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Unintentional Lessons: Reflecting on the Purpose of Theological Education, Part III

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In my previous post (the second in a series of three) I reflected on deep learning as part of the formative educational process. I explored what it might look like to focus on students and the world they live in rather than on teaching our own particular (and often narrow) expertise. I suggested that part of the responsibility of forming students' selves and lives involves commitment to our own personal and institutional growth.

My institution (Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University) holds out a vision of a world transformed by God's love, mercy, and justice and names as its mission to educate and inspire people to serve God's diverse world as leaders in churches, the academy, and public life. We claim to value "Scholarship that engages churches, the academy, and public life; Justice that enhances diversity, flourishing and wholeness; and Practice that enlivens intellectual, spiritual, and professional growth." I resonate deeply with these values. I came to Brite, in part, because of these values. I long for any conversation among my colleagues about how we accomplish these in the classroom and in the lives of our students (and in our own lives, for that matter). I want to hear more about how they model careful listening, how they dignify diversity as a desirable norm, ways in which they manage to draw underrepresented voices out, and how they model effective conflict management in classrooms and hallways. How do they they help students learn to identify the implications of what they learned for engaging the suffering world? What skills and tools, what ways of being do they try to model? How do they enact

justice and engage their work toward wholeness in the classroom and beyond? How do they enliven personal, spiritual, and professional growth? How do they teach toward cultivating a more flourishing world?

These questions would likely sound ridiculous to many of my colleagues. “It is my job to teach them a discipline,” they might rejoin, “not teach them who or how to be.” Fair enough, I suppose. This is, after all, how most of us were trained. We learned to read, to dissect an argument, to analyze, and maybe to construct. Many of us never had a course in pedagogy, studying neither its purpose(s) nor effective practices. Our doctoral programs had us focused on content rather than process. We have gotten comfortable there and have had to continue the habits we learned as graduate students to have any chance of succeeding in the academy. I get it. I have done it, too.

But I want to suggest that what we imagine our role as theological educators to be exposes how we think of our students and our responsibilities to them. Do we see them as students needing to learn biblical exegesis or history or psychoanalytic theory? To what end do we teach these? Would it change how we teach if we understood that our students are the future, the potential embodiment of God’s work in the world, a potential source of resistance, hope, and healing?

Surely even those of us who have not studied pedagogy have heard of explicit curricula (what we claim to be teaching, what we focus on) and implicit curricula (what we teach by being ourselves, by the choices we make in the classroom; what we include and do not include on a syllabus; how we engage students and the teaching and learning community, etc.). Perry Shaw asserts that students learn more through the ways schools function—and in the way they experience the classroom—than they do from any verbal or written content they receive. Shaw quotes pedagogical theorist Robert Ferris as saying, “the faculty *are* the curriculum” (*Transforming Theological Education: A Practical Handbook for Integrative Learning* [Langham, 2014] 10, emphasis added).

If Ferris is correct, then many of us have some serious unlearning to do. Most of us are not training future academics; rather, we are teaching students who will soon be parish ministers and other religious leaders, leaders of not-for-profit organizations, community organizers, and activists. They are or may be parents, partners, neighbors, and leaders. And yet many of us (myself included) teach the way we were taught. We teach the way(s) we are familiar with. We teach as professional scholars. But our students need something different. They need something more. They deserve something more. So does the world we all share.

If the faculty are the curriculum, then our students are watching. They are absorbing our ways, our values, and our commitments. They are being shaped by the outlines of our own lives. I won’t speak for you, but my life as an academic is often pretty narrow, focused, and insular. As noted above, it has had to be, in order to gain and keep any status in the academy that I have “earned.” I am comfortable in my habits, the rhythms of my days, and in my heady work. But if Ferris is correct, I should be alarmed by what I am modeling. The academy can be a

competitive, self-absorbed, and zero-sum place. The coin of the realm is critique and challenge and jostling for distinction. Is this what we want our students to take from their time with us? If we played out Kant's categorical imperative, what kind of world would we be helping to create?

Such a question invites us teacher/scholars to ask ourselves why we do what we do and to what we want to contribute. It calls us further than that, though. It invites us to ask what kind of being human we are modeling for our students, what we want to be modeling, and what hard and intentional work it will take to close the gap. I am a trained psychotherapeutic clinician, so the idea of sitting with someone to explore the stuck places in myself, to engage my potential areas of growth and change, and to face the wounds I carry does not hold stigma for me. Others will find their own way, and I support that—as long as we can all arrive at the same place: understanding theological education as a formative endeavor, whether we are clear and intentional about the ways we are forming ourselves, our communities, and our students or not. Deep learning is usually referred to in positive ways, but I worry about the kinds of deep lessons our students are taking with them without our intention, our consent, or even without our awareness.

https://wabash.center/2022/08/unintentional-lessons-reflecting-on-the-purpose-of-theological-education-part-iii/