



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 What Teachers Love about Teaching
(*Schools in a Pluralist Culture*, pp. 20-26)

Suggested Article

📖 Pursuing Knowledge
(*Schools in a Pluralist Culture*, pp. 46-49)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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What Teachers Love about Teaching

Teaching is such a personal art, so context-dependent and unpredictable, that it cannot be reduced to a method or set of skills. So what do teachers really love when they talk about how much they love teaching?

Prayer

Responsive Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 2:15-17a, 23-25a

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

Avoid profane chatter, for it will lead people into more and more impiety, and their talk will spread like gangrene.

Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness.

Reflection

What is it really like to be a teacher? The snapshot of wise teachers in 2 Timothy 2:14-26 reminds us what an important role they play in a community that strives to live truthfully. Their ability to "rightly explain the word of truth" goes far beyond speaking and writing about the truth clearly, powerfully, and correctly. Wise teachers avoid one-upmanship, do not needlessly pick fights, and control their anger with those who disagree with them and would be contentious. They have no infallible method, but they exhibit certain traits—righteousness, faith, love, peace, patience rather than being quarrelsome, and gentleness in correcting opponents—that draw others toward the truth.

Stephen Webb invites us to examine the art of teaching. On the one hand, it "is simply a more condensed form of the need all of us have to pass something valuable down to the next generation. Teachers are just people who are on more intimate terms with the limits and frailties of communication than most people." But this does not mean the practice of teaching is simple. Indeed, he says, "Teaching is to talking what a symphony is to humming."

Webb warns that teaching is such a personal art and so much depends on the interaction between the teacher, particular students, and the subject matter, "that what works can change from minute to minute, let alone day to day." Nevertheless, he notes that wise teachers share the following practices.

- ▶ *They set boundaries and build trust with their students.* Teachers do not perform like entertainers. They create "a real intimacy of minds" by making a safe place and time for students to "share stories, information, questions, and ideas in confidence, without worrying what other people might say." For this reason, "Distraction is the enemy, and focus is the goal. Sometimes students talk only to the teacher, as if nobody else was in the room.... When the learning gets going, however, the students begin talking to each other, and parallel play turns into a free for all, with the teacher



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trying to orchestrate the chaos. There is a sweet spot in every class where a question, text, or problem will take off and find a life of its own, both absorbing and replenishing everyone's energy."

- ▶ *They avoid the fashionable buzzwords*—like formation, service, tolerance, and transparency—that focus too much on how students learn instead of what they should learn, Webb writes. "Teaching has to be grounded in great and enduring questions." Moral formation and citizenship are worthy ends, service opportunities are valuable, tolerance (rightly understood) is good, and understanding processes of education (through "transparency") is helpful, but these should not displace "old-fashioned goals of education. Teaching has to be grounded in great and enduring questions, and inviting the student to join in those questions is to some extent asking the student to leave behind their old patterns and habits of learning."
- ▶ *They humbly recognize the limits of theories about teaching.* "Perhaps teaching, in the end, is just too integral to human nature to ever be amenable to careful delineation," Webb concludes. "We teach what we know, and thus, to a significant extent, we teach who we are, and so a good theory of teaching, to cover the field, would have to describe human nature in all of its subtle complexity."

Study Questions

1. List the virtues of a wise teacher in 2 Timothy 2:14-26. Do you agree these traits are important? Would you add other traits to the list?
2. Recall the teachers, in school or church, from whom you learned the most. What traits made them good teachers? What methods did they use in the classroom?
3. Stephen Webb writes, "Teaching is a private activity because the classroom has to be separated from the outside world if the teacher wants any chance of success." Discuss what he means by this. Do you agree?
4. Perhaps Webb's most controversial claim is that teachers should be wary of these four "buzzwords": formation, service, tolerance, and transparency. Why does he resist shifting the focus toward each one? Discuss his views.
5. "'Assessment' is a big buzzword these days...often to the annoyance of most teachers," Webb notes. Assessing learning in the classroom "is like cooking food, feeding your guests, eating with them, and writing a restaurant review all at the same time." Why have we focused so much on assessment? Is it good for education?
6. Discuss the artist Raphael's profound vision in *School of Athens* of education as a conversation among friends across centuries and human cultures. How does his vision relate to Webb's description of the good classroom?

Departing Hymn: "God, You Give Each Generation"

What Teachers Love about Teaching

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Responsive Scripture Reading	Responsive Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To identify the traits of wise and good teachers.
2. To discuss how teaching is a personal art that is context-dependent and unpredictable.
3. To consider how good teaching creates space for “a real intimacy of minds.”

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide.

