

The Role of the Teacher

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A Work In Progress

The Christian Teacher.

The question might be asked 'is there any difference between a Christian and a secular teacher?'

If the answer to this question is 'yes' then it is logical to ask 'what are these differences and what characteristics account for them?'

It is clearly the case that some excellent teachers have no belief in God and no relationship with Him. This should not be surprising as common grace is available to all. In the secular world teachers who are passionate about their subject, consider the student as a whole person, work to grow a school community, teach students the value of having integrity and caring for the less fortunate and contributing to the wider community, are not unknown or even uncommon.

Many of these excellent teachers may even happily give an account of religion in their teaching. Brian Hill (p64) has argued convincingly that an understanding of religion is necessary for students to grasp or comprehend adequately the records of history and literature and to grasp the motivation behind much of what happens today in ethical, social, political and technological spheres as well as the arts.

If then Christians do not have a monopoly on being good teachers with a whole- of- life perspective, what is it that makes a difference?

Pazmino (1997, p17) claims that Christian distinctiveness in education flows from the place of the Scriptures which provide an essential source of understanding for the Christian educator, and a concern for the spiritual well being of students. It is from the Bible that the Christian teacher draws their framework for understanding the student, their teaching material and pedagogy. For the Christian educator it is not enough to teach religion in order to allow students to better understand history, literature, the arts or even humanitarian concerns. They understand the transformational nature of biblical truth in the whole of life experience and have a desire to both live a transformed life and to teach from a perspective of biblical truth. They have a desire to serve God in their work and to bring honour to God through their teaching.

The Christian teacher in the classroom.

Teaching requires the teacher to possess and continue to develop expertise in several areas. A teacher must know their content, understand pedagogy and develop an understanding of each student in their class. Understanding each student allows a teacher to choose pedagogy that will facilitate learning. They must also manage the class in a way that allows learning to occur. All of these tasks should be underpinned by a biblical understanding of the world.

A. Teaching content

The teacher is in a position to introduce their students to the wonder and richness of knowledge and an appreciation of the world and the part they can play in society. Seligman () has shown that building appreciation and a grateful or thankful response in students helps to build their resilience. Within the framework of the curriculum they can introduce both positive and negative aspects of the world to their students in a safe environment where curiosity can be indulged and encouraged, lively debate enjoyed, thinking and presuppositions challenged and wise understanding developed. A Geography class learning about sustainable development can relate this to God's mandate to Adam to have dominion over the earth. A Biology class learning about the intricate interdependence of a food web has a small window into the wonder of God's creation. A Legal Studies class debating the introduction of re-integrative shaming into the judicial process allows an opportunity to explore the power of repentance and receiving forgiveness in healing the offender and the offended. Such examples are endless. The Christian teacher can point to the creator God's hand in creation and the way he sustains it.

While taking a responsible attitude to faithfully teaching the curriculum Christian teachers know that they have far more to teach their students than just the syllabus. This educational task is not just to reprogram secularised students with right understanding and so equip them to confront the errors of this world (p85?), nor is it to treat education as a single vessel into which a Christian world view can be poured (Smith p137 in Edlin & Ireland). The task can better be described as a missionary encounter with the prevailing culture (Lesslie Newbigin (1989) in p86). To meet the challenges of such a mission in a multicultural and pluralistic world Cooling (p88) suggests using a 'contextualise and transform' approach in which teachers need curiosity and an ability to deconstruct and reconstruct their own thinking. At one level the teacher needs to genuinely engage with the cultures of their students in order to understand them. This becomes a challenge in a multicultural classroom but is fundamental to understanding the child. In addition to seeking to understand the cultures of the students, teachers need to be able to use their curiosity to

deconstruct and critique their own culture. In many ways this is a more difficult exercise. They need to be theologically curious (Cooling p85) and ask theological questions about their own cultural values and to be able engage the curiosity of their students in the asking of questions and the pursuit off answers. While curiosity is intimately linked to learning because of its ability to motivate people to want to know and learn more (John Hull – 1985) it also presumes exploration and questioning on the part of the learner. In this case both the teacher and the students are the learners.

