Enhancing Student Engagement in a Course on the Book of Acts

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As a student in biblical studies courses – first at Regent College in Vancouver, then at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, and then at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia – I had no problem becoming engaged in the material, perhaps because I have always found studying biblical texts inherently interesting. However, once I assumed a position on the other side of the lectern, I quickly discovered that studying biblical texts is not inherently interesting for everyone. In those early years at Columbia Bible College, I found that many undergraduate students just did not care to engage in material that was so fascinating to me.

Upon reflection, I came to realize that since I was teaching at a Bible college, I should not have expected anything different, for the students we attract come with a greater diversity of expectations than do students attending more typical post-secondary educational institutions. Besides students who come for the academics, there are also those who come for specific vocational training to become a worship arts pastor, or a youth pastor, or a missionary. Many of them have little tolerance for anything not directly relevant to their future ministries; for these students, the finer points of biblical interpretation are a tough sell. Then there are the students whose primary purpose for coming is faith formation and who see their time at college as an opportunity to grow in their faith. Many of these students grow impatient with any discussion of biblical texts that does not address "what the Bible means to me today." Planning a course to meet the needs of so wide a range of students is a daunting task.

In the mid-1990s, I was assigned a course in the Book of Acts that was required for all first-year students, with each of the four class sections consisting of a mix of academically oriented, vocationally oriented, and faith-formation oriented students. At that point in my teaching career, I was still finding my way about how to engage students who were not particularly interested in an academically-based approach, and my efforts in those years

with the Acts course did not meet with a whole lot of success. However, sabbatical leave during 2001-2002 provided an opportunity to reflect on this problem, and I returned from the leave having totally revamped the course, with regard to both the material and the structure, all in an attempt to help students become more engaged.

In this new incarnation of the course, I decided against incorporating the typical discussions of critical issues surrounding the Book of Acts such as composition and redaction. I figured that while such discussions may be interesting to academically-oriented students, they would be dismissed as irrelevant by vocationally-oriented ones, and would be excruciating for those merely looking for how Acts applies to their spiritual lives today.

While abandoning discussions of these critical issues, I did work at sneaking in insights related to less-typical critical issues here and there throughout the course. The recently-developed discipline of social-scientific criticism has proven a veritable gold mine in this regard. The practice of taking present-day anthropological models developed from research into cultures not touched by modernist thinking and using them as interpretive grids for analyzing the pre-modern biblical texts has supplied insights into the Book of Acts that have caught the attention of students in all three categories (more on this later).

Another recently-developed discipline helpful for raising less-typical critical issues has been narrative criticism. In revamping the course, I remained constantly vigilant to the fact that the Book of Acts is a piece of narrative. Narrative possesses the capacity to engage an audience. It invites members of the audience into a story world to have them experience for themselves the events being related. In fact, well-crafted narratives can engage the audience to such an extent that they lose all awareness of the real world as they become totally immersed in the story world, an experience I have had often in movie theaters.

Of course, it would be impossible to concoct such an experience of the Book of Acts for students, short of a well-made 35-hour re-enactment of the book. However, here are some key considerations in attempting to draw out the narrative nature of a text such as Acts for the purpose of producing a narrative experience. First, discussion of the overall structure of the book at the beginning of the course should be avoided. Narrative by its

very nature is sequential, with events unfolding one after another, building for the audience a cumulative experience of the elements of the story, an experience that becomes distorted if they are made aware of all the elements from the outset. Therefore, if students are presented with an outline of all the major events in the Book of Acts, their reading of any given episode will be tainted by awareness of later events in the story line.

Even at the level of the individual episode, I avoid providing at the outset a summary of the passage. Rather, I try to carry students along in the drama of the events of the passage. For example, when covering the Council of Jerusalem, the gathering to decide on whether Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus need to convert to Judaism (Acts 15), I walk students through one side of the debate and then the other, noting the serious tension that would have existed in this gathering and that the decision was not a "slam dunk" but could legitimately have gone either way. Only after having them *experience* the powder-keg atmosphere of the procedings do I reveal the outcome.

Also, in dealing with the details of a particular passage, I try hard not to succumb to the common practice of referencing material from a passage subsequent to the one under examination. For example, in interpreting Saul's Damascus Road experience in Acts 9, it would be illegitimate to draw into the discussion what this character goes on to do later in the narrative; such information is irrelevant to the task of discerning the nature of the impact that Acts 9 makes on the audience, since not having yet reached this later material, they would be unaware of its content. Therefore, in teaching Acts, I avoid referencing material from later in the book, but I do draw students' attention to related material already encountered earlier.