Distribute copies of *Schools in a Pluralist Culture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation on “Observations”

Stephen Webb describes the intimacy of discussion, the trusting give-and-take of debate, in a classroom. That is why, “When someone is visiting my classroom...it often feels like the delicate climate I have struggled for weeks to create has been hit by a threatening weather pattern. Students who had sunny dispositions just a couple of days ago now act like a fog has descended into our room. This is such a small sample of my work, I want to cry out, a snap shot of a long and interesting drama that would need to be filmed to do it justice! Silences get heavier, I get chattier, and my jokes fall flatter when visitors enter my class. The result is a twist on that parody of a philosophical question about whether a tree falling in a forest makes any noise if nobody is there to hear it. In my classroom, the tree is perfectly quiet when someone comes to watch me chop it down.

“Can a visitor ever see or hear what a teacher sees and hears in the classroom? Visitors see a silent kid in the corner, but they do not see the eye contact with the teacher or the conversations after class. Visitors hear a stilted comment while the teacher hears the end product of weeks of coaxing and cajoling. When people visit my classroom, I get defensive, as if someone were crashing the annual Webb family reunion. I want to pull them aside and explain that Uncle Paul is not always like that while Aunt Mary is actually paying more attention than you might think” (*Schools in a Pluralist Culture*, 21).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for the gift of wise and good teachers in schools and congregations.

Responsive Scripture Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

In this discussion we explore Stephen Webb’s considered vision of good teaching as “a personal art.” Since teaching is like a well-crafted, intimate conversation, it is similar to experiences everyone shares. Yet this also means teaching is not easy to predict, regulate, and measure. Take this opportunity to reflect on the abilities

and traits required for good teaching, and to thank God for gifting persons in our schools and congregations with those abilities and traits.

Study Questions

1. The traits highlighted in the scripture passage include the ability to explain truths correctly and carefully, righteousness, faith, love, peace, purity of heart, and gentleness in correcting others. These virtues are opposed to pride, self-righteousness, envy, and anger. The “worker who has no need to be ashamed” cares about the truth, not one-upmanship over others.

Members might add traits that help teachers resist other enemies of good teaching such as laziness, fear, and carelessness, or virtues that are related to respecting and caring for students, planning and working cooperatively with others, interpreting complex texts, managing discussions, etc.

2. The teachers from whom we learn the most are not always the ones we enjoy the most. Good teachers often challenge and expand our thinking, make us work hard, and introduce us to ideas that make us uncomfortable. Members might compare and contrast two or three of their best teachers in school or church. Did they have similar traits, or different traits that were matched to their academic disciplines or students’ ages and abilities? Did they use similar or differing methods and approaches?

Were they gifted in ways that would serve well in your congregation as well as in school? What is your congregation doing to encourage and develop future teachers with such traits to serve in the congregation and in schools?

3. Webb does not mean classroom discussions are unrelated to “real life.” Rather, he says “the classroom has to be separated from the outside world” in the sense that it is free from worries and distractions that would lead teacher and students away from the truth. This context of safety and trust is necessary for the teacher and students to explore ideas, ask honest questions, and develop intellectual friendships.
4. Webb seems to worry that formation, service, and tolerance are goals external to and in competition with seeking the truth and mastering essential intellectual skills. He also objects that teachers are ill-prepared to guide moral formation, that service education may come with a social agenda that is not open to question, and tolerance can undermine moral education. The call for “transparency” that he resists is the version that encourages teachers to let students determine the curriculum. If we agree with Webb that the focus of education should be on seeking the truth, could there be a proper role for these other goals?
5. Increased classroom assessment has been touted as a way of making schools more accountable for tax money spent on education, comparing teaching approaches and schools, rewarding good teaching, standardizing curriculum across schools in a highly mobile society, improving school performance, and promoting basic academic skills. Can we focus too much on testing? Critics say it has reduced education to “teaching for the test,” ignored teachers’ varying strengths, and driven imaginative teachers from the classroom.
6. Raphael’s *School of Athens* depicts “an activated and lively intellectual debate” among moral and natural philosophers (i.e., astronomers, physicists, and mathematicians); it is paired with frescos that represent theology, poetry, and jurisprudence. The balanced, symmetrical composition links thinkers from several ancient centuries; Raphael later inserted an image of his older contemporary Michelangelo. Stephen Webb focuses on defining a space and time for students to develop bonds of trust (see the response to question 3 above), but he might welcome Raphael’s idea of extending this sort of friendship to include those who have developed the ideas and texts that bring the students together.

Departing Hymn

“God, You Give Each Generation” can be found on pp. 53-55 of *Schools in a Pluralist Culture*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.