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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Accents of Teaching

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Blog Series: Stories from the Front

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I first discovered that I loved to teach when I was 19 years old at the front of a classroom of 70 adolescents in the city of Urumqi, a huge city in northwest China.

Supposedly, I was teaching them English. In reality, these 13- and 14-year olds knew English rather well. They just needed me as a resource. As an (almost) native speaker of English, I could speak to them for a few hours a day. It really wasn't my expert pedagogy that made a difference nor what I thought were finely developed plans. I had a voice they wanted to hear. I had a particular accent gained through many years of practice. I had the quotidian expertise of a particular dialect of a particular language. In short, I could speak a language in a way they needed to hear. I had a voice and an accent and a tone that they could imitate so that in short order they too could speak in a particular way.

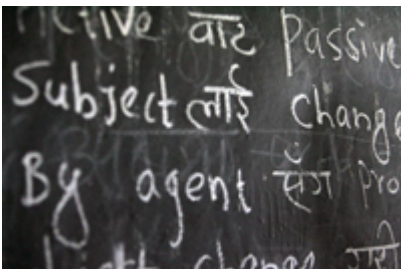


Photo Credit: "Lesson on a chalkboard" by World Bank Photo Collection, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/worldbank/3426957249>

That summer in northwest China, I learned the joys of teaching. Those few hours of teaching in the morning were done in the blink of an eye. There was always more to say and do even though my stressed preparation suggested that I would run out of material after just five minutes. In just a few weeks, my students made significant strides. Seeing their development as English speakers filled me with a sense of accomplishment. Moreover, the students were simply delightful. Their energy infectious. Their struggles so familiar to me as a young person.

But alongside these feelings of vocational satisfaction, I learned something critical about teaching. To be honest, I learned it in retrospect and it's been swirling in my mind recently.



Photo Credit: "Linn Schoolhouse Chalkboard" by Todd Petrie, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/58869428@N05/14694644882>

Teaching, at its core, is not just about the communication of information nor the acquisition of discrete forms of expertise. Teaching is fundamentally about helping students discover their voices and hone their ability to receive information and adapt it to serve their contexts. Teaching is not just the reproduction of knowledge but its transformation. Teaching is not just the education of brains but the formation of whole students who can think and feel and reflect in ways that will change them and those around them.

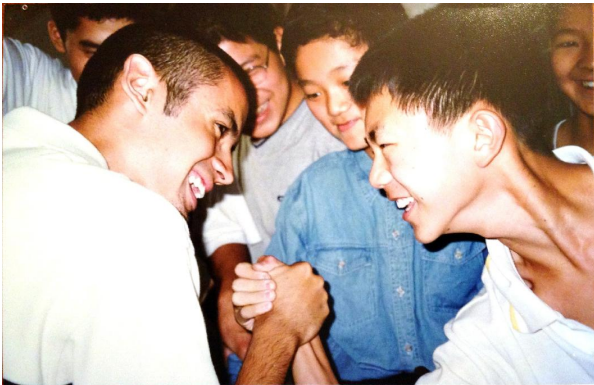
Perhaps my teaching today is more like the teaching in China than I often think. Certainly, my pedagogy is more developed, my knowledge is broader, my confidence in a classroom sharpened. But the task remains strikingly similar.

I have a voice, an accent of sorts. I have worked on the craft of biblical interpretation through study and teaching alike. And when I teach, I am inviting my students to hear the effortless accent gained through years of experience, the thoughtful but natural-sounding syntax of the kind of biblical interpretation I am practicing.

In China, my aim was not for my students merely to parrot me, to use precisely the same words I had shared with them. If they never uttered the words "window" or "door," they could still be successful. My goal was not that they would echo my voice or merely capture my cadence. My hope was that their voices would flourish, that fresh words would leave their lips, words I had never taught them. After all, what I was teaching them was not the stuff of language as much as the habits it requires.

Now, standing in the front of a classroom of adult learners studying Greek or the Gospel of Luke, not much has changed. So too, today, my teaching is not about creating new versions of my own scholarly idiosyncrasies (of which there are unfortunately many!) but inviting students to be attuned to the voice emerging within them and the voices of their neighbors. The “accent” I hope to teach them is an openness to the wisdom of their neighbors tied with a deep well of conviction about what really matters in the world.

They might never speak the words I teach them, but when they speak new words with passion and conviction and grace and thoughtfulness, then my work is done. And that fleeting feeling of victory carries me to my next class.



<https://wabash.center/2014/09/the-accent-of-teaching/>