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Reforming Theological Pedagogy in Christian Religious Education in the Digital Era: A Theological-Didactic Analysis

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Abstract: This study examines the transformation of theological pedagogy within digital learning environments, focusing on the shift from a transmission-oriented model to a dialogical, reflective, and transformative paradigm. Employing a literature-based approach that engages theories of theological pedagogy, reflective didactics, and digital learning practices, the conceptual synthesis suggests that digital spaces foster new forms of active learner engagement in constructing theological meaning. The analysis identifies three core conceptual transformations: (1) a paradigmatic shift toward participatory learning; (2) a theological reinterpretation of presence and incarnation beyond physical proximity; and (3) the emergence of digital space as a legitimate locus theologicus for experiencing and articulating faith. The discussion further highlights the relevance of Groome's shared praxis and Klafki's reflective didactics as foundational frameworks for designing pedagogical models that are both contextually grounded and transformative. Overall, this study contributes to contemporary discussions on theological education by emphasizing the need to reconstruct pedagogical goals, processes, and relational dynamics for the digital age.

Keywords: Theological Pedagogy, Digital Learning, Shared Praxis, Reflective Didactics, Locus Theologicus.

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed profound transformations in global education driven by rapid digitalization, fundamentally reshaping how knowledge is created, shared, and applied across disciplines, including theology and Christian Religious Education (CRE). Advances in artificial intelligence (AI), social media, virtual classrooms, and online learning platforms have accelerated the transition from teacher-centered instruction to more collaborative, networked, and learner-centered educational environments (Anderson, 2020; Siemens, 2014). Rather than merely digitizing conventional instructional practices, digital technologies have reconfigured pedagogical interactions by promoting participatory learning, dialogical engagement, and collaborative knowledge construction within interconnected learning communities (Castells, 2010; Selwyn, 2016). This transformation has also expanded

educational access while requiring institutions to develop new pedagogical strategies that foster digital competence, critical thinking, and lifelong learning (Bond et al., 2020; Redecker, 2017). Consequently, digitalization should be understood not simply as technological advancement but as a paradigm shift that reshapes educational philosophy, teaching practices, and learner engagement in contemporary society (Holmes et al., 2022). These developments also underscore the need for an operational theological-didactic framework that translates theological principles into implementable pedagogical components, including instructional principles, educator roles, learner participation, and reflective learning processes suited to digital environments.

These developments have significantly influenced theological education, which has traditionally emphasized lecturer-centered instruction, textual interpretation, and face-to-face learning. In contemporary digital contexts, however, theological education is increasingly expected to cultivate critical reflection, contextual engagement, and collaborative learning while preserving theological integrity and the formative mission of Christian education (H. A. Campbell, 2020; Schweitzer, 2017). Theology students are no longer passive recipients of doctrinal knowledge but active participants who construct theological understanding through digital communities, online discussions, podcasts, and virtual learning environments. This learner-centered orientation reflects dialogical educational principles that emphasize participation, inquiry, and shared knowledge construction (Freire, 1970; Garrison, 2017). Consequently, reforming theological pedagogy requires integrating faith, reason, and technology within a holistic educational framework that nurtures spiritual maturity, Christian character, and faithful discipleship while responding to the characteristics of digitally native learners (Osmer, 2008; Smith, 2009). Such reform also demands that Christian educators possess not only theological expertise but also pedagogical and technological competencies that enable meaningful learning experiences across diverse digital contexts (Benkler, 2006; Groome, 2011; Koehler & Mishra, 2009; Turkle, 2015).

Within the Indonesian context, discussions on digital transformation in Christian Religious Education have gained increasing scholarly attention. Paelongan et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of integrating Christian values with digital literacy to cultivate faith-based character capable of engaging critically with digital culture. Likewise, E. Boiliu (2023) demonstrates that digital learning models can significantly enhance students' motivation, participation, and learning outcomes in Christian Religious Education. Purnomo & Adu (2025) further argue that media literacy is essential for developing students' critical thinking amid the rapid circulation of digital information, while Nugroho and Sirait highlight the importance of contextual theological responses to digitalization within Indonesia's multicultural missionary setting. Despite these developments, many Christian educational institutions continue to rely predominantly on lecture-based instruction and have yet to utilize digital technologies as interactive and transformative pedagogical resources (Hura et al., 2025; Moran, 2018). Furthermore, existing Indonesian studies have primarily concentrated on digital literacy, instructional media, and the effectiveness of technology-assisted learning, with comparatively limited attention given to how theological content, spiritual formation, and pedagogical practice can be integrated within a coherent theological-didactic framework. This imbalance suggests that technological innovation alone is insufficient to address the broader educational mission of Christian Religious Education, which seeks to cultivate intellectual, moral, and spiritual development simultaneously (Groome, 2011; Redecker, 2017).

