## Afterword

# Teaching the Bible: Goals for Student Learning

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Teaching is an interplay of dynamics between the classroom, the teacher, and the student. Learning is a complex interplay between the student, subject matter, teacher, and learning context. Each of the essays in this issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* works at some mix of these factors as the authors describe the pedagogical challenges and opportunities that they face in teaching the Christian scriptures in their particular classroom. Common to this group of authors is that they each have found some way to negotiate their role of teaching biblical studies with their personal history from within the Mennonite or Anabaptist tradition. How this has been negotiated varies greatly according to their pedagogical philosophy, the school's institutional mission, their department or school curricular goals, and the students in front of them in the classroom.

One of the temptations we all face as teachers is that we feel we have so much to teach. We have spent years in close study of a text or subject matter, immersing ourselves in a discipline of study through our doctoral programs. For every teacher, the temptation is to focus on the body of work that we have mastered and thus the amount of knowledge that we need to pass on. We approach teaching by asking ourselves: What do we know that we must teach? What content, method, or approach must we be sure the students get? As members in a particular society or guild (for most of these authors it would be the Society of Biblical Literature), we ask what we need to teach to be true representatives of that discipline of study or loyal to the guild.

This temptation is complicated when we are also teachers from within a particular confessional tradition, either by personal confession or because of the institution which we serve. Then our loyalties are also claimed by the tradition and what it wants the students to know. How do we represent this particular lens of Christianity, Mennonite beliefs, or the Anabaptist tradition

in our classroom? How are we both a professor of the discipline and of a particular confessional tradition?

Imagining that teaching is a process of passing on is much like the image of ourselves as containers of information which pour into the containers of the learners/students. And compared to our almost-full-to-overflowing containers, the containers of the students are practically empty. So the task becomes one of filling their container with some of what is overflowing in us. In this model, a good teaching session is measured according to what we have imparted to them that makes them more like us in terms of what is known, how much is known, and what is valued.

What many of these essays struggle to articulate and understand, however, is the harder challenge of who we want our students to be (instead of what we need to teach). Asking what we want the students to learn presses us to look not at ourselves and all that we have to impart, but at the students and the future world in which they will live in order to ask what character, skills, and beliefs we would like them to exhibit in light of those future possibilities. It is this more nuanced issue of what these authors want their students to learn (and why) that I wish to explore in relation to these essays.

**Knowing Narrators**

The essay by Jo-Ann Brant, "The Power of the Spoken Word," is attentive to her own progression of pedagogical thinking from the time she began teaching up to her present classroom goals. Noting that her original task was "to guide my students to a level of sophistication in their reading of the Bible and to a broad canonical approach tempered by a historical consciousness," Brant documents the nature of, and reasons for, changes in her pedagogy as she constantly engaged the question of what she wanted her students to learn.

Her current set of goals for student learning are shaped by three factors: 1) an analysis of the current church and its needs; 2) an intuitive understanding of the type of religious decisions that are ahead for her students; 3) and a sense of what she teaches as a representative of the guild. Her most explicit nervousness about her current pedagogical methods is directed toward her doctoral mentor who functions as the initiator for

the discipline's guild ("What would my dignified Jesuit doctoral advisor think … ?"). Yet despite this nervousness, she is willing to proceed with a performative pedagogy because she is committed to Goshen students being able to take on the role of transmitters of scripture through being engaged story-tellers. For Brant, this involves the students in encountering the emotive and kinetic dimensions of the text, which brings to the fore the receptive dimension of listening instead of reading and analyzing. "The text becomes much more memorable and meaningful," states Brant, as the students become "the knowing narrator" of the biblical stories.

The use of pre-and post-tests by Brant and her colleague give them a way of assessing what their students bring to the classroom and of evaluating the learning outcomes of classroom activities. And while the pedagogy that she has adapted for this class may not be filled with the textual criticism expected by the guild, her student learning goals do demonstrate a level of sophistication about reflective classroom practice that will serve her students (and the church) well.

