Continuity and Change in the Communication of the Gospel

by Tom Boomershine

The purpose of this paper is to try to draw together the outline of an overall understanding of continuity and change in the Church's efforts to communicate the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The occasion is our faculty colloquies which I regard as a historic development. To my knowledge, this is the first time that a representative faculty of scholars have wrestled with the impact of electronic media on our mission of witness and interpretation. In distinctive ways, Don Rogers, Jim Nelson, Ty Inbody, Norman Thomas and Len Sweet have addressed the issue of the impact of media change on the disciplines of Christian thought. I have read all of the papers in detail and reflected on them in relation to the past and future of Biblical interpretation and theological education. My mind is spinning with so many thoughts that I can't hold it together. At times in the last week, I have been afraid my brain was going to explode. I have been trying to integrate it all into a comprehensive understanding. And I have failed.

Therefore, what I want to do is to share some things that are clear to me and to ask some questions. Maybe together we can make some progress.

In an earlier paper I have distributed to you, modestly titled "Biblical Megatrends," I have sketched the development of Biblical interpretation from the perspective of media change. In that paper I have outlined the correlation between paradigm shifts in the interpretation of the Bible and changes in the dominant communications technology of Western culture. The task of Biblical interpretation is to make the meaning of the Biblical texts appropriately present in later cultural contexts. Since later cultural contexts are shaped by the dominant communications technology, the methods of Biblical interpretation must change in order for the traditions to be made meaningful in those contexts. In that paper, I have taken a diachronic approach to the question and have traced the developments through time.

Here I want to outline a synchronic analysis of the relationship of Biblical interpretation and communications technology. I will do a cross-sectional analysis of the factors of meaning in the major paradigms and apply the resulting theory to some of the problems we have discussed in our colloquies.

Aristotle's system in the Poetics for the analysis of the causal elements in the meaning of poetry is useful in the analysis of paradigms of Biblical interpretation. Aristotle isolates four major causes of meaning: the content or formal cause, the form or efficient cause, the medium or material cause, and the purpose or final cause. The meaning or effect of poetry is determined by the interaction of these four elements. Outlined in a chart with reference to the elements of poetry, the causes are as follows:

Cause	In Art Generally	In Poetry
Material	Means or medium	Language, rhythm, harmony
Formal	Object or content	Actions with agents
Efficient	Manner or form	Narrative, epic, dramatic
Final	End or purpose	Pleasure

Applied to the gospel tradition in its pre-documentary stage, the medium was oral speech, probably chanted to a melody, and shaped by the rhythms of the episodes in which the stories were composed. The form of the gospel was narrative

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interspersed with speech material. The content was the events of Jesus' life and ministry often concluding with his death and resurrection. The purpose was, first of all, the pleasure and enjoyment of the audience. This story has always been associated with good news. The meaning of these recitals of the gospel tradition varied widely from conversion to radical alienation. For those who were converted by the stories, the recitals were highly intense experiences of transformation of their relationship with God. Thus, the stories of the sermons of Peter at Pentecost and of Steven prior to his stoning may reflect some aspects of both the intensity and variety of effect in early Christian story telling.

We can describe the same elements in later paradigms. For purposes of contrast, in the paradigm of the Bible in silent print, the medium is a document read in silence. The content of the stories is transformed into two types of documentary data: historical data about the events described and theological data about the beliefs reflected in the stories. The form in which this data is made meaningful in seminaries is an exegesis paper which has a specific shape and character: e.g., ordered and logical argumentation, reference to primary and secondary source data, etc. Sometimes, an exegesis is reformed into an oral discourse in which the theological conclusions of the exegesis are stated and made relevant to a contemporary situation. A prevalent form of sermonic discourse in this period has been the exposition of the story's central idea in three points with illustrations and a closing poem.· When faithfully carried out, this paradigm has often resulted in the same basic effect or meaning. Through this paradigm of interpretation, people have had experiences of radical transformation of their relationship with God. So also, the paradigm has resulted in a wide range of responses from conversion to radical alienation to boredom.

