Virtues

The Prize Is Virtue: Subject Teaching and Character Development

Career-shaping experiences often occur early in a teacher's professional life. Here are two from my first few years teaching biology.

1. Fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds used to do a lot of dissection; sheep hearts, cows' eyes, and pigs' feet were among the regular items. I soon found that there were predictable patterns of behavior in dissection classes. The boys responded liked actors let loose with a chain saw in a horror movie. The girls approached the specimen with temerity, as though it might leap out and bite them. (I exaggerate and am guilty of gender stereotyping, of course, but there seemed to be some truth in my observations.)

2. The eleven-year-olds' course included an embryology unit on chick development in the egg. It was a practical course that included opening up fertilized eggs from the incubator and comparing what could be seen with diagrams in the books. Every year I had to deal with upset children who had watched the beating heart of an embryonic chick stop as they viewed it through their binocular microscope.

These two experiences unsettled me. What dispositions was I encouraging by engaging my students in learning biology in this way? What habits of mind and heart were being fostered? Was I nurturing behavior that had its foundations in the idea that animal life was a cheap consumable, dispensable in the school laboratory just like the ingredients in chemistry experiments?

Certainly it felt like something wasn't right, so I changed my approach. During dissections I worked on the classroom atmosphere, adopting a more formal style than other biology lessons, like not allowing conversation as students entered the room and insisting upon disciplined handling of the specimens. I wanted to convey the idea that respect for life was important, particularly when that life had been taken to support the students' learning. My aim was to cultivate a sense of science with reverence. With the eleven-year-olds, I stopped teaching the embryology practically. (I had to get permission for this from the head of my department.) It seemed a bridge too far to make them watch the chicks die when they could see the developmental stages better on photographs.

Such incidents wouldn't happen in school biology today. However, the questions that worried me as a young teacher are still pertinent now: What sort of people do I hope my students will become as a result of having me as their teacher? What sort of character will they develop? Which virtues will they demonstrate?

I lead a lot of training for teachers in Anglican and other Christian schools on developing distinctively Christian approaches to teaching and learning. One comment often made runs along these lines: "I teach science [or math, design and technology, sociology, history, etc.]. What does being distinctively Christian have to do with teaching, say, photosynthesis or the use of punctuation?" This is a good question, because it is so easy to create Christian approaches that have nothing to do with the subject matter of the lesson, like preaching a mini-sermon at the end of the lesson. One can imagine one of my heart dissection classes finishing with a pause for thought on the desperately wicked nature of the human heart. I jest, but not that much. It does happen.

However, once we take seriously the idea that how we organize the classroom and which learning activities we choose will inculcate habits of mind and heart that will contribute to shaping the people our students will become, then it begins to make sense that the way we teach photosynthesis (or whatever) can be distinctively Christian. This is true even though often (as in the case of photosynthesis) the facts and information conveyed might well be the same as in any other classroom. As teachers we therefore are responsible for choosing the sorts of dispositions that our students will be encouraged to develop as a result of being in our classroom.

In case this smacks of indoctrination or desecration of a student's autonomy, it is important to remember that this shaping is inevitable in any classroom, whether or not the teacher is intentional in the way that I am advocating here. Character shaping goes on in every classroom. For example, my students would have left my biology classes having had certain dispositions reinforced regardless of whether I had decided to change my teaching approach to dissection. If I hadn't been intentional about it in the way described, the peer-group disrespect toward sanctity of life would have been reinforced. Hopefully, through my revised, intentional approach, a different habit of mind and heart had been reinforced.

All teachers therefore have decisions to make about the character traits or dispositions that they intend to nurture in their students. From now on I will use the technical term virtues to describe these desirable traits that are fostered through education. Sadly, education can also foster vices. If teachers aren't intentional about this process, they probably will nurture—by default—traits prevalent in society at large or in the peer

culture. Some of these will be vices. In a distinctively Christian education, the virtues fostered intentionally should reflect a distinctively Christian understanding of what it means to be "fully human."

