It has been recently added to the curriculum since it seemed that students

required something more substantial to read that specifically targeted engagement with issues of social justice and vocation of ministry. The book includes stories, experiences, biblical and theological insights, and reflections - indeed, a manifesto and prophetic call - about the need for Christian believers to become incarnational in ministry to the poor and marginalized around the world. In 1983 Hayes founded InnerCHANGE in Los Angeles, a compassionate order among the poor and marginalized ([www.innerchange.org](http://www.innerchange.org)).

The book is most helpful for the course because, first of all, it reminds students that any calling to ministry cannot exclude ministry to the poor and needy. Next, it helps students to address the contradiction that seems to exist within Western Christianity's preoccupation with the pursuit of wealth at the expense of identifying with the poor. Also, it introduces students to the plight of the poor and marginalized around the world and challenges them toward an incarnational model of ministry that will guide them as they "submerge" themselves into alleviating these needs. Students are not required to submit a reflection paper on the book, unfortunately. However, going forward it does seem wise for that to occur so that students can demonstrate in their writing how they have interacted with the material.

In the last week of the module of the course, students focus on issues of gender and the ministry. They read two pieces of literature: a short piece written by the B.T Roberts called *Ordaining Women* (1891) and an article by M. Robert Mullholland, Jr. *Women and Men: Wives and Husband* (date unknown). Here students are invited to consider the role of women in leadership and ministry. Surprising, this issue relates much to issues of social justice, especially within the ecclesial culture that has often been dominated by male preachers and leaders. Students are invited to discuss and debate the much bigger issue of women in ministry leadership positions. It does create some healthy tension among course participants, depending on the religious culture of the student and their particular biblio-theological stance on the matter.

Field Experiences. Another curricular approach involves the opportunity for students to participate in two field experiences by visiting the sites and writing one-page reflection papers. The first involves visiting a religious service of a culture and/or ethnicity different than that of the student, where the stated curricular objective

is for the student to “Demonstrate a sensitivity to cultural, ethnic, and gender issues with regard to their importance for the vocation of ministry.”

Students reflect upon the following questions while attending the service or ceremony: What worship styles are different? What worship styles are the same? How have I been received? At the conclusion of the module, students are required to submit a one-page reflection paper that features the cross-cultural experience and, in part, answers the above questions.

With this experience, students can move outside of their familiar social and religious zones and experience worship in settings where the languages, customs, economic statuses and cultures are different. The experience and reflection helps to expand their worldview, reminding them of the biblical writers vision that someday every “nation, tribe, people and language” will stand before God’s throne in worship (Revelation 7:9).

A second visit includes participation in a service-learning project. Students are required to demonstrate a commitment to social justice by investing four hours of service in an organization or club that specifically provides services to the underprivileged or needy. This social justice focus is a significant emphasis within the Wesleyan theological tradition of John Wesley and thus is essential for students seeking ministry within a Wesleyan context or any theological tradition. The assignment is the cornerstone for helping them develop social justice awareness in their future vocation of ministry. It provides a needed and helpful application of the material in Hayes’ book *Submerge*.

At the conclusion of the module, students submit a one-page reflection paper on their four-hour commitment. They describe how they felt and any note-worthy experiences of meeting persons or observing particular needs.

One student shared that the organization he joined with did something very radical and transformissional. The organization works to alleviate the sexual exploitation of women. For this project, they petitioned local florists to donate flowers and then as a group visited girls at the local strip club to deliver the flowers as a gift and pray for

the girls. He states that the gesture was very appreciative. And, as a result of the ministry of this organization, one of the girls has left the club in pursuit of other jobs to support her family.

Another student shared a transformissional moment: the ministry she served with offered need-meeting ministries to the homeless. In one instance, a worker was able to build a strong relationship with a client and eventually lead that client to a faith commitment. The worker was able to follow up with the client for ongoing disciple-making, encouragement and ministry.

Finally, one student's transformissional learning involved reflecting critically about social justice and faith sharing. The student shared problem of helping homeless people with housing needs but leaving Jesus and his message of redemption "outside, in the street".