Some dimensions of the problem of New Testament interpretation can be seen from these comparisons. The purpose of New Testament interpretation is to generate continuity of meaning. The goal is that the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus which took place in the original context happen again now. The original meaning can be defined in various ways: in relation to the person and character of Jesus Christ, in relation to the original experience of the oral traditions about those events, or in relation to the original texts that recorded those traditions. The focus of New Testament study has focused first on the meaning of the documents themselves. But the value of the documents is a witness to the person and events of Jesus Christ. In some way Knowing the reality and truth of God in Jesus Christ is a goal. In that sense, the purpose of interpretation in every age is continuity of meaning. For shorthand purposes of this discussion, let's call this Jesus Christ the Gospel. The purpose of interpretation is the continuity of meaning of the Gospel.

Now some things about New Testament interpretation that are made clear by communications theory.

1) The content, form, and medium of the interpretation of the Gospel are interdependent and equally important causes in the determination of the meaning of that interpretation.

If you change one element, you change the meaning. For example, I remember a sermon in a preaching seminar at NYTS that was an interpretation of John 3:16. In a tone of total anger and hostility, screaming at the congregation and

pounding the pulpit, he said, "God loves you. Do you hear that? God loves you." In relation to the text, there was continuity of content. The form was sermonic, thoroughly traditional. But the manner or medium of oral address was completely different than the manner of John 3:16. The result was a complete change in the meaning or impact of the sermon.

We are all familiar with the issues of changes in content. I am now teaching the Gospel of John. Jesus' steady address as a "son" of God as "Father" clearly created in the original recitals of the Gospel a high degree of intimacy in relation to God. This was a central aspect of the transformation of relationship to God that many people have experienced in the hearing of the Gospel over the centuries. Its impact was intimate and intensely relational. The Apostles and Nicene Creeds continued that "father/son" tradition of Jesus. The problem is that in the late 20th century, these same words have come to have exactly the opposite effect as was intended for many persons. We have sought for other names. But the suggested formula - Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer - does not have the same meaning. The form and medium of the Apostles creed or the doxology are retained. A criterion has been that to sing the formula to the same tune. But the content of the names is functional rather than relational. Change the content = change the meaning. We will come back to the issue of the changes of meaning that result from the role of the receiver in communication of the Gospel.

However, the most graphic examples of this phenomenon are in relation to media change. If you change the medium of a story from oral discourse to writing, the meaning changes. We know this with books that are made into movies. In order to have anything approaching the same meaning, the form and content of the book must be significantly changed.   The same is true of oral narratives that are recorded in writing. In order to have the same meaning, that cannot simply be recorded. Or read lectures that were written for silent reading aloud and, as we all know, they are often boring.

Thus, each of the causal factors in meaning must be taken into account.

2) Continuity of meaning cannot be achieved by the continuity of anyone causal element.

A frequent error in Christian communications theory is to fix on one element of the character of the Gospel and assume that it is decisive in relation to meaning.

Let me first take an example dear to my heart: story telling. In the context of the realization that story is a primary form of communication in the Biblical period, a growing movement in relation to preaching is narrative preaching. It has taken many forms. At its worst, the theory is: simply tell a story and you will communicate the Gospel. We are now being subjected to a wide range of stories about dying dogs, poignant moments, and humorous anecdotes. These stories may be entertaining rather than boring and even emotionally moving rather than dead. But they often have nothing to do with the Gospel. There is nothing magical about the form of story: Hitler was a great storyteller.

The more general problem is the maintenance of a form with the assumption that it will cause the same meaning to happen in later context. The church is known for its preservation of liturgical forms that have changed their meaning. Thus, the Roman Catholic community held on to the Latin mass as a liturgical form for centuries after Latin ceased to be a living language. The apparent decision of the

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hymnal committee to put the new hymnal in the form of Anglican hymnals is a classic instance of the misplaced confidence in continuity of a form.

More difficult is the recognition of the falsity of the Church's basic assumption that continuity of content will guarantee continuity of meaning. An underlying assumption of the Church's love affair with theology is that continuity of content or doctrine will result in the faithful transmission and interpretation of the Word of God. But, of course, the assumption is false. I have heard many sermons and read even more books that had sound theological content in direct continuity with the apostolic tradition that were utterly lacking in the power and meaning of the Gospel. In fact, the mainstream of the theological tradition recognizes clearly that the reinterpretation of the content of the Christian tradition in the thought world of each new age is a basic task.

