

A Reflection on the Formative Curriculum of Anglican Schools

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What is your goal for your students?

Teaching in an Anglican school is a rewarding experience, supported by centuries of tradition in academic excellence and pastoral care, focused on a clear vision of ‘the good’ and what it means to live what sociologists refer to as a ‘good life’. In the Anglican community, it is the Bible that gives us that vision, characterized as ‘wisdom’. And so it is in Anglican schools that education is seen as nothing less than the intellectual, spiritual and moral formation of students towards wisdom. The routines and rituals that are practised in the community are crucial to such formation with the student developing a certain orientation toward the world^[1] through the community’s practices.

How is your subject forming your students?

While this understanding of formation is largely uncontested, its application is often restricted to activities outside the classroom of the mainstream subjects. However, it is a major premise of this paper that such student-forming practice is not restricted to the more obvious Christian celebrations, but can also be seen in the routines and rituals of the subjects we teach and of our classrooms. The question we need to reflect on is not ‘Am I contributing to the formation of my students?’ because as teachers, we are inevitably doing so. Instead, we should be asking ‘Whose view of the good life am I promoting in my classroom?’ and ‘How can I support my students towards wisdom with its concomitants of commitment and insight?’

Who are you teaching?

21st Century students inhabit a post-Christendom consumerist society that fails to provide them with a satisfactory ‘big story’ for life, substituting, by default, an atheistic version of secularism. Students are responding by constructing their identity around technology, brands and celebrity, with the resultant ‘pornification’ of girls and undisciplined aggression of boys. Bereft of the wisdom that begins with an acknowledgement of their Creator, students are filling their lives with counterfeit gods that give them false hope for the future and a false vision of what it means to live the good life.

What do your students really need?

The big story that students really need is ‘one that tells of origins and envisions a future, a story that constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a source of authority...gives a sense of continuity and purpose...one that has sufficient credibility, complexity, and symbolic power to enable one to organize one’s life around it’. (Postman, 1996, p. 5-6) Anglican schools are ideally placed to offer that ‘big story’ of worship and worldview as they draw on a rich tradition of Christian thought to promote vibrant faith in Jesus Christ. Indeed, ‘to be in school is to acquire a worldview’ Eliot Eisner (1992) so we do well to ensure as far as we can that our educational initiatives reflect and are directed by the biblical worldview of Christ the King, the Lord of Creation.

How important is Biblical Studies for the holistic curriculum?

One suggestion for consideration in relation to the formative nature of the curriculum is a reconfiguration of Biblical Studies as an integrative subject of the curriculum framework. While still teaching ‘the whole counsel of God’, Biblical Studies could also provide linkages to the subjects that students consider ‘mainstream’ with a consideration of relevant worldview issues. In turn, the subjects could program units that tackle foundational belief issues intentionally and purposefully.

How can you avoid pseudo-integration of a ‘biblical worldview’ with curriculum?

It is important that we open up the subjects to exploration from a theological foundation. It is an exploration of the issues that are already there, or ‘integral’ to the subjects, not an artificial imposition of Christian doctrine onto the subjects. Areas to explore are the nature, strengths, limits, knowledge issues and ethical implications of subjects and opportunities for service. This would reflect a similar approach to that of Theory of Knowledge, the integrating subject that is taught in the International Baccalaureate, albeit from a Western philosophical perspective. In this way, teachers are articulating for student exploration and response the formative routines and rituals of their subject.

Is the integrated curriculum framework reflective of the real world?

Of course, this structuring must be accompanied by the biblical understanding that human experience and thought alone cannot integrate student learning. Although valid in themselves, they should not be understood as functioning autonomously or be taken as the source of order and meaning in life. Jesus Christ Himself is the one true integrator. ‘All things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together’ (Col.1:17). He does this through his powerful word. The curriculum framework above is just one way in which to promote the formative, comprehensive, captivating and imaginative biblical worldview.

Why is this so important for teachers to reflect on?

The hope for students who experience this curriculum framework is that they will stop marginalizing Biblical Studies and rejecting belief as they see the role of such beliefs in all knowledge as well as the comprehensive nature of the redemptive claims of Christ. ‘Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven’ (Col.1: 20) is a clear indicator of God’s extensive purposes for a new creation, redeemed for human flourishing and God’s glory. With the waning of Christendom, students need support in their pursuit of meaning in life. They do not have the taken-for-granted framework that former generations used to interpret the world. Anglican schools are well positioned to present Jesus Christ as the source of hope, love and peace and the motivation to serve others. Reasoned, respectful, resilient, relational: this is the type of faith Anglican schools can promote but it requires modification of curriculum and a recognition of the formative nature of our classrooms.

Postman, N, (1996) *The End of Education*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York

[1] Smith, D. I. & Smith, J. K. A. (2011) *Teaching and Christian Practices*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Cambridge, pp. 7-9.