Accordingly, this study addresses the identified gap by proposing a theological-didactic analytical framework for reforming theological pedagogy in Indonesian Christian Religious Education. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine digital literacy, instructional technologies, or online learning effectiveness, this research positions theological content, pedagogical practice, and learners' digital contexts as interconnected dimensions of educational

transformation. The study argues that effective theological education in the digital era requires balancing technological innovation with theological reflection, spiritual formation, and contextual pedagogy rather than prioritizing technology as an end in itself (H. Campbell, 2021; Schweitzer, 2017). By adopting a theological-didactic perspective, this article contributes conceptually to the expanding discourse on digital theology while extending current discussions beyond issues of technological implementation toward a more integrative pedagogical framework (Helland, 2016; Kimmons, 2020). Practically, the findings are expected to provide guidance for Christian educators, theological institutions, and curriculum developers in designing learning environments that remain theologically faithful, pedagogically meaningful, and digitally relevant in response to the educational challenges of the twenty-first century (Koehler & Mishra, 2009; Trust & Whalen, 2020).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a library research method to examine the concept of reforming theological pedagogy in the digital era through reflective analysis. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study addresses conceptual and normative issues rather than empirical phenomena. Qualitative research seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of meanings, ideas, and phenomena within their specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a library research study, this research analyzed a range of academic sources, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, and previous studies related to theology, pedagogy, and digitalization. According to Snyder (2019), literature-based research enables scholars to synthesize existing theories and empirical findings in order to develop new conceptual frameworks.

Data collection was conducted through a comprehensive review of scholarly literature concerning digital theology, theological pedagogy, and Christian Religious Education. The data were analyzed in three stages: (1) literature identification and selection, (2) thematic categorization to identify recurring patterns and key issues, and (3) reflective theological analysis using a theological hermeneutic approach combined with reflective didactic theory (Osmer, 2008). This analytical process generated a conceptual synthesis illustrating the interrelationship among faith, pedagogy, and digital technology within the context of Christian education. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed conceptual triangulation by comparing multiple theoretical perspectives and scholarly viewpoints to achieve balanced and consistent interpretations (Bowen, 2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal four major themes: (1) the paradigm shift in theological education from transmission to transformation; (2) the reconstruction of the meanings of presence and incarnation in digital learning; (3) the conceptualization of digital space as a new locus theologicus; and (4) the didactic-theological implications for reforming theological pedagogy. Each finding is analyzed by relating the conceptual evidence to the theoretical framework developed earlier, demonstrating both the consistency and the conceptual contribution of this study.

Paradigm Shift in Theological Education: From Transmission to Transformation

The analysis indicates that theological education in the digital era has undergone a fundamental shift from a transmissive paradigm to a transformative one. Under the traditional transmission of doctrine model, faith education was primarily understood as a one-way process in which theological knowledge was delivered from an authority figure (teacher or lecturer) to learners. This model emphasized cognitive mastery of doctrine but tended to overlook reflective participation and personal spirituality.

In contrast, the digital era requires a transition toward the transformation of faith, in which learners become reflective participants who actively construct theological meaning through digital interaction. Observations of digitally supported Christian Religious Education (CRE) practices demonstrate increased learner participation and creativity when students engage in online discussions, theological content creation, and virtual faith reflection (E. R. Boiliu & Telaumbanua, 2022).

These findings reinforce Groome's contextual theological pedagogy, particularly the principle of shared Christian praxis, which views faith education as a dialogical process that connects learners' lived experiences with the Christian faith tradition through critical reflection and communal dialogue (Groome, 1980). Within digital environments, this principle is manifested through online learning communities where faith is continuously interpreted and reconstructed within participatory, interactive, and open learning spaces.

Accordingly, reforming theological pedagogy involves more than adopting digital technologies; it requires rethinking theological understandings of learning as an act of reflective faith. This new paradigm is consistent with Klafki's theory of reflective didactics, which argues that education should extend beyond the transmission of knowledge by enabling learners to discover the social, existential, and spiritual significance of what they learn (Klafki, 1995).