B. Pedagogy

Trevor Carney (2011) describes pedagogy as the science of teaching (p1) or the ‘how’ of classroom practice. While pedagogy is a broader concept than just teaching strategies a consideration and understanding of the educational theories that underpin teaching strategies is important.

Teaching practice is underpinned by a plurality of educational theories and fashions in pedagogy. Jerome Bruner (1969) says “any choice of pedagogical practice implies a conception of the learner and inevitably communicates a conception of the learning process and the learner. It is a medium that carries its own message” (in Smith p144). It is all too easy to teach the way you were taught to teach at university or the way you were taught at school or even to be excited by some new methodology or program that is being touted as new and exciting, without giving thought to the underlying concept of the learner or the learning process. The Christian teacher needs to be conscious of the hidden message.

For the last few hundred years the predominant cultural paradigm that has underpinned education has been modernism or modernity where the truth or knowledge that was to be taught was thought to be discovered by the systematic, logical application of the scientific method. In this context it was thought that children could discover truth and meaning through their learning activities. This construct was replaced by post-modernity where truth is viewed as a social construct with many and varied legitimate forms. In the educational context this is the background of Glaserfeld’s radical constructivism which sees children as independent thinkers who do not discover meaning but who actually create their own meaning in their learning activities. More recently disenchantment with the construction of personal meaning and truth has occurred and educators have turned to empirical constructivism and secular critical realism (Edlin p93), which again accepts an external reality. Christian thinkers like Cooling, Edlin, and Don Carson, among others, have proposed a paradigm they call ‘Reformed critical realism’. Reformed critical realism is distinguished from the secular critical realism by the recognition of the

existence, authority and involvement of a knowable God who has revealed himself through the Bible and through Jesus (Edlin p 97). While this paradigm still contains elements of secular critical realism it has a different starting point; a genuine commitment to Scripture. It affirms that there is God created truth and external reality which are contained in the Bible but recognises that we perceive these things through our own culturally and socially developed bias. As Carson explains this does not, however, change the nature of the truth (in Edlin p101-102). He says that “no truth which human beings may articulate can ever be articulated in a culture transcending way – but that does not mean that the truth thus articulated does not transcend culture.”

When a Christian teacher knows the paradigm that underpins any particular methodology they are in a better position to critique and adjust their practice. One might ask for example whether it is valid to set up a classroom around the student’s discovery of a personal understanding of the world. This may be structured as individual learning contracts where students are given little guidance from the teacher other than to facilitate the student’s individual discovery and learning. This teaching paradigm is based on a post modern ideal that believes there is no ultimate external truth and so it denies a basic Biblical understanding. Does this mean that the Christian teacher cannot use discovery learning which is organised around student contracts? Not necessarily. An awareness of the assumptions and presuppositions of the methodology allows the teacher to modify the process and accept that there is an external truth and that at times it may be helpful for the students to be set tasks or learning contracts that lead to their discovery of some aspect of this knowledge.

A Christian teacher needs to build an integrated understanding of truth, knowledge and practice.

C. Thinking about foundations and values

An integrated approach to teaching challenges the Christian teacher to ask foundational questions in relation to the content they are teaching and the pedagogy they are using. It requires the teacher to articulate their Biblical world view and value system and weigh the curriculum and their teaching practice against these norms. The value of this approach is voiced by Collier who encourages Christian teachers to “link a Christian worldview to their academic disciplines, and to critique the world views that emerge from textbooks and syllabus documents” (Collier, 2007, p6-7). Cooling also suggests that teachers should be looking for fundamental biblical themes that could shape the teaching of their subject (p11).

When Christian teachers identify the values deeply embedded in the subject material they teach and the pedagogy they practice, they are in a position to contextualise these values and help students to reconstruct their understanding in the light of biblical truth. This complements the current debate over 'values education' and introduces a Biblical framework that validates values as opposed to accepting values based on a consensus of social conscience without foundational absolutes.

This approach can happen seamlessly within the framework of the Board of Studies syllabuses. Here the content provides a rich opportunity for learning which is not barren and unrelated to building an understanding of God and the world that he made and sustains. It in fact provides many opportunities to build bridges of understanding.

