
With an Eye on the Future

*Development and Mission
in the 21st Century*

Essays in honor of Ted W. Ward

General Editors

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Lois McKinney

Sectional Editors

Muriel I. Elmer

Robert W. Ferris

Stephen T. Hoke

Mark E. Simpson

Catherine Stonehouse



800 West Chestnut Avenue, Monrovia, California 91016-3198 USA

Chapter Nineteen

Habits of the Excellent Teacher

KLAUS ISSLER

How do we best improve our teaching as we approach the twenty-first century? To be sure, exciting educational resources will continue to emerge from the overflow of our technological advances—there will be no lack here. But will an exclusive focus on method or curriculum innovation yield the most important learning dividends? Scripture seems to direct our attention elsewhere, to foundational issues relevant for teachers whether living in the first century or the twenty-first century. “A student is not above his teacher; but everyone who is fully trained will be *like his teacher*” (Luke 6:40). It is the *character* of the teacher that will largely influence what kind of student outcomes we can expect.

In Luke 6:39-49, Jesus warned his disciples not to follow the Pharisees, the blind who led their followers into a pit (v. 39). Instead, Jesus inferred that if they learned of him, they would be like him when they were fully trained. Then, in verse 45, our Lord pointed to the inward source of outward conduct, “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”

This chapter places the spotlight on a crucial element in our pursuit of educational excellence: to help teachers become better persons so that out of their being, relating, and doing in the practice of teaching, the lives of students will be affected.

CHARACTER AND EXCELLENCE

Excellence, what is it? We usually expect excellent teachers to meet high standards worthy of our praise.¹ Such standards involve ongoing innovation, new insight, and creativity. Second, the excellent teacher is one who typically goes beyond the call of the routine, expending extra effort to do what is best for students. These two factors of reaching for higher standards and regularly going beyond the routine are matters of the heart, not just the head, of character, not just technique. Teaching involves more than performing educational skills; it involves a life influencing a life.

Some may wish to equate "effective teacher" with "excellent teacher." The concept of effective teacher draws our focus to means-end concerns, the consequences of teaching as evidenced in student outcomes. These indicators are largely identified with short-term outcomes within the scope of a unit, a semester, or a year of study. But by such a limited criterion, Jesus must be regarded as an ineffective teacher during his earthly ministry.² The Gospel writers seem to go out of their way to underscore how slow the disciples were to learn (for example, Mark 8:14-21, 31-33; Luke 22:24-27; John 14:8-9). So, when we think about the excellent teacher, we must use a broader set of criteria and include both short-term and long-term effects.

In addition, the term *effective* seems to be associated primarily with what can be validated exclusively through empirical research. But there are other sources of knowledge from which we can glean truths about excellent teachers and teaching (for example, the Bible or our conceptual analysis of the topic). Effectiveness contributes to excellence, but there is more to excellence that effectiveness research cannot tell us.³

A MODEL OF HUMAN FLOURISHING

To elaborate the concept of excellent teaching which involves the life of the teacher, we must first know what kind of human functioning or flourishing is possible; that is, we must articulate a view of human nature. Ronald Habermas and I have proposed a "4-C" model of Christian maturity (Issler and Habermas 1994, 173), which I will use here to mark out general arenas of human flourishing (see Figure 1 below). At the core of the model is God, the source of all life and the focus of our lives. When we are rightly related to God (communion), we open the door to all the potentialities of human flourishing. Our nature equips us to grow in our being (character), in our relating

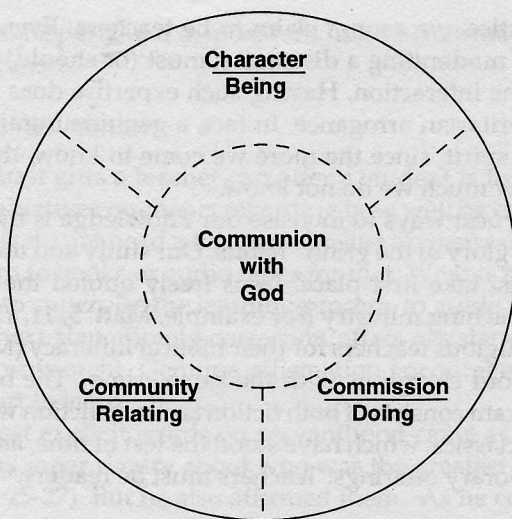


Figure 1: 4-C Model of Christian Maturity

with others (community), and in our doing (commission). As we grow in all four components, we live a balanced life as God intended.

Applying the outer components of the model specifically to teachers, we arrive at these important focal points:

Being: The Teacher as Student

Relating: The Teacher as Friend

Doing: The Teacher as Skilled Artisan

The purpose of this chapter is to suggest certain habits or dispositions within each of these arenas that undergird the teaching ministry. Space permits only a brief survey and two illustrative metaphors for each general category, with the hope that readers will expand the list as a follow-up exercise.⁴ An excellent teacher is one who increasingly embodies the dispositions discussed here, exemplifying high standards and regularly going beyond the routine.

BEING: THE TEACHER AS STUDENT⁵

Truth or subject matter is an essential ingredient in teaching. We forfeit our right to teach if we ever stop being lifelong learners ourselves.

The Teacher as Expert in Process

A traditional role for the teacher is to be a subject-matter specialist, and I want to affirm this element as foundational. Without some de-

gree of expertise, we cannot claim to be teachers. Even the small-group leader moderating a discussion must (or should) know how to facilitate the interaction. Having such expertise does not always lead to authoritarian arrogance. In fact, a genuine humility should settle on our spirit, since the more we come to know, the more we recognize how much we do not know.

One of the best ways to increase our knowledge is by reading—one of those “glory of the grind” habits. Our study and meditation in Scripture must take first place. Jesus freely quoted the Old Testament in his teaching ministry (for example, Matt. 5, 11, 15). He even chided the religious teachers for their biblical illiteracy (Matt. 22:29). Would our Lord charge us with the same crime? The best kind of reading program consists of both fiction and non-fiction writings and includes the classics, which have stood the test of time, as well as the best contemporary offerings. Teachers must be readers.⁶

The Teacher as Critical Thinker

Bloom et al. (1956) developed a taxonomy of the cognitive domain proposing that our knowledge of something can range anywhere from a simple awareness to much higher levels of synthesis, and evaluation. To lead our students into the higher levels of critical thinking, we must engage in analysis, synthesis and evaluation ourselves. Much of the shock-therapy teaching our Lord used stemmed from a desire to critique the prevailing assumptions of his day (for example, Luke 14:26, the family is ultimate; Matt. 19:23-24, wealth is a sign of God’s favor).

But let us be honest; worthy reading and good thinking are hard work. What compels us to these tasks? After I settled into my teaching routine (first as a church staff member, and now as a professor), my teaching has been kept alive by the questions about the