The first finding therefore demonstrates a shift from transmission to transformation, indicating that theological education has moved away from one-way doctrinal instruction toward dialogical, reflective, and participatory faith learning. This transformation aligns with Groome's framework of shared Christian praxis, which emphasizes learners' active engagement in interpreting life experiences through dialogue with the Christian tradition. Within digital contexts, these principles are reflected in online learning communities that foster open collaboration, creativity, and theological dialogue. The findings further indicate that digital environments expand opportunities for transformative learning by enabling students to construct theological meaning through digital content creation, online discussions, and virtual reflective practices.

The second and third findings further enrich theological understandings of presence and incarnation within digital environments. Theological learning is no longer dependent solely on physical co-presence but increasingly on the quality of relational and interactive engagement fostered within digital ecosystems. This development introduces a renewed understanding of digital space as a *locus theologicus*—a context in which faith may be experienced, interpreted, and shared. Consequently, digital space should not be regarded as a replacement for physical learning environments but rather as a complementary arena in which authentic Christian faith practices can develop.

Collectively, these findings have significant didactic-theological implications. Reforming theological pedagogy requires more than replacing traditional teaching media with digital technologies; it demands a reconstruction of how educators understand the purposes, processes, and relationships involved in faith formation. Klafki's reflective didactic theory provides an important foundation in this regard by emphasizing that education is fundamentally a process of meaning-making in which educators guide learners toward understanding the social, existential, and spiritual significance of knowledge (Klafki, 1995). The findings suggest that this approach is particularly relevant within digital contexts, where educators must intentionally design learning experiences that connect Christian teachings with learners' everyday digital realities.

Overall, the synthesis of these findings demonstrates that digital theological education requires pedagogical, hermeneutical, and theological transformation. Such transformation creates opportunities for more participatory, contextual, and meaningful models of Christian faith formation that are responsive to the realities of contemporary digital life. Accordingly,

this study offers a significant conceptual contribution to the development of contemporary theological pedagogy by explaining how educational space, relational engagement, and Christian praxis can be reinterpreted and reconstructed within the digital era.

Presence and Incarnation: Spirituality in Digital Learning

The second finding indicates that spirituality has become a critical dimension of digital learning, requiring a reinterpretation of the concepts of presence and incarnation. In online learning environments, the relationship between educators and learners is often reduced to superficial technical interactions. This concern is consistent with Anderson's warning regarding the risk of disembodied learning, in which the relational and incarnational depth of education is diminished (Anderson, 2020).

However, reflections on digital Christian Religious Education (CRE) practices across several educational institutions (Paelongan et al.; (Paelongan et al., 2024; Purnomo & Adu, 2025) suggest that authentic spiritual presence can be cultivated within digital environments through empathy, active participation, and reflective communication (Paelongan et al., 2024). These findings highlight the importance of developing incarnational presence, referring to the presence of Christian educators that extends beyond technical instruction to embody Christ-like love, care, and Christian values throughout digital interactions.

This concept is closely associated with digital theology, which understands the digital world as a new spiritual space or locus theologicus where God's presence may also be experienced and encountered (H. Campbell, 2021). Consequently, presence and incarnation should not be regarded merely as abstract theological concepts but as practical foundations that enable Christian educators to embody and communicate faith within digital environments.

From this perspective, reforming theological pedagogy requires the development of a spiritual digital pedagogy that integrates both the theological and ethical dimensions of technology use (Palmer, 1998). Rather than viewing digital technologies solely as instructional tools, Christian educators are called to cultivate learning environments in which meaningful relationships, spiritual formation, and faithful discipleship can flourish despite the absence of physical co-presence. Such an approach ensures that digital learning remains not only technologically effective but also spiritually authentic, relationally grounded, and theologically faithful.

Digital Space as a Locus Theologicus: Faith Education in Virtual Contexts

The findings indicate that digital space serves a dual function as both an educational medium and a theological arena. Online learning platforms, social media, and digital communities are not merely instructional tools but also new spaces for faith formation and theological reflection. (H. Campbell, 2021) describes this phenomenon as a digital sacred space, a context in which experiences of faith, Christian fellowship, and prayer can be authentically practiced.

