

Don Taylor - Philosophy of Teaching

The broad theological principles that undergird this philosophy of education and teaching are threefold. (1) That humans are intended by the injunctions of Proverbs (and elsewhere in Scripture) to pursue wisdom—which is the power of the mind that includes both morality and skill that are inseparably bound together (O’Dowd 2009: 112). Having been made in the image of God, our students ought to be in pursuit of wisdom and knowledge that is directed by their Christian faith. Being image bearers, they are to be light to the world, but also to function as God’s representatives and good stewards of the world. While much more could be said of these premises, suffice to say that these should be the driving motivations for the acquisition of knowledge and Christian wisdom, taking ‘captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ’

(2 Cor. 10:5). Thus, as a teacher, my motivation is to facilitate and encourage our students to acquire knowledge in the context of a biblical worldview. (2) As humans created in God’s image we are graciously gifted with rationality that includes imagination, creativity, and inquisitiveness. While these gifts mark our mental capacities that can be enlivened in the teaching process, these capacities have been corrupted by the fall of humanity and are tainted by sin. Therefore, we must exercise our rationality with humility and test our thoughts to see if they conform to scripture. Further, beyond an individualist model, we must test our learning and imaginations against those of others and be critically accepting to the thoughts and ideas of others. Humility needs to be modeled by teachers such that students will engage new ideas with a spirit of exploration but not without evaluation. (3) But, the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom is really not the final goal, rather it is service to the church and to the world that should be the final product—though often evidenced in the student after they complete their education with us. Nevertheless, we must advocate and model to our students the necessity to use our wisdom and gifting for the benefit of the local and global church, and for the betterment of the world. Christians must be people of deeds, and our education ought to motivate our students to serve insightfully and with surgical precision as they following their gifting. These theological principles give shape to my philosophy of education and provide the essential passion for my classroom endeavors.

My natural disposition toward my students is a pastoral one. As I begin each class I look upon the faces of my students and my fundamental concern is for their spiritual well-being. I feel that life is filled with trials and instability, so I want to encourage and build their faith in God such that they can navigate life with confidence and hope fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit. The tone that I try to set in the classroom is a reverent one that seeks to honor God in pursuit of wisdom and growth. Therefore, prayer at the beginning of class is essential to set the tone of dependence upon God and it signals to them my care for their lives and their learning. As I teach I consistently want to give them greater confidence in God and his ability to lead them through life and into eternity. As I personally seek to exalt God and grow in submission and wisdom, I hope that this encourages them in the same direction.

My teaching philosophy is fixed upon the belief that student learning and growth is the rudimentary objective in the classroom environment. Teaching skills and techniques are all chosen and honed with this outcome in mind. Class preparation focuses on two central foci: the nature of the material and the station, or orientation of the students to the material. My

job is to connect the two in the best possible way pedagogically. In the classroom, this begins by creating an atmosphere conducive to learning including: positive and reinforcing relationships with a free and democratic spirit. From this juncture I generally take on one of two roles, sometimes moving back and forth within the same class. If the material is new and accessible (like many of my freshmen courses) I take on the role of Tour Guide. With a spirit of exploration and movement, I cover the material creating interest and energy, at the same time pointing to the relevance and importance of the material. However, I have been shaped by Parker Palmer (1998: 115-125) who asserts a “subject-centered” approach that places the teacher/expert amongst the learners, all looking inward to the subject in the middle. Nevertheless, this “positioning” is created by attitude and tone, as I regularly espouse my own questions and gains in studying the subject as a fellow learner, who is just further along in the field. If, however, the material is difficult and requires more student effort, then I take on the role of Coach (particularly with language courses). As coach, I focus on marketing, motivating, exhortation, and encouraging as a means of prompting the students to not only engage the material but work to master it. Nonetheless, a coach provides a level of expectation and standards that can inspire a student to push themselves harder and to reach greater heights. Both of these roles (Tour Guide and Coach) also have a critical relational aspect. The tour guide provides the student with security and there is a strong element of trust placed in the tour guide. The coach can positively create expectation for the students to perform. The relational issues need to be attended to and consequently, places responsibility on me not to violate the trust and security that the students expect.

In each of my classes there are several goals for students that should be encouraged in direct and indirect ways. That students would: grow closer to God, respect the authority of the word of God, read biblical and other texts with greater awareness and hermeneutical complexity, aspire to learn and engage ideas—new and old, discover more about themselves, and be drawn to think about the world with Christian maturity. Aside from the specific objects of each course I teach, it is hoped that these goals and sentiments are assumed and evident.

My natural inclination to teaching, not so much a philosophy, is that I am normally excited about the material and the joy of learning, and I also tend to care for and love my students. When these things come together, it translates into positive classroom experiences, learning and growth. I have also come to agree with Augustine (2006:177) that most significantly the human will was corrupted in the fall and while the mind often aspires for more, the will often desires less. Therefore, motivation and inspiration that inflames the will is needed to elevate student interest and ultimately bring change. This kind of charged atmosphere is intended to elevate the student to meet my expectations and hopefully match my level of enthusiasm for the subject.