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Salient Experiences that Shape My Pedagogy

Abstract

Predicated upon Plato's dialogical method of inquiry, this professor's teaching style acknowledges the value found in community dialogue and the importance of incorporating Bloom's six levels of cognitive thinking in the classroom. Rejecting rote memorization and one-way dialogue, she explores truth in fiction and narrative and often uses the dramatic moment as a teaching tool—finding and using a key moment in a scholar's discovery, a contradiction in a text, or a face-off of the "truth" of opposing positions to unveil prejudicial attitudes, reveal places where a student's thinking is struck, or show the irreducible complexity of an ethical issue.

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My teaching style has been heavily influenced by educational theories—theories of knowledge, language, and human development. But learning to teach is not all about theory. Both theories and methods of teaching need experience to bring them alive. Certain formative learning experiences in my own life have enlivened educational theories that I have studied and solidified my pedagogy. Here are a few of those salient experiences.

Just the Facts

The first "aha" experience of learning that influenced my later approach to teaching was a lesson in critical thinking. I was an early-entrant college freshman at Shimer College, a "great books college." We didn't have textbooks at Shimer but studied primary sources, the classics of the western world.

One day we read an article on the molecular theory of heat. Granted it was a few centuries old, but I hardly noticed that. I learned that heat molecules traveled from one object to another, spreading warmth by entering objects and changing their temperature. I had never studied the transmission of heat and found it fascinating.

When I got to class, I was surprised to hear the professor ask, "What is wrong with this theory?" Five or six students jumped into the ensuing discussion with criticisms of the article. Heat couldn't be molecular, separate from the objects that were changing temperature, they argued. I've long since forgotten the reasons they gave, although I have learned somewhere along the way that heat is generated by the movement of molecules not separate "heat molecules." The shock for me was that the students didn't accept "the facts." I thought science was about facts. And facts were written up in scientific articles. And those articles were put into books. Science books gave you the facts. And here were students, some as young as I, criticizing science. That day I learned something about scientific theory. And I learned something about critical thinking.

I've incorporated that lesson into my teaching. When students suggest that a text may have weaknesses, I welcome their critique. I tell them never to expect to agree 100 percent with any text. Pointing out flaws and limitations of an author's viewpoint, comparing it with other views, and devising new ways of looking at a topic are part of the learning process. There is no such thing as "just the facts."

This is especially true in theological education where the temptation to

reify human made theologies is strong. Last semester a student in my course on evangelism and modern society wrote a critique of U.S. immigration policies along the Mexican border. She was so convinced that her position was right that she unthinkingly used statistics from two very polemical books that supported her position. Because they were statistics and because they were printed, she assumed their validity. In that case, "the facts" were anything but clear from the statistical analysis.

The Dramatic Moment

At Shimer College, we studied not only science but the humanities. In theater productions and literature, I discovered that truths about human nature influenced feelings as well as thinking. The plays *Antigone* and *Waiting for Godot* presented by student drama groups that first year of college gave me insights into the dramatic moment. The presentations gripped me; the messages startled me. Not only linear thinking about what might be true but a deeper apprehension and feeling marked the learning experience.

In *Antigone*, a young woman goes to the battlefield where her brother had been slain. As a penalty of being on the losing side of the war, Antigone is forbidden to bury her brother's remains in the culturally prescribed way. This not only prevents her from grieving properly, it puts in jeopardy her brother's journey into the next life. I was transfixed by the play. That night I learned something about death, about grief, and about power used to harm the innocent. Learning through the dramatic moment proved to be a powerful experience.

Waiting for Godot also taught me something about the power of drama to draw the audience into participation in the thought and action of the play. Two merchants are waiting throughout the play—waiting for someone to rescue them from financial disaster, someone powerful enough to save them. They wait and wait and wait. When the curtain finally drops they are still waiting. And the audience is left waiting with them. Without knowing it, we were taken in to the deception. All along the audience had suspected that no one would come to the rescue. But in the end, we were caught waiting as well. The force of that moment, when I found myself in a crowd in front of the dropped curtain—waiting—was one I haven't forgotten.

I remember the first time I saw Roland Bainton use that technique in his film, "Where Luther Walked." Rather than a dry lecture in church history, Bainton followed Luther's steps, acting out his passionate questioning of God, his dismay at being excommunicated and pursued by church authorities, and the resolution he found in the Apostle Paul's explanation of justification by faith.

Using the dramatic moment in teaching can be a powerful tool. I strive to find and use a key moment in a scholar's discovery, a contradiction in a text, a

challenge from a student, a face-off of the "truth" of opposing positions. Those moments can be used to unveil prejudicial attitudes, reveal places where a student's thinking is stuck, or show the irreducible complexity of an ethical issue. The drama of the moment itself effectively accentuates the point at a visceral level.