Even more difficult is the recognition of our commitment to continuity of medium. The whole notion of apostolic succession is in part based on the assumption that continuity of oral tradition is the guarantor of continuity of meaning. This is also present in the rabbinic tradition of Judaism. And there is an ongoing priority to the oral medium. But it is no guarantee.

Nor is writing. Theological education assumes in practice that the guarantee of continuity of meaning in the interpretation of the New Testament is mastery of the medium of writing. The assumption is that if students can write credible exegesis papers they will be able to communicate the Gospel faithfully. We require little or no demonstration of ability to make the Gospel authentically meaningful in the medium of oral discourse. It is no wonder that the apprenticeship system has been more effective in training preachers.

Continuity of meaning requires that all the elements of the interpretation of the Gospel work together in ways that communicate authentically. To state an overall theory, I would argue that in order to have authentic communication of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, there are definable lines of continuity. The content needs to be in some clear way related to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God's self-revelation to Israel. The form needs to be in continuity with the forms of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The medium of communication needs to be adapted for the purpose of authentic communication. And the over-all purpose is the enjoyment of God.

II. The medium is the message.

The reason why media changes are so pivotal in relation to Biblical interpretation is that a change in the medium also is correlated with cultural change. The most recent developments in communications theory have emphasized the over-simplistic character of McLuhan's media determinism. In different cultures, the message of a new medium is radically different. The impact of radio in the oral culture of Guatemala has been very different than its impact in the literate cultures of Europe in the early 20th century.

Communications technology, which in Aristotle's terms causes major changes in the medium or means of poetry, can best be conceived as a set of potentialities as well as a set of limits. The medium establishes a pattern of possibilities and constraints. Each medium by its capabilities permits and empowers certain kinds of forms and content. However, in order to be effective in the conveying of meaning, the content and form must be compatible with the medium.

A further dimension of recent communications theory is that communication is more than the transmission of a message or even an effect to a receiver. Rather communication is an interaction of relationship in which what is sent and what is received is influenced by both the sender and the receiver. The notion that a medium such as television or computers is a neutral vehicle for the transmission of data is inadequate. The audience or receivers of the communication shape the meaning of the message by the way in which they interact with the message.

The clearest example of this are the differences in meaning that take place when the same form, content, and medium is used in later cultural contexts. Thus, a literal interpretation of the Bible which in its original cultural context of the Reformation had a highly progressive, forward looking meaning. It was related to the emergence of a new culture for which the message of Jesus Christ was made alive and vital. In the late 20th century literal interpretation of the Gospel has become a reactionary force connected in its meaning with the preservation of an authoritarian culture. In the history of Biblical interpretation, a pattern can be identified. In each new media age, a new paradigm of interpretation is developed that facilitates an energetic and new experience of the Word of God. Thus, the allegorical methods of the early Church, the literal interpretation of the Reformation, and historical critical methods were each cultural vanguards that made the Word of God meaningful in the new cultures that were emerging. But, in the context of later media changes and the need for continuity of meaning in that new culture, the earlier hermeneutic becomes conservative and is associated with the preservation of the earlier culture.

To put it another way, if the Church maintains the same systems of interpretation in new media ages, continuity of meaning is not maintained because the dominant medium of communication and its culture changes. In fact, in that new situation, the same hermeneutic that was previously progressive becomes conservative. I would suggest that the reason for this is that the listeners change. As a result, the same interpretation does not have the same meaning for them that it had for earlier listeners.

Thus, in the Christian tradition, we have spent a great deal of energy working on continuity of content and, to a lesser degree, form. The issue of the impact of the medium on the
culture and life of the Church has been much less a conscious issue. In general, we have simply taken the medium of the present culture for granted. Yet the changes that have been created by media change have convulsed the Church and transformed its mission. Changes in the dominant medium have been correlated with the most cataclysmic changes in the life of the community: the separation into rabbinic and christian Judaism, the separation into Protestant and Catholic, and the divisions of supernaturalists and modernists.
In light of this analysis, we can see the radicality of the change that we confront. The change in the medium is changing the meaning of the traditions we value. They are becoming increasingly associated with a previous culture and its values. In this sense, maintaining those traditions and modes of communication may become increasingly reactionary. On the other hand, we are committed to maintaining continuity of meaning. Our temptation is to equate continuity of meaning with continuity of form and content. Because the medium and the resulting dominant

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cultural context has changed, this means we will have to change the content and form of our thought in order to enable continuity of meaning.