This is not to argue that a Christian teacher is distinctive because they identify and teach values. The teaching of values is not an end in itself. It is really a process of introducing God's wisdom into the lives of the students and enabling older students to identify and critique the hidden values in the content of the material they are studying. It should impact their lives and enable them to grapple with the practical questions of character, truth, ethics and lifestyle (Pazmino, p 31). This is a process of "developing the student's fundamental thinking" (Collier p3, 2010) in order to "equip them with the ability to deconstruct and reconstruct their own thinking" (Cooling p11). By examining and debating the fundamental presuppositions of a subject (p10) the students are empowered to think independently and equipped to weigh up ideas against the Biblical truths they are learning. Such Christian teaching is not distinctive but rather transformational.

D. Developing the life-long learner

Teaching a student to think and become a life-long learner is a different process to indoctrination or imposing a truth on the student. Indoctrination demands mindless compliance and obedience and the loss of personal integrity and rationality. This is not the role of the Christian teacher. As a facilitator and trainer the Christian teacher encourages their students to grapple with questions of truth. Cooling suggests that Christian educators need to promote curiosity acknowledge the pertinence of (teenager's) questions and assist students to wrestle with issues (Cooling in Collier, Christian Perspectives, 2007, p457). This is training in the development of a process of learning that hopefully will continue throughout adult life.

The teacher then should also be automatically modelling this process of being a life- long learner.

E. The students

Teaching is not a stand-alone occupation. A teacher cannot stand at the front of a classroom and deliver an excellent lesson in isolation from the students who are present. Teaching and learning are intimately connected. To be a teacher is to be in relationship with the learner (Sainsbury, 2011) and a critical key to creating and sustaining environments and processes for effective and fruitful learning must be based on understanding the learner (Sainsbury p16). An in depth explanation of the nature of the learner can be found in the chapter on the nature of the learner.

When a teacher stands in front of a class of thirty students at any grade level there is a commonality in how the students are seen. Each student is different in ability, personality and gifts. Differences bring variety and interest into the classroom as well as challenges in meeting learning needs and training other students to accept and celebrate differences. Because differences can make people uncomfortable there needs to be a deliberate and purposeful building of a culture of accepting and celebrating differences.

Students are also similar in that each student is made in the image of God and is valued by God. No student is worthless or useless. They also share a similarity by all living in a fallen world. Teachers should not be surprised when a student cheats or lies or is involved in bullying behaviour or any other negative behaviour. Individual students may be more or less socialized, more or less compliant, more or less attentive but none are more or less deserving of God's love or the Christian teacher's best efforts to understand them and help them to learn. It is often the difficult behaviour of students that allows the most meaningful opportunities to mentor, teach and understand a student. In the same way a teacher who is spoken to or corrected should see it as a positive opportunity for growth.

F. An ordered environment

It is well documented that learning decreases in a chaotic environment. (Reference) Motivation and the ability to learn are affected by many and complex components but a well organised and well managed environment with clear expectations and boundaries and consistent and fair consequences when expectations are not meet or boundaries are crossed, is basic to facilitating learning. This is a reflection of the way God has dealt with mankind. Real freedom to live and to love is found when we live inside the boundaries God has given in the Bible. The Old Testament gives us the Ten Commandments. The all-knowing God who sees and understands the heartaches

and difficulties of his people did not take back His law when life got tough and his people did not keep the commandments. (Deuteronomy 28:1, Deuteronomy 28:15). He called them back to the right way to live and forgave them when they repented (Deuteronomy 30: 1-3). This is a good starting point for developing a discipline system in the classroom and in the wider school which has clearly defined boundaries and room for compassion within the boundaries.

There are many students who live in difficult circumstances. Some have been indulged and given no boundaries or opportunity to develop self control, some have been abused, some are unloved, some live with parents with significant mental health issues and some are very damaged. Some are aggressive, some are the passive victim. The life stories of some students are heart breaking. When a teacher knows a student's story it can be difficult to impose consequences for unacceptable behaviour. Some teachers think that it is an act of love to bend the rules for particular students because of their difficult lives but that is not the way God has dealt with his people. I have witnessed such students who have been given grace without consequences for their poor behaviour, laughing at the way they are able to manipulate the system. A student needs to be held accountable for their behaviour and can still be given forgiveness, understanding and support. This is a complicated area of school life and often there are no easy answers.