Truth in Fiction

Novels, short stories, and films can focus on the truth in a powerful way. Golding's *Lord of the Flies* makes a point about human depravity and the loss of innocence. Jame's Baldwin's *Another Country* shows how a naïve idealism that doesn't take into account social mores and structures can lead to disaster. The film *The Mission* presents the conflicting goals of colonial powers and mission workers during western expansion into South America. Experiencing the shock of those truths through reading those novels and stories and seeing such films led me to begin using fiction in courses in ethics and mission. Truth can be found in fiction, sometimes presented in ways that are more powerful than didactic methods.

I remember using *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros in a graduate course on cross-cultural ethics at the Graduate Theological Union. The first day a student protested vociferously. "This is not a text in ethics," she insisted. No, it wasn't. That short book simply relates experiences of a young Latina girl in a big city. But along the way, ethical issues around sexuality, the use of power, social imbalances, and community mores are revealed in a personal and powerful way. Those experiences provided the material for student discussions of moral situations in a cross-cultural setting. Ethical discourse using specific instances helps students to link analysis of theoretical concepts in ethics to "real life" situations. And the situations, when presented dramatically, bring out the affective dimensions crucial to reasoning about moral issues. Students enter the world of the young girl, feeling her confusion, her sense of betrayal by society, and her pain.

Truth in Narrative

The knowledge that can be gained through fiction can be seen in biography as well. Many times a person's articulation of their theology is less deep and broad than the way they live their life.

In my course Understanding Mission through Biography, I have students read narratives of missionaries and delve into their lives to dig out their theology of mission. Often where their feet have gone is more instructive than their theological statements. Their actions speak volumes.

William Sheppard, the first African American Presbyterian missionary, went to the Belgian Congo in the late 19th century. Swept up in the evangelical fervor of the era, his stated goal was to win souls for Christ. Yet in the years

he spent in Congo, he not only planted churches but did anthropological work, hunted wild hippos with a local chief, tended to the dental needs of his parish, and fought the oppression of the natives working on the rubber plantations of the Belgian king. By studying Sheppard's autobiography and biographies written about him, the breadth and depth of his theology of mission can be gained.

Different Ways of Thinking

In order to gain insights from fiction and narratives, one must dig into the texts, often reading between the lines, inferring, analyzing and evaluating.

Graduate studies in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin introduced me to theories of learning that have shaped my teaching style. By far the most influential for me was B. S. Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. In two volumes, Bloom outlines both cognitive and affective processes and gives instructions on how to develop educational objectives that utilize those complex processes. Bloom outlines a hierarchy of cognitive processes that includes remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Those six processes are further broken down into subsets that help the teacher devise objectives and activities that further learning in complex ways.

I utilize Bloom's insights by developing discussion and exam questions that require the students to use those cognitive processes repeatedly in their work. Those processes include recalling important points, ordering them, developing procedures of investigation, analyzing constituent parts of a theory and relating them to one another, making judgments based on criteria and standards, and creatively putting elements together to form a new structure or pattern. Those steps in cognitive thinking help students appropriate material in critical ways.

Bloom's taxonomy has proved invaluable in the classroom. By formulating questions from Bloom's analysis of cognitive processes, I have learned to stimulate and sustain classroom dialogue that holds the interest of students and stays on track while honoring and utilizing students' ideas. Rather than focusing on memory recall questions or asking students closed-ended questions that have a single answer, I can take their ideas and formulate questions that further the discussion in meaningful ways. By directing the discussion in that way, I can interject "mini-lectures" on important issues at appropriate junctures. The class time becomes a dialogical event without wandering off in irrelevant directions or degenerating into a bull session. Incorporating all six levels of cognitive thinking in the classroom opens the students to new ways of critiquing and utilizing the ideas of others as they develop their own thought.

I remember a classroom discussion of the theological warrants for

Christians caring for the environment. The discussion became rather one-dimensional as the sinfulness of neglecting God's good creation was rephrased over and over. To get at other theological ideas I asked questions about how individual students related to nature, both materially and spiritually. Did time spent in nature lead them to worship? What was the role of nature in sustaining human life? What limits should be put on changing natural landscapes so that human life could be nurtured? That discussion broadened the theological base we were working with and also led to deeper questions about good and evil in nature and human affairs.

Finding a Deeper Question

Together we discovered a deeper question. Classroom discussions that range over multiple cognitive processes, rather than focus on memory and recall, contribute to dialog in community. Knowledge itself is discovered not by individuals but through dialogue in community.

It was during PhD studies at the Graduate Theological Union that I discovered my true mentor in teaching through discussion. Plato's dialogues are the definitive works on this for me. Socrates, the teacher in the dialogues doesn't lecture or give the right answer. In *Protagoras*, for instance, Socrates asks a question about education. He hears from a number of discussants on the topic, listens to their answers, and considers each. In the end, what the dialogue discovers is not "the answer." Rather, the discussion of various views of education leads the master teacher to articulate a deeper question: "What is knowledge?"