II
The Role of Theology in an Electronic Age

I do not think it is possible for us to think constructively about the communication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in an electronic age without understanding the role of theology in the history of Christianity. Seen from the perspective of the history of religions, the role of theology in Christianity is a highly unusual and distinctive role. Let me simply sketch some hunches that can be tested by those who know more than I do.

First a definition of theology in Aristotle's categories. The content of theology is ideas. The ideas are derived from various sources: e.g., Biblical tradition, philosophy, and experience. The form of theology is argument. Specifically, the form of theology is governed by the laws of logic such as the law of non-contradiction. The medium of theology can be either oral or written. In its oral forms, theology was oral disputation about propositions conceived and developed through the study of documents. In the modern period, theology has become increasingly conducted in the medium of writing and specifically writing intended to be read in silence. Theology is then, to adapt Ty Inbody's terms, critical reflection on thought or speech about God in the form of argument.

Let us also describe what is not theology. In relation to the forms of communication, poetry and narrative are not theology. First narrative: the form and content of narrative is a series of events with characters organized in a plot. In relation to form, therefore, a narrative theology is impossible; a discourse can be either narrative or theology but it cannot be both. Narrative and theology are different forms. It is possible to discuss narrative in theological categories. Thus, the Gospel narratives are constantly deconstructed as narratives and reconstituted as theology. This process involves the identification of the theological content of the narratives, the disassociation of that content from its narrative form, and its recomposition in the form of theology. Thus, a narrative theology can be critical reflection in the forms of theology about narrative (George Stroup) or the use of form of narrative to trace the development of theological ideas (Gabriel Fackre).

Also poetry is not theology. Poetry has content which can be discussed in the forms of theological discourse. But the form and manner of poetry is characterized by language "chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through its meaning, sound, and rhythm." (Webster's Third Unabridged) The form of poetry is characterized by highly concentrated language that is symbolic or associative in its logical structure; the language has a musical quality associated with rhyme or alliteration. It is possible to reflect critically about the language about God implicit in poetry in the forms of theological discourse. One can even write or speak theology in a poetic manner. But poetry and theology are distinctive forms of communication.

These distinctions are necessary because there has been a tendency for theology to subsume all forms of language about God under itself. This tendency creates unfortunate confusion, both for theologians and for the Church. This is evident in the fact that, from the point of view of literary form, ther are no theological

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discourses in the Bible. The closest that the Bible gets to theology is the letters of Paul. But I would argue that even Paul's letters do not have the characteristic forms of theological discourse. Thus, I would agree again with Ty Inbody that we need to distinguish theology among the many forms of human language about God. The primary forms of revelation and witness are both linguistic and non-linguistic: e. g., actions, images, prayer, creed, story, song, witness, and liturgy. Theology is a second order language of critical reflection on the primary languages of the tradition with its own distinctive form and content.

The problem with Ty's distinction is, however, that theology has in fact been a primary language for Christianity. Theology is the distinctive literature that emerged in the post-canonical period as the characteristic new form and style of the Christian church. The distinctiveness of this new literature and its hermeneutical function as the decisive framework for the interpretation of the Scriptures can be seen by comparing this system with the forms of Mishnah and Talmud that were developed by rabbinic Judaism in the same period. Just as midrash in the forms of halakah and haggadah was the decisive form of commentary on the primary language of first the Hebrew Scriptures and then the Mishnah, so also theology was the decisive form for Christian commentary on the Scriptures. It is true that both theology and midrash are secondary languages in the sense that they are commentary on other primary languages. But they differ immensely in, for example, the way they relate to the traditions of Hellenistic philosophy as well as the media world of writing. Thus, rabbinic Judaism did not really develop a theological literature until the 19th and 20th century.

That is, I would argue that theology has functioned in the Christian tradition as a primary language alongside the primary languages about God that Ty Inbody has rightly described. However, it is in relation to the electronic era that Ty is right. In an electronic age, theology is and will increasingly become a secondary language of critical reflection about the Church's efforts to tell the truth about God in the primary languages of witness and faith.