Students are growing up in a world where the media emphasises an immediate gratification and quick emotional response and computers foster self centeredness and lack of commitment. (Postman p?). It takes patience and commitment on the part of the teacher and schools to etch out a path that gives students a sense of coherence and meaning, showing them God's paths of integrity, righteousness, justice and mercy through nurture (Deut 6, Ps 78) H & B P 10) Postman 1993, pp16-17, 186.

The Christian teacher in the school community

(this section is still to be developed)

Through the eyes of a Christian teacher)

A. The teacher as a professional

As a professional the Christian teacher needs to be skilled in the best practice and latest pedagogy as well as educated and knowledgeable in their teaching area. The teacher should teach all expected Board of Studies curriculum content without cutting corners. To maintain skill and knowledge levels teachers should be active members of their Professional associations. This also opens opportunities to influence curriculum and the thinking within disciplines.

The teacher as a scholar and learner

One of the goals of teaching is to develop the students into life-long learners. If a teacher is to succeed at reaching this goal it is important that the teacher also enjoys and models being a life-long learner both in their area of teaching and in their Christian faith.

A Christian teacher can have a confidence to seek knowledge and a confidence to explore the world because they have a sure knowledge that truth exists; that it can be known and that God is the author of truth. They are not searching in a vacuum to construct a framework that is relevant for their own society but rather discovering what the maker has made known.

As reflective practitioners they continue to look for ways to improve their expertise and proficiency and can be courageously self critical (H & B p33). As a scholar and learner a teacher's job is never finished. As a Christian scholar and learner perhaps the task is only just beginning.

Smith encourages Christian educators to engage with the detail within the particular sub culture of their discipline and to explore the peculiar pedagogical texture of their particular curricular areas, so that the noble sentiments of mission statements have a genuine purchase on the daily grind of classroom teaching; on the content, pedagogy and framework of teaching. He calls for a balanced and disciplined attentiveness to the particular; to what is really happening in classrooms (P148- 149). This is an ongoing task.

The teacher who is teachable and accountable

(This section has yet to be developed)

Not only to their students, the school and the parents but also to God.

B. The teacher as a Christian leader

Servant leadership

A teacher is automatically in a position of leadership in the classroom and should be conscious of the privilege and responsibility of this position. The importance of this responsibility is reinforced by a Biblical warning that ‘not too many of you should become teachers.....as we who teach will be judged with greater strictness’ (James 3:1). While this was a warning to church leaders it is equally applicable to teachers of children. Any role model must be conscious that their behaviour gives permission for others, especially the followers to do copy the leader’s behaviour.

The Biblical model of leadership is the servant leadership of Christ. This is not leadership without authority but rather a leader who does not act out of selfish ambition but in the interest of others (Philippians 2:3-4). It is a leader whose vision for those they lead includes more than teaching curriculum content effectively. It includes growing each individual student into a responsible adult who not only takes their part in the adult world but one who appreciates the world and is able to give of themselves in the communities to which they belong. It is a vision that includes a hope that each student would come to a saving knowledge of Christ. It is a vision of a person who cares enough about the students to get to know them and who recognises everyday opportunities to challenge and encourage students. It is a leader who happily gives up their own lunch time to listen to the woes of a student and offer to pray with and for them. It is a leader who rolls up their sleeves and works beside students in extra-curricular activities.

Servant leadership empowers others to be effective in their service and promotes a communal accountability (Fowler in Ireland & Dickens p123). It may often mean that the leader will step back and allow or empower others to do the things they do well.

Leaders who are successful can also be described as transformational leaders as the lives of the children in their care are changed and enriched. Van Brummelen (p235) describes

'transformational' leaders as those who "promote a communal working environment characterized by love, unity and mutual support". He also describes them as reflective practitioners and risk takers willing to evaluate and try new curriculum. As transformational leaders they seek to maintain a shared purpose while allowing and celebrating diversity.