**Teaching Venturesome Transgressors**

Dietmar Neufeld articulates his role of New Testament teacher as a guide who encourages the students "to become venturesome transgressors, border crossers into the strange world of the Bible . . . ." His pedagogical journey has brought him to a set of student learning goals that are much more tightly linked with that of the guild of biblical studies than has Brant, as a way to engage his students' "genuine curiosity about Jesus, Paul, gospels, epistles, and apocalypses" with the strange world of the Bible.

Neufeld reflects on his personal biography as he describes how he came to the pedagogical commitment of "inculcating within students a cultural sensitivity and a cross-cultural perspective." Understanding that meaning comes through social systems of signification, Neufeld uses the social-cultural milieu of the New Testament world to press students to understand their own embedding or transgressing of cultures and the meaning-making that they experience in those ventures. This set of student learning goals matches well with the student body and institution in which he teaches – a non-confessional university setting where a wide variety of students take his courses (students with cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity as well as majors and non-majors).

In this way, Neufeld gives his own Mennonite upbringing significance as a series of places and people who struggled and survived within a variety of alien landscapes, rather than as a set of beliefs or habits of the heart which must be passed on to others. Thus, as a teacher of the New Testament, he exposes the first-century world as a strange and foreign place in order to counter the dangers of ethnocentrism in his students through striking "strange fires under their own spirituality."

**Constructive Controversy**

The strange world of the Bible also plays a key role in the pedagogical strategy described by Reta Halteman Finger, who uses biblical simulation to teach the Book of Romans. Her student learning goals, however, differ from Neufeld's as she uses the Romans material to design alternate social settings and allegiances whereby the students can engage in simulated role-play and conflict resolution. Her intent is to bridge the gap between the historically re-constructed first-century Jesus movement and modern Western society so that the students might understand more fully "the human limitations of the earliest believers" and "the contemporary implications of Romans." This pedagogy establishes an authoritative role for the biblical text as it models norms for contemporary behavior, and it posits student learning as the ability to recognize this textual normativity and relevance.

A challenge faced by Halteman Finger is the transition in and out of the role simulation. She works well with the issue of how to get students to engage in the role play as they adjust to this being their "course work" and with debriefing in their individual journals. In addition to this, there are some group questions that might be explored around the issues of performance and identity, or how the students experienced the points of immersion and the points of differentiation between their identity and the roles they played. Given all the virtual role-playing that is a part of the students' gaming world, it would be interesting to hear how the students would describe being in a prescribed role within the simulation.

The question of performance and identity becomes especially important when teaching within a Mennonite or Anabaptist context. While this method depends on discovering a contemporary affinity and identity with the first-century church (which fits well with a Mennonite ecclesiology), I would

assume that Halteman Finger has discovered many points of difference between the two that would be a helpful counterpoint to articulate in order to avoid a collapsing together of the 21st-century and biblical worlds.

**Narrative Teaching Narrative**

Gary Yamasaki's teaching has also evolved as he took more seriously what skills and interests the students were bringing to the classroom. More specifically, Yamasaki noted the students' apparent lack of interest in biblical interpretation. The course that he developed around the Book of Acts serves as a first-year requirement for all students and emphasizes the narrative experience of the book. The goal, as he states it, "is to recreate the story world of the Book of Acts and transport the students into this world so that they do not just learn cognitively about the events covered, but actually experience them along with the characters." He does this through a variety of means (video-clips, avoiding overall summaries of the structure, building explanations in narrative sequence, and a competition game), all with the intent of using some form of "narrative to teach narrative."

While many of his pedagogical methods highlight the narrative nature of Acts, the framework of the game is somewhat at counter-purposes, as is demonstrated by his assessment methods at various stages and points on the journey. These tests and awards measure student learnings such as analytical skills, content mastery, and level of engagement. But what is taught when narrative teaches narrative; what might be articulated as the student learning goal? Do students demonstrate an ability to place events in a narrative sequence? Do they demonstrate a shift of worldviews from a non-narrative to a narrative framework? And what is the desired outcome if it is demonstrated that they do? That said, there are still clear gains in this method, especially when measuring the group learnings, such as corporate problem-solving.