Another way of putting the issue is that theology has constituted the primary hermeneutic for making connections with the actions of God in Jesus Christ. It is true that the stories have continued to be told, liturgies celebrated, and hymns sung throughout the period. But the decisive framework for the interpretation of the tradition has been theological. Even the form of narrative in the Christian tradition has been controlled by the need to make sense as an illustration of ideas: hence, allegory.

That is, I would propose that the idealistic mode of conceiving reality that was proposed by Plato was taken over by the early Church and developed into a mode of interpretation of the Biblical tradition. They rightly recognized that continuity of meaning in the cultural context of the Hellenistic world of literacy required the deconstruction of the stories and discourses of the Scriptures and their reconstruction as theology. Thus, the theological arguments that led to the formation of the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds made possible a framework of meaning that provided essential continuity of meaning with the actions of God made meaningful in the earlier forms of the New Testament. In this world, theology as a system of meaning constituted the primary language of Christianity. Theology was to the primary narratives of the Gospels what Plato's philosophy was to the Homeric

narratives of Greece, the reconstitution of the primary traditions in a radically new form. That is, theology has been a primary form for the Church in the context of the culture of literacy which came together in the same period as the formation of the Church as separate from rabbinic Judaism. That culture has been modified by the two periods of upheaval associated with changes in the distribution and modes of perception of writing: namely, the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

If, as Len Sweet has argued, we are in the middle of the third major challenge to the western church, it is because of the changes that are happening in the world. Thus, the preservation of continuity of meaning with the original events of God's self revelation in Jesus Christ in the culture being generated by electronic media may require us to develop an approach to the content and form of communication that is as radically discontinuous with our tradition as the early Church's discontinuity with the form and content of the traditions of Israel.

The problem I am struggling with is the recognition that theology has been the primary way by which we have thought and communicated as Christians. It has provided our normative system of interpretation. And it has functioned brilliantly in the cultures of literacy in which the church has witnessed and ministered through these centuries. The question before us is whether theology as a primary system for the definition of the form and content of the Word of God in the culture of literacy is culturally relative. Is this central role of theology relative to a culture/communications world organized around literacy? Can the form and content of theology be the framework for continuity of meaning in a post-l iterate, electronic world? In the context of the fact that the most powerful communications technology in the world is shifting from writing to electronic communications, can theology as a form and content continue to be effective as the primary content and form of Christian communication? Will it provide continuity of meaning or will it become increasingly anachronistic and associated with a previous culture and its ways?

III
Biblical Interpretation and Theological Education in an Electronic Age

If we accept the gifts and constraints of electronic communications technology in all its complexity from radio to film, TV and computers, what can we project?

I would argue that the issue of evaluation is continuity of meaning. The medium, content and form of communication are relative to the particular purpose and style of communication. All are valid in relation to different cultural situations. In relation to that purpose, once a decision has been made about the medium of communication, certain possibilities and constraints operate. Thus, TV has a set of constraints that are not present with radio or computers. Those constraints shape both the content and the form of the communication. And the problem is that theological modes of interpretation do not work well in electronic media and its culture. Electronic media reinforce a thoroughly empirical epistemology. Sense experience is reality, not simply a shadow on a wall. Theology is based on the distinction between sense experience and reality. Its content is ideas and its form is argument. The need is for a non-theological hermeneutic for the interpretation of the Gospel in the cultural world of electronic media. When the medium of the Gospel

changes, continuity of meaning requires a change in the content and form of communication of the Gospel.

Thus, if the major task in educating effective Church leaders is the mastery of the most advanced communications technology and of the systems of interpretation that can communicate the Gospel in that world, we need to change the way we think. We live in the first period since the 2nd century in which a medium other than writing has been the most advanced communications technology. The communications world of each age and each subculture is composed of the distinctive integration of all of the communications systems that have been and are available.

Our present posture is resistance to electronic media and its impact on the church and the culture. Theological education effectively exists in the world of silent print as if telecommunications has never happened. It has been shaped by it and fortunately has made adjustments. But it has not understood the sources of the pressure have been and has made adjustments that have not always had the desired effect.