Essentially, all these practices contribute to an approach whose goal is to recreate the story world of the Book of Acts, and to transport students into this world so that they do not just learn cognitively about the events but actually experience them along with the characters. It is my hope that by immersing themselves in the story world of Acts in this way, and by being carried along in the flow of the narrative as episode unfolds into episode, students will increase their level of engagement. One piece of anecdotal evidence suggesting this is indeed working comes from an end-of-semester note from a student who had just completed the course. Initially she had not wanted to take it, thinking that Acts was "long and boring." However, about

her experience of the course she wrote, "You made it come alive in your class. What you taught has clung to my brain – when reading through Acts now I remember all these things you said in class and I feel like I can really enter the story."

Another way in which narrative is used in the course to facilitate engagement with the material is the employment of clips from movies and TV shows – that is, audio-visual narratives. I try to incorporate at least one clip into each class session – essentially using narrative to teach narrative – with each clip designed to illustrate some dynamic in an event of the story line of Acts with a scene from a contemporary movie or TV show depicting the same dynamic. For example, when discussing how the Jews considered the Gentiles unclean and thus avoided any contact with them, I show a clip from the movie Introducing Dorothy Dandridge to provide the students with a 20th-century illustration of this dynamic. The clip shows Dorothy Dandridge, a major singer and movie star of the 1950s, being prohibited from using a hotel pool simply because she is African-American. In response, she sticks her foot into the pool as an act of defiance. And that evening, as she returns to the pool area, she finds the pool drained and in the process of being scrubbed. It is my hope that such a vivid image might succeed in providing students with at least a sense of the attitude Jews would have had toward Gentiles in the New Testament era. And, if some students have drifted away at that point in the class session, a movie clip is quite effective in re-engaging them.

"Acts: The Game"

There is one other innovation included in the revamp of the course – the most significant innovation – and it is the focus of the rest of this paper. In reflecting on the narrative movement of Acts from Jerusalem to Rome, I came to realize that this movement lends itself very well to a game format, a game involving competition to get to Rome first. Proceeding on the assumption that tapping into students' competitive nature could increase engagement in the material, I formulated what I have entitled "Acts: The Game."

In its new incarnation, the course still had all the basic standard elements: readings, lectures, group discussions, exams, papers, quizzes. It is just that many of these elements have become incorporated into a game format.

For the purposes of Acts: The Game, I decided to conduct the competition on a group, as opposed to an individual, basis. Therefore, at the beginning of the semester, I divide students into teams – or "tribes," if they prefer – of five or six. In making up the teams, I am careful to ensure there are no pre-existing friendships between any members of a given team. At one level, this is simply a precaution to prevent cliques forming within the teams. At a more important level, however, I want this experience of teamwork to serve as training for students in working with people they do not know – or know, but do not like – a skill helpful for functioning in the real world.

The teams then compete against each other, with their progress charted on a PowerPoint-generated game board, with the starting line at Jerusalem and the finish line at Rome, and with sixty spaces to navigate in between. There are markers every twelve spaces, each designating entry into a new "bonus" territory. As a team passes each of the markers, members of the team each earn one bonus mark toward their final grade up to a maximum of five, with Rome being the fifth marker. The team that reaches Rome first – or, if no team makes it that far, then the team that has advanced the farthest – wins the game, and members get to have their names engraved on an Acts: The Game plaque that is presented during the final class session. And, as an added incentive, I offer a pizza party for any team that actually makes it all the way to Rome.

There are various ways to earn spaces on the game board, each designed to enhance students' learning. The first is by means of quizzes based on the required readings. I have found that many students will not do the readings unless they can gain some tangible benefit from doing so, that is, something that counts toward their final grade. For this reason, I attach a benefit for completing the required readings. I give a series of pop quizzes, each consisting of a single multiple-choice question based on the readings for that class session, with students' performance on these quizzes counting toward their final grade. I formulate each question in such a way that if the reading has been done to a reasonable degree of thoroughness, the answer will be obvious. And with these quizzes occurring at a rate of almost one per class session, I hope to induce the students to read – not just skim – every reading. I also hope that this experience of having to stay on top of the

readings for every session might help students grow in discipline.

In addition, I incorporate these quizzes into Acts: The Game. For every quiz where at least half the members of a team get the correct answer, the team earns one space on the game board; but if every member gets the correct answer, the team earns two spaces. With this provision comes further inducement to get the readings done; more correct answers mean a better chance at bonus marks and also a better chance of winning the game. However, this provision also makes for some helpful group dynamics. Because one's performance on the quizzes affects not only one's own grade but the whole team's progress – and thus the grades of the other team members – I hope students will develop a sense of responsibility to others on the team. I also hope this provision might prompt some actual accountability dynamics, with team members holding each other accountable for getting the reading done.