A life that is an example

The privilege and responsibility of being a teacher is significant. It is the responsibility of the Christian teacher to be a model of Godly integrity who brings Christ's love and Godly wisdom to their students and to all people in the school community. This is expressed through the relationships that are developed and characterised by love, trust, openness, honesty, acceptance, caring, support, forgiveness, correction and affirmation (Pazmino p21). A Christian teacher is one who measures their own behaviour by the standards set in the Bible, who is open to correction and models repentance and forgiveness in their dealings with other staff as well as with students. There is no Christian mould but rather individuals who wear a cloak of godliness that enhances the personality and shares the gifts given to each individual with a humility and gratefulness to God.

C. A partner with parents and community and a facilitator of community

Teachers have a unique opportunity to guide and influence the lives of students and at times to extend this influence to the parents and community.

Daniel Goleman (1995) explains that because of the changes in society schools have to go beyond their traditional mission to help students to live with emotional, social and moral proficiency (p233, 270). As a result he says we have to provide schools where students learn to live and to contribute to compassionate just and dependable communities. Such an endeavour strengthens the whole school and allows individuals to flourish and appreciate each other's gifts (P188). In this community students learn to tackle new topics, overcome challenges, take risks, venture opinions and make mistakes without feeling threatened or judged (p189) and to harness emotions in socially effective ways (B & H (p187).

Hill extends the idea of 'the school as community'. He (p96) suggests that schools benefit from pursuing a partnership with parents and the community which he describes as 'the school in the community' and 'schooling for community'. Each of these aspects prepares students to become a part of the wider community (Hill p96). Belonging to community is part of our very being as humans (Fowler p117).

D. The teacher as a promoter of justice and truth

Justice is a Biblical principle that should be practised by the Christian teacher. Arthur Becker (in Pazmino, p49) identifies three aspects of advocacy for justice: the correction of injustice, the positive pursuit of justice and the prevention of injustice. In the classroom the positive pursuit of justice for individual students should be the foundation of discipline, and truth should be set as a benchmark for communication. It is not always the case however, that this high ideal is achieved. Some students are well practiced and masterful in their interpretation of events and tell a story far from the truth. At times there may be opportunities or indeed the necessity to practise the correction of injustice if a student has been wrongly punished but more generally the correction of injustice and the prevention of injustice should be built into the framework and everyday practices of the school.

The choice of curriculum allows teachers to expose students to a wider and global awareness and critique of justice.

(this has yet to be developed)

E. Teacher as pedagogue.

A leader who nurtures the children in their care.

The student is a person with dignity, rights and purpose and with developmental potential. Nurturing development is part of the hidden curriculum in schools. It happens alongside the daily routine of the transmission of knowledge and the gaining of academic results. It is communicated through the relationships the teacher builds with individual students and with the class and the wider involvement of the student in school activities. Hill says that the relationship with pupils not only facilitates formal learning but is itself a curriculum of educative experiences (Hill ? p13).

An authority figure and guide.

By virtue of simply being a teacher a person becomes an authority figure to the students they teach. This is not to say that a teacher has automatic authority in the twenty first century classroom. Students are quick to assess a teacher's skills and may or may not accept and validate their authority. But by simply being a teacher our behaviour, attitudes and who we are has an influence on the students; for better or worse. This is not a responsibility to be taken lightly.

An innovator

A teacher who knows their students and the curriculum and seeks to establish a real and meaningful learning environment in their classroom must become an innovator. The same lesson content taught to two different classes in the same day will be different. Some of the differences will be planned to reflect the teachers understanding of the learning styles and abilities of students in the different classes and some will happen as the lesson progresses in response to the student's engagement or lack of engagement with different parts of the lesson.

Conclusion

There is no biblical model of how to teach a child but some wisdom may be gained by considering the apprenticeship model employed by Israel. This involved illustrating by example and explaining while doing. The goal was always to aim for children to become autonomous and independently faithful and to have personal integrity. Such an apprenticeship model includes an intentional relationship or connectedness built into the teaching and learning process and a godly life that is lived before the students.