



Bible Class: What Tests Teach

What if online quizzes helped teachers to think about the purpose of learning?

Travis taught Bible classes, and became increasingly unhappy with some ways of approaching e-learning.

"I sat in on a training session on how to use e-learning to promote my students' learning. The business teacher, who was the school's expert on this subject, introduced us to the quiz feature on the school's VLE (virtual learning environment). In business classes, students were tested each week on a chapter of their textbook using multiple-choice questions that the computer generated randomly from a bank of questions created by the teachers. The students retook the test until they scored 90%.

"As a teacher of Bible, I was alarmed at the suggestion that this approach might be implemented in other subjects. Was this appropriate to theological education? I had visions of multiple-choice online tests where students were simply required to identify correct information. Even worse, I had visions of students feeling required to conform to certain beliefs in order to pass (e.g., What is the mainstream Christian approach to the creation/evolution debate: (a) theistic evolution, (b) old-earth creationism, (c) young-earth creationism or (d) intelligent design?).

"I wondered how the nature of the quiz might form students' attitudes to the kinds of learning needed. My concerns crystallized into one key question: How can a quiz that steers students toward thinking that 'right answers' are what really matters be used in connection with a teaching approach that wanted students to engage with theologically controversial issues and appreciate the importance of weighing different arguments? I decided to use some quizzes for clear-cut factual information as I was being asked to do. (If I had had a choice, I would not have used them at all.) But I supplemented them with alternative forms of assessment which tested other skills, such as learning to advocate for an argument that you disagreed with. I also gave students feedback on answers and alerted them to alternate answers where there were debates around an issue."

What's going on here?

Travis saw Bible class as a place where people explored meaning, significance, and differences in belief, not just information. Bible class was a place for engaging humbly with diverse viewpoints and learning from the encounter.

He engaged students with the material in ways that involved empathy and critical thinking, not just right answers.

He reshaped his practice by designing specific forms of assessment to signal what was of significance.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Travis reflects: "Sometimes people assume that to 'have faith' means expecting you to believe certain things, and for there to be no argument about them. I wanted my students to become more open to listening to the diversity of views within Christian theology, rather than dismiss unfamiliar views too quickly. I adjusted the online quiz to avoid the danger of reinforcing a very rigid approach to encountering difference of opinion among Christians. This reframing of the online quiz is also designed to promote Christian love by encouraging students to develop the skills of empathy and of seeing things from another person's point of view before making a judgment."

What difference does it make?

Assessment strategies can shape students' thinking about the purpose of learning. We need to ask what messages our assessment is sending about the purpose of learning and how it can be designed to send the message we want. The danger of indiscriminate use of the right/wrong online quiz is that it conditions students to think that the purpose of studying is to focus on the perceived correct answer, rather than to enter into the debate as a participant with a view to refining one's understanding of the debate in question. It can also minimize encounter with others' viewpoints.

Where could we go from here?

Bible class is not the only subject that tackles controversial issues, and online quizzes focused on right/wrong answers need to find an appropriately defined role and to be supplemented in a variety of curriculum areas. Across all areas of learning there is room for reflecting on how the form of testing that predominates meshes with broader goals for students intellectual, spiritual, and moral growth.

Digging deeper

Christianity emphasizes meaning and significance and gives people a way of understanding and making sense of our world. Our world is not meaningless; life is not an accident. Meaning is not something we have to make for ourselves (as many humanists maintain), but neither is it a rigid conformity to a divine blueprint. For Christians, the purpose of life is love; humanity was created to love and enjoy a relationship with God and others.

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. Westminster Shorter Catechism

Making sense of our world within that framework of meaning is part of Bible classes, but this requires an open atmosphere to ask questions, debate difference, and explore. God may have made a world with meaning, but it is not rigid.

Christianity offers a worldview that leads to the generation of moral values and ideals that are able to give moral meaning and dignity to our existence. Alister McGrath.

A Christian understanding of life and the world gives believers a framework to interpret experience and give it meaning: life is not just a collection of pieces of information. The Bible describes this world as made by God but fallen; it is not as God intended. It still bears the stamp of a good Creator, but it needs to be redeemed and one day will be remade, with all sin and sorrow having disappeared (Revelation 21:1-4). The Bible describes this re-creation in poetic terms expressing harmony (Isaiah 11:6) and peace (Isaiah 2:4). At the centre of this vision is a relationship with God through Jesus that can start now and last for eternity. The vision gives life direction, and love of God and others gives life meaning. Both vision and relationship are bound together, and both changed

the present. Christians are called to live as signposts to God's better future, bringing peace, justice, and joy, reflecting God's love for the world as seen in Jesus.



Previous: Reason and Faith
What if Bible Class were about reas...

Next: Stories and Bible Class
What if Bible stories encouraged c...