The dynamic of responsibility also comes into play in another component of the game, and that is attendance. The college where I teach has a policy of compulsory attendance, with unaccounted-for absences resulting in reductions in one's final grade. Despite this inducement to attend classes, some students still skip. To provide further inducement not to skip, I offer one space on the game board for each block of four consecutive class sessions where every member of a team has no unaccounted-for absences. So, for a student thinking about skipping a class, who may not care about losing marks toward his or her own final grade, perhaps a sense of responsibility to their teammates might be enough to cause a change of heart. This past semester, I was interested to note that entering the final week the Acts students still had a string of perfect attendance going. And though the string was broken by a single absence in the final week, the 99.79 percent attendance rate far exceeds anything attained in the era before Acts: The Game was introduced.

Another way spaces on the game board can be earned is by means of group quizzes. In almost every session, I will press "pause" on a lecture and pose a question to the class, awarding spaces on the game board for teams able to produce the correct answer. While the quizzes mentioned earlier are designed to hold students accountable for the readings, these quizzes are designed to test their analytical skills – specifically, their ability to integrate

into the interpretation of a newly-encountered passage what they have already encountered earlier in the course.

For example, following the apostles' flogging and second release by the Sanhedrin in chapter 5, the narrator mentions, "As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name" (5:41 NRSV). I use this as an opportunity to draw into the lecture a cultural dynamic coming out of social-scientific research, specifically the concept of honor. After providing a basic understanding of this value, I use a movie clip depicting an honor-challenge situation, a newspaper report on an honor killing in Iraq, and a description of the honor-restoring practice of hara kiri from my own Japanese heritage to drive home the nature of this value that would have played a significant role in the cultures of the NT era. Then, when we reach chapter 16 and the account of the Philippian jailer, I first explain the traditional interpretation of the jailer's drawing his sword to kill himself: that his allowing prisoners to escape meant he would have to face the penalty they would have faced, and so he decides to take matters into his own hands. But then I give the teams, as a group quiz, the question, "Given what we have seen in the Book of Acts to this point, what is an alternative explanation for the jailer's wanting to kill himself?"

Whether or not members of a given team can make the connection between the jailer's decision to kill himself and the discussion of honor from weeks earlier, the group quiz serves a number of purposes. First, and most obviously, it gives students experience in corporate problem-solving – an experience of working together to achieve a goal – and this serves as a good counter-balance to the dynamic of competition inherent in the game format. Therefore, at the same time members of a given team are thinking in terms of working against the other teams, they will also be thinking in terms of working with members of their own team – in the midst of competition, the dynamic of co-operation. Second, these group quizzes help to accommodate those students who may not learn best through lectures but learn effectively through group discussion. Third, because of the nature of the questions used for these quizzes, students are compelled to continually address their minds to earlier material, resulting in a stronger grasp of the course as a whole. Fourth, when they are able to discern the correct answer, the fact that they have discovered the connection themselves makes a much stronger

impression on them than if I had just explained it as part of the lecture. And, finally, a group quiz simply provides a change of pace – and thus an opportunity to re-engage – for students who may have drifted away during the lecture.

I have noticed that allowing sufficient time for team members to work through the group-quiz questions does add to the already considerable time pressure created by trying to do justice to all 28 chapters of the Book of Acts in just 27 class sessions. With the addition of discussion time for the group quizzes, something had to give, and that has ended up being discussion time of personal application issues.

The new-look Acts course has not completely eliminated discussion of application issues, but the amount retained is definitely below the norm for first-year courses, the level at which the proportion of faith-formation oriented students per class is the highest. To compensate for this loss, I use the opening of each class session to raise points of application. Over the years, I have compiled a library of anecdotes – some from things I have read, others from things I have experienced – and at the beginning of each session, I present one that relates to a theme raised in the previous session. In this way students are invited, without the investment of a significant amount of class time, to reflect on how what they experienced last class relates to their lives today.

As is evident from the foregoing, Acts: The Game does not involve much in the way of head-to-head competition between the teams. However, there is one other major component of the game that does raise head-to-head competition. In discussing the significance of honor in the first-century Mediterranean world, I cover the basics of honor challenges, conceptualizing the challenge-riposte dynamic as something like a game in which units of honor are at stake. So, if one person challenges another and the challenged person is not able to riposte, the challenged person loses honor while the challenging person gains honor. I use this concept as the basis for providing another means by which teams can earn spaces on the game board: the successful challenge of another team.

The challenge would not take the form that an actual honor challenge, such as an insult, a slap – or even a gift – would play in an honor-dominated culture. In fact, the challenge does not have anything to do with honor at all.

But this dynamic of challenge-riposte seemed so well-suited as a component of the game that I had to find some way of including it.