That is, the problem may not be electronic media but our norms for defining the continuity of what is authentically Christian. Seen from the perspective of previous media changes, the resistance response has been generated by those groups that are most highly committed to the interpretation of the religion in the previous media age. We as mainstream churches are highly invested in the traditions of the media age of silent print with its values of detachment, reflective critical analysis, and urbane sophistication. We are highly committed to certain ideas, to theological continuity. But all of these values are part the hermeneutical system, the network, that has made the Gospel meaningful in the age of silent print. The hermeneutical system is no more appropriate to the age of electronic media than allegorical interpretation in the world of silent print and historical criticism.

The study of theological education, understood as the primary center for the education of the church's leadership, has largely been pursued from within the existing presuppositions of the paradigm in which it was born. Edward Farley's recent analysis broadens the basis from recent American theological education as in the Niebuhr/Williams study to include the periods of theological education since the establishment of the medieval universities. Farley's study is the first major effort to identify the first principles of this distinguished communal project in the life of the Church and to evaluate present theological education and its planning for the future in that context.

The problem with Farley's project is not the accuracy of his historical analysis. It is both illuminating and on the whole accurate in its basic conclusion. However, the essentially anachronistic character of his proposals for the solution of the problems of theological education's future, namely, to go back to theologia as the center for the curriculum, reveals a basic flaw in the presuppositions of his historical analysis. The flaw is the assumption that a reappropriation of theologia will have the same energizing and empowering effect for the leaders of the Church in the 20th century as it had in 12th through the 19th centuries. The problem is that Farley ignores the cultural relativity of theology and assumes its more or less timeless, unconditioned role in enabling effective Christian leadership. The basic anomaly of Church leadership education is that many of those who have been trained in the models

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most like those of the medieval theological centers have been the most ineffective leaders and those trained in more "practical" ways have turned to be more effective.

When the history of theological education is seen within this context, the primary problem with Farley's analysis becomes clear. Theology has provided the hermeneutical system for the communication of the Gospel in the media world of literacy and textuality. In an age in which electronic media and oral styles of communication are increasingly dominant, theology has much less power and community formation capability. In fact, the projection would be that making theology the center of the Church's educational enterprise will result in leaders who are increasingly ineffective in the communication of the Gospel and the formation of vital Christian communities. To simply reemphasize old communications strategies rather than to reform our educational processes in light of a new communications situation is to misunderstand the problem. It is essential to be clear about the problem before we propose an answer.

Is there any alternative to theology as a paradigm for the interpretation of God in Christ and then for the education of church leaders? I found an article in the journal of communications by Walter Fisher called "The Narrative Paradigm: In the Beginning." In the context of the analysis of the tradition of rhetoric, he argues that a narrative paradigm is the framework within which to understand and develop communications in the world of electronic communications. His statement was a positive revelation. I would propose that a narrative paradigm broadly conceived is a better paradigm for the organization of education of church leaders and for interpretation of the tradition in the culture of electronic communications than theology.

What would a narrative paradigm look like? John Navonne has outlined this best. It would be organized around the components of God's story as transmitted through the story of the church and its intersections with our stories as human groups and as individuals. Narrative includes history, myth, symbol, poetry, and prophecy: it refers to the various ways in which people tell stories about God and themselves.

The components of the curriculum would be: the major episodes or periods in the narrative of God and the Church. There would be a narrative structure of the curriculum in which students would learn components of the story and then explore ways that those stories intersect with the lives of communities and individuals.

They would be thoroughly involved with electronic media from the beginning, learning storytelling as an oral art, then narrative deconstruction and analysis through the study of theology, and the various styles of narrative in electronic media. Theology would be a discipline of reflection and analysis of the ways in which the Church has evaluated and now evaluates its efforts to tell the story. Theology would be integrated into narrative experience.

The fields would be considered as aspects of a common story rather than as discrete scientific disciplines. The teachers would be interpreters of the various aspects of the narratives and their intersections, each mastering certain elements, types, or periods in the communal narrative.

Graduates would be competent oral, writing, and electronic commentators thoroughly familiar with the modes of interpretation of the tradition in each communications system and able to teach the parts of the narrative that they have

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learned. They would be familiar with the whole narrative and masters of some parts of the narrative.

That is as far as I can go.