Missing from this assignment is student's reflections on past involvement in ministries of social justice and commitments required going forward to continue working for social justice in society. Students should also be required to identify their passions, giftedness, and the particular areas of concern where they could best serve. Likewise, students must enter into dialogue and critical reflection with course-mates on the experience, as this would increase the depth and richness of the experience.

Online Discussions. The third tool used to facilitate social justice learning in the course Vocation of Ministry is forum discussions. To date, it is the weakest link in the chain for learning about social justice and therefore needs considerable attention going forward. It is a less than effective approach because: (1) discussions are asynchronous, (2) course design requires revamping topics to include at least one week of discussion regarding social justice, (3) students often do not have time to remain engaged with the discussion beyond the required number of postings, thus impacting deep learning, (4) and the largest numbers of posts makes it difficult for the professor to effectively guide all students in the learning process.

That being said, one week is scheduled for students to discuss issues of gender and the ministry. It's helpful that students are exposed to substantive teachings through course readings, for in some instances a student embraces a position without knowing why they do.



One experience of transformissional learning for two participants involved the foci of character and community. The learners vigorously maintained opposing views: one supported women being called into ministry to lead the church and the other did not. However, the question posed had to do with maintaining love and respect for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ despite not being able to agree that a woman could be called by God to full-time ministry. Love and respect for others are ultimately a character issue; maintaining relationship with someone who disagrees with you is an issue of community.

So, as the students discussed the matter it became apparent the disagreements could not be resolved easily. In fact, one student spoke with me on the phone and shared the difficulties of the experience. While it was obvious the relationship between the two was strained, and that the matter wasn't resolved, the students were able to highlight the key question of love and respect in community, realizing that Christians pursuing a vocation in ministry ought always to pursue love and respect and maintain Christian brotherhood and sisterhood in the midst of disagreement. Thus, it's possible to suggest that they continued down the road toward the goal of transformissional learning.

Designing curricular approaches that foster transformissional learning must be an important objective for any facilitator of learning. As has been shown, by use of course readings, experiential learning approaches, critical reflection and writing, group dialogue, and instructor engagement in the learning process, the online environment can be a useful venue for students to be transformed for the sake of mission.

## **Conclusion**

The advent of online learning offers the professor of mission opportunities to engage students from every corner of the world for social justice. Instructors continue ascending a steep learning curve of curricular theory and best practices for guiding online students forward. Thankfully, we are making progress. To foster continued engagement with best practices on the subject, this presentation featured curricular approaches from an extant online course taught

Asbury Theological Seminary, a course that included course objectives to advance student's understanding of and experience with social justice. By featuring a new approach to leadership development applied to learning – the transmissional paradigm – professors now have four areas of focus in which to develop curriculum for social justice and thus move students forward as transmissional agents of change in their culture.

## Notes

- 1 Readers should review docstoc.com for a list of over 90 articles on this subject. Available at <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/19878388/SERVICE-LEARNING-ARTICLE> (Accessed 11 May 2013).
- 2 I'm using the term social holiness interchangeably with the term social justice, although some would argue that we are not being faithful to John Wesley when we use these terms interchangeably. See Thompson A (2011) From Societies to Society: The Shift from Holiness to Justice in the Wesleyan Tradition. *Methodist Review* 3: 141-172.
- 3 Please see "The Trouble with Online Education," available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/20/opinion/the-trouble-with-online-education.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/20/opinion/the-trouble-with-online-education.html?_r=0) (accessed 16 May 2013).
- 4 Ogne and Roehl do not limit the use of Transformissional coaching to church leaders, obviously, and are regularly involved in coaching leaders who serve in a variety of organizational contexts.
- 5 During the writing of this paper I've come to realize the need to offer students a basic understanding of this term, something that hasn't been done since I started facilitating the course. It's just assumed that students know what it means. However, when one student wrote me and asked if the service-learning project they participated in was a true social justice project, I realized then that if they have to ask me then it's likely they don't really grasp the meaning of the term.

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