As with Halteman Finger, I would prod Yamasaki to design a clear de-briefing time with his students where they can think about the gaming aspect of the class learning and consider what happened with the heightened interest through the game. It could become a moment of reflective engagement for the students about their assumptions and help Yamasaki consider the learning that takes places through this method.

**Spirit of Appreciation and Essential Guide**

The essays by Loren Johns and Laura Brenneman focus on the importance of the modeling and attitude of the teacher. Johns argues for an approach that links critical thinking with a spirit of appreciation for faith-related issues. Tracing parts of his own history of learning about the Mennonite faith, Johns talks about the teachers who were not afraid of questions or the use of one's mind. Recognizing that teaching and learning often involve the processes of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation, he underscores the importance of the ethos in teaching in order to sustain the learning goal of student transformation.

Brenneman focuses more on the modeling that occurs when the teacher is a member of an under-represented group within the tradition. Calling them "essential guides for faithful interpretation of the Bible," Brenneman argues that women provide a pedagogical lens that is supported biblically and is educationally necessary for men and women students.

Both of these scholars understand that teaching is always a fine balance between raising questions about, and expressing appreciation for, a tradition of faith. As Johns says, "learning that matters is learning that touches on who we are, how we imagine our place in this world, and what we value." When the learning goal is student transformation, the teacher who is the guide becomes more than just one who possesses knowledge; he or she becomes the model of how one can reshape a worldview that puts us in a proper relationship with God. And with Brenneman's stress on the Holy Spirit being available to all, women and other under-represented groups must be able to teach with authority to facilitate this transformation.

**The Bible as Scripture**

Eric Seibert demonstrates pedagogical creativity as he structures the required introductory Bible course at Messiah College around the questions of historicity, truth, and the trustworthiness of the Bible as scripture. Establishing his student learning goal as enabling students to think more critically about the nature of the Bible as a way of strengthening their faith, Seibert does a careful job of articulating a variety of classroom practices for this goal. Some of his work is closely aligned with that of Johns and Brenneman, since the attitude of the professor is key in helping this goal come across with authenticity.

Seibert also demonstrates how closely aligned the task of being a biblical scholar and a theologian are within teaching contexts that are strongly marked by a confessional tradition. Often doctoral programs do not serve this overlap of training (making stark distinctions between the training of a biblical scholar and that of a Christian theologian), a situation that can leave the particular teacher scrambling to develop some thoughtful approaches to that area in which they were not trained.

**Speaking Intelligibly and Meaningfully about God**

I end with Wes Bergen's articulation of his teaching philosophy, since he argues strongly that the study of the Bible is a way of moving beyond sectarian theology rather than instilling it. His student learning goal is to prepare students to speak meaningfully and intelligibly about God and the world. This, he argues, is a human need and not one that should be kept cloistered within the Mennonite world. A Mennonite pastor who teaches at a state school, Bergen understands that his Mennonite heritage informs his scholarly perspective, but also assumes that his work will be judged by others "on the basis of their ability to make sense of and agree with the assertions made."

This is a teaching philosophy that is counter to the sectarian understanding of 'the world' as that from which we need to be separate. Indeed, 'the world' becomes a theologically expansive term to mean the context in which the God/human interaction is 'enfleshed,' or even with a more positive valance as 'that outside of what we are, toward which we are directed.' One could contextualize Bergen's argument by noting that it is a very appropriate expansive teaching philosophy, given his position as a professor of religious studies within a state university. But my sense is that this pedagogy would hold for Bergen even if he was teaching undergrads within a Mennonite-related institution.

And so I am back to the question of student learning goals. Toward what are we teaching? What is the future that is yearning to be brought into being? What are our learning goals for our students? Who do we wish them to be, and how do we want them to inhabit their future worlds? It is only as we direct ourselves towards those questions that we can truly inhabit our profession as teachers.

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