Within the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE), digital space may be understood as an *ecclesiola in rete* ("a small church within the network"), an online faith community that cultivates reflective spirituality through digital content, discussion, and ministry. Nevertheless, the analysis also reveals important challenges. Not all digital environments foster genuine spiritual depth, as many function primarily as channels for information dissemination rather than transformative faith formation. Consequently, Klafki's theory of reflective didactics provides an important framework for evaluating the extent to which digital content and instructional methods mediate the meaning of faith rather than merely transmit religious information (H. Campbell, 2021).

From the perspective of contextual theological pedagogy, digital space requires a reinterpretation of Christian praxis that engages meaningfully with contemporary digital

culture. Faith education in virtual environments should promote critical dialogue between theology and digital culture, enabling learners to interpret the signs of the times from a theological perspective. In this context, the role of educators as digital theologians becomes increasingly significant. Rather than presenting theology solely as a body of doctrinal knowledge, educators are called to facilitate theology as an interpretive and reflective process through which learners engage critically with the realities of the digital world.

Didactic-Theological Implications for Reforming Theological Pedagogy

The first finding demonstrates a paradigm shift from transmission to transformation, indicating that theological education has evolved from a one-way model focused primarily on doctrinal transfer toward a dialogical, reflective, and participatory approach to faith formation. This transformation is consistent with Groome's framework of shared Christian praxis, which emphasizes learners' active participation in interpreting life experiences through dialogue with the Christian faith tradition (Groome, 1980). Within digital environments, this principle is expressed through online learning communities that encourage openness, collaboration, creativity, and theological dialogue. The findings further suggest that digital spaces expand opportunities for transformative learning by enabling learners to construct theological meaning through digital content creation, online discussions, and virtual reflective practices.

The second and third findings deepen theological understandings of presence and incarnation within digital contexts. Theological learning is no longer dependent solely upon physical co-presence but increasingly upon the quality of relational and interactive engagement fostered through digital ecosystems. This development introduces a renewed understanding of digital space as a locus theologicus in which faith can be experienced, interpreted, and shared. Accordingly, digital environments should not be regarded as substitutes for physical communities but as complementary spaces that support authentic Christian praxis.

Collectively, these findings have significant didactic-theological implications. Reforming theological pedagogy requires more than replacing traditional instructional media with digital technologies; it demands a reconstruction of educational purposes, learning processes, and relational dynamics within Christian faith formation. Klafki's theory of reflective didactics is particularly relevant in this regard, as it conceptualizes education not merely as the transmission of knowledge but as a process of meaning-making in which educators guide learners to understand the social, existential, and spiritual significance of what they learn (Klafki, 1995). The findings of this study indicate that such an approach is especially appropriate for digital learning environments, where educators are challenged to design learning experiences that connect Christian teachings with learners' everyday digital realities.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that digital theological education requires both pedagogical and theological transformation. Such transformation creates opportunities for developing models of faith education that are more participatory, contextual, and responsive to the realities of contemporary digital life. Therefore, this study makes an important conceptual contribution to the advancement of contemporary theological pedagogy by demonstrating how educational space, relational engagement, and Christian praxis can be reinterpreted within the context of the digital era.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that digital theological education is undergoing a profound paradigmatic transformation. The shift from a transmission-oriented model toward a dialogical and reflective approach indicates that the construction of faith increasingly depends on learners' active participation and the relational dynamics fostered within digital environments. The reinterpretation of the concepts of presence and incarnation further suggests that theological presence is no longer determined primarily by physical proximity but by the quality of

interaction, collaboration, and openness within online learning communities. Consequently, digital space functions as a new locus theologicus in which authentic and contextually meaningful experiences of faith can emerge. These findings underscore the need to reconstruct theological pedagogy by designing learning experiences that are not merely informative but transformative while simultaneously strengthening educators' competencies in theological digital literacy.

Furthermore, the relevance of Groome's concept of shared Christian praxis and Klafki's theory of reflective didactics demonstrates that faith education in the digital era requires pedagogical approaches that connect theological teachings with learners' lived digital experiences. The practical implications include designing collaborative learning environments, utilizing digital media as spaces for theological reflection and faith formation, and renewing curricula that recognize digitality as a legitimate theological context. This study also provides directions for future research, particularly empirical investigations evaluating the effectiveness of digital theological pedagogical models across diverse educational settings and church communities. In addition, cross-cultural comparative studies and in-depth examinations of relational dynamics within online theological learning communities are needed to expand our understanding of how presence, relationships, and Christian praxis are constructed and experienced within the global digital ecosystem.

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