I use Plato's dialogical method both as a model and goal for classroom discussion. I believe each student brings an expertise to the discussion that will contribute to the search for knowledge among us. Yet, not all ideas are equally good or equally appropriate for resolving a problem. And I cannot abdicate my responsibility as the teacher of the group. Socrates, Plato's voice in *Protagoras*, remains the teacher throughout. Yet he brings about a conversation, respecting varying points of view. Through this creative process, he finally articulates a more profound question that becomes the basis for further inquiry and analysis.

Plato's dialogical method has become, over the years, a staple of my pedagogy. What underlies this question? Where is it taking us? What issues are connected here? Can these opposing viewpoints by harmonized, or not? Is there a new direction calling to us in these differing voices?

Talking about using this dialogical method is much easier than putting it into practice. It takes less effort to give "the answer," present the "correct theory," to discard ideas that don't fit into the dominant paradigm in one's setting. I frequently slip back into those comfortable patterns. Plato's *Protagoras* reminds me to seek a better way.

Dialogue in a New Era

Sometimes Plato's method is referred to as a dialectic method. But since in our modern western way of thinking, Hegel's dialectic has become associated with the term dialectic I prefer to call Plato's method a dialogical method of inquiry. But Hegel's dialectic has also become a part of my pedagogy. Hegel's dialectic asserts that a thesis and antithesis, or two differing and opposite ideas may be synthesized and brought together to reveal a higher truth.It doesn't always work that way but remaining open to the possibility that parts of competing or controversial viewpoints can be harmonized keeps people from different contexts in dialog with each other. Just possibly a harmonizing way of thinking about the two views may be found.

I find this method helpful in teaching evangelism. Students come into my classes with enthusiastic support of particular evangelistic methods along with disdain for others. And they often disagree about what methods are best. Some have been hurt by over-zealous Christians that pushed them to make a commitment to Christ over and over again. Others have felt duty-bound to behave in certain ways without understanding the grace of God in their lives. Through class discussions on the hurts and healings of contemporary evangelistic methods, those opposing positions are often harmonized into a fuller understanding of the gospel itself.

Hegel wanted, single-handedly, to unite all knowledge, and I am not trying to do that. With the postmodern turn, scholars have learned that every understanding of truth is influenced by a context, a historical situation, and the researcher/thinker him/herself. Realizing the situatedness of knowledge, however, and placing different interpretations into proximity with each other can sometimes yield a synthesis, providing a new direction for thought and action. Somewhat ironically, Hegel's universalizing approach can, in the postmodern era help avoid a total relativizing of truth that ends discussion—"your truth" and "my truth" can never meet. It has happened in my evangelism courses: evangelistic methods are often synthesized even as the truth of the gospel in its universal relevance is reinforced.

Learning in Community

Often insights are gained in conversation that elude the solitary scholar. In my classes I strive to respect student opinions, encourage them to articulate the sources of their views, and attempt to use them creatively to lead to deeper questions. I remember hearing in graduate school that Augustine wrote ninety-nine books. He wrote them by taking a group of friends off to a monastery and talking about ideas together. That story inspired me, as a student who thrived on thinking out loud, talking through ideas in dialog with others. With other doctoral students we formed a student seminar that met periodically to discuss student works in progress. I have continued that

tradition in my own classes with student-led seminars on important texts and ideas.

While teaching graduate school in Indonesia, the women students gathered together periodically for lectures, dinners, and retreats. Through dialoging together, they came to a better understanding of their calling to church ministry and the theology that supported their calling. Their everyday practices of honoring leaders in their communities, practicing hospitality, and creating beauty became the basis for new theologies that continue to feed the church in Indonesia.

The classroom and its extensions into communities is always an exciting place for me. Learning in community, dialoging with students from various backgrounds and perspectives, and bringing the wisdom of current and past scholarship into the discussion makes for interesting conversation. And sometimes the classroom discussion reveals a new insight, motivates us to action, or integrates our longings with our ideas.

I hope that some of the students in my classes will have formative learning experiences there that will influence their teaching as they leave seminary and scatter to become teachers of the church. Because theological education is not for seminaries, it is for communities. Insofar as we educate for the academic community, it is good. But insofar as we educate for the churches, developing leaders that will influence widening circles of community, we educate for God's kingdom.

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BENJAMIN BLOOM **Taxonomy of Educational Objectives**	
Cognitive Domain	Knowledge Comprehension Application Analysis Synthesis Evaluation
Affective Domain	Receiving Responding Valuing Organization Characterization
Benjamin S. Bloom, David R. Krathwohl, Bertram B. Masia. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Objectives. Handbook II: Affective Domain.* (New York: David McKay Company, 1964), 176-193.	