So then, a Christian virtue can be thought of as a human disposition or character trait that is derived from a Christian understanding of what it means to be fully human. The Bible teaches that humans are not now in the state that God intended for them. However, Jesus's becoming human and his death and resurrection began an act of restoration, which means that humans who respond to God's invitation will be changed. The Bible promises the restoration of a "new earth," where things will be as they should be again and humans once again will be the people they ought to be (Revelation 21:1-4). The stunning thing about biblical teaching is that it tells us that those who are "in Christ" can offer a glimpse of the character of restored humanity by the development of Christian virtues in their current life. The description the Bible gives us of God's ideal human, as envisioned in the "new earth" and manifested in Jesus, can therefore help us to be intentional in shaping the virtues that we hope students will develop through a distinctively Christian education. To use other theological language, a distinctively Christian approach to teaching and learning can contribute to our students' vocation as humans to be kingdom-of-God people now. They are literally anticipating the future state of humans in God's restored kingdom by the way that they live today. Wow!

What do Christian virtues look like? What vision of being human does the Bible offer that reflects God's vision for restored humanity? In his New Testament epistles, the Apostle Paul offers a compelling picture that is highly relevant to teachers when he describes faith, hope, and love as the three Christian virtues that will endure (1 Corinthians 13:13). This website has adopted these as the key virtues that a distinctively Christian approach to teaching and learning will seek to foster. Sometimes these can be mistakenly understood as nice, middle-class characteristics that well-raised children manifest. Not so: they are far more radical than that and paint a compelling picture of what it means to flourish as a human being. Three important things can be said about them.

1. They are not just characteristics of interpersonal behavior. They also have huge implications, for example, for social structures, for attitudes to the environment, and for the sorts of ambitions that we harbor for a career. A serious read of what are called the Beatitudes in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12) will make the point. Try that now, reading each verse slowly and pondering what that might mean to your life if you tried to take it seriously in your own behavior. It has been said that the Bible is biased toward the poor. *Biased* might be the wrong word,

but it certainly emphasizes the responsibility that humans have to promote the well-being of others, particularly those who are disadvantaged.

2. Importantly for education, faith, hope, and love also have implications for the habits of thinking that we develop and not just for moral behavior. All human knowledge is interpreted from within a framework of understanding shaped by certain beliefs about what is important in life. Currently influential worldviews include consumerism (the notion that what we own is what is important) and utilitarianism (the notion that knowledge is important only insofar as it contributes something useful, like economic growth). If faith, hope, and love underpin our worldview, we will think very differently about the knowledge that we learn. The responsibility of the Christian teacher is to help students understand how much their thinking is shaped by the habits of the world around them, and to encourage them to take responsibility for forming their own habits of the mind by helping them to see what a difference a Christian worldview makes to learning. This means not only intentionally teaching from a Christian worldview, but also being intentional in helping our classes to understand why we are thinking about the subject in this different way.

3. Finally, faith, hope, and love offer a picture of what it means to be human that is very different from what the contemporary culture offers. For example, there is a movement today that wants to reemphasize the role of happiness in life. There is much to be welcomed about this, particularly its desire to shift government policy away from an excessive concern with economic growth as the main thing that matters in life. However, in many people's minds happiness is associated with self-fulfillment, whereas Christian teaching would say true happiness is to be found in becoming the servant of others. An Anglican bishop recently suggested that patience, humility, charity, and chastity are four defining Christian virtues; imagine suggesting that during a government consultation on the nature of citizenship! The Church of England website (http://www.christianvalues4schools.org.uk) illustrates how differently values are understood from within the Christian worldview. In planning for distinctively Christian teaching, we will need to be thinking carefully about how we might move our students from influential "vices" toward Christian virtues by how we reframe our approach so that the development of faith, hope, and love shape our students' learning.

Virtues are hard-won prizes. Our students will not develop faith, hope, and love as the result of attending one assembly or by having the school rules posted on the classroom wall (as important as both of these are). Rather, they are developed through years of

supported learning-by-experience, shaped by the work of an intentional teacher. For this to happen there must be a whole-school, shared understanding of what it means to flourish as a human being in Christ. Then there needs to be a school policy of promoting faith, hope, and love as the virtues that the students will be encouraged to develop.

Further Reading

This article has a particular debt to the writings of N. T. Wright, a university academic and former bishop of Durham in England. See particularly *After You Believe* (2010) and *Surprised by Hope* (2008) both published by HarperOne.