I decided to have the challenges consist of questions on course content. Regarding the formulation of a challenge question, I stipulate that it must be reasonable. In devising the question, students are to think in terms of something they would deem fair if they were to encounter it on an exam. The question is then presented to the challenged team, who have one minute to come up with an answer, being allowed to discuss the question among themselves but not to consult any books or class notes. If they cannot answer the question, the challenging team advances one space on the game board and the challenged team is knocked back one space. But if the challenged team can answer the question, it advances one space and the challenging team is knocked back one space. I hope that the prospect of having to face questions from other teams might be enough to induce students to be constantly reviewing earlier material, thus enhancing their learning in the course. And I suppose that, beside the prospect of losing a space on the game board as a result of being unable to answer a question, there is also the prospect of losing face before one's peers. So perhaps there is an honor component in these challenges after all.

The first year I introduced the "challenge" component, it was hardly used at all. In fact, in one section there was not a single challenge for the whole semester. I discovered at the end of the semester that students in that section had entered into a pact not to issue any challenges, and thus save themselves from having to constantly review the course material; my attempt at tricking these students into learning had failed. In a later semester, however, one section saw a flurry of challenges right near the end. One team was getting close to the finish line in Rome, and thus the pizza party. Another team was so far behind they had no chance at the winner's plaque but became obsessed with preventing the first-place team from making it to Rome. Therefore, the far-behind team challenged the leading team with question after question. In the last session of the semester, members posed a question that stumped the leading team, thus pulling it back one space and leaving it one shy of Rome. With these challenges, the challenging team risked losing spaces and thus moving backwards, perhaps even into a lower bonus territory. That they were willing to take on this spoiler role

demonstrates just how engaged in the game students can become.

This type of engagement does not surround only the challenges. Even with the simple single-question multiple-choice quizzes, the classroom often explodes into cheers and high-fives when I announce the answer. And among the more subdued students, I have witnessed quick conferences among team members to figure out how many spaces they earned through their answers.

I have found that these spaces on the game board really do matter to the students, and not only for the earning of bonus points. When I put the weekly update of the game board up on the screen – weekly is not frequent enough to keep some students from asking for updates in the intervening class sessions as well – students' reaction is not "How many bonus points do we now have?" Rather, it is more likely to be some good-natured trash-talking.

Course Survey Results

Over the years, I have had students fill out a short survey at the end of the semester, soliciting their feedback on such things as how they feel about the "game" component of the course and about the use of clips from movies and TV shows. However, some of the questions dig deeper, seeking to discover whether the course has made an impact on them. One such question is designed to probe to what extent a student's interpretive approach to biblical texts might have changed: One of the objectives of the course was to train students in viewing Biblical texts through 1st-century eyes (by introducing concepts such as 'honour & shame / dyadism / fatalism). Was this objective met for you? Following are results from three Acts classes during the past two years: To a great extent: 69; To some extent: 25; To only a small extent: 2; Not at al": 1. This data strongly suggests that the course has been effective in instilling within students the importance of reading texts from biblical times against the backdrop of the culture of those times, as opposed to automatically defaulting to the cultural norms of 21st century North American Christians.

Given how ethnocentricity is such a prevalent trait of the North American church today, students with this type of training have the opportunity to make an impact on how biblical interpretation is practiced

at the congregational level. Some will go on to become preachers, and with this awareness of the differences between present-day culture and ancient culture, they will be able to do exegesis that takes into account these differences, thus allowing them to produce sermons that better reflect the intended meaning of biblical passages. And even those who do not go into pastoral ministry can use this awareness to help steer others away from anachronistic interpretations of texts in the context of Bible studies.

It remains to address the issue that prompted the revamp of the Acts course in the first place: Has the new-look course succeeded in increasing the level of student engagement with the material? I formulated a pair of questions on the semester-end survey to help provide an assessment of this issue, and following are the results from students in one particular semester fairly early in the life of the course in its new incarnation, at a time when Acts was still a required course and thus prone to having engagement problems with students who did not want to be in it in the first place.

The first question probed the degree of enthusiasm students had as they entered the course. The results indicated that only 28 percent had looked forward to taking it, while the remaining 72 percent ranged from feeling lukewarm about having to take it to not wanting to take it at all.

With that as the before picture, I included the following question to get the after picture: Overall, did you enjoy the course? with the students able to answer: definitely no / no / neutral / yes / definitely yes. There were no students who answered "definitely no" or "no," and only 14 percent answered "neutral," with 86 percent answering "yes" or "definitely yes."

These survey results evidence a marked shift in the attitudes of students, and though there is no way to know for sure if the more positive attitude toward the course resulted in a greater degree of engagement with the material, my subjective observations of the dynamics during class sessions suggest that this was indeed the case. I have been able to declare the experiment a success, and the innovations are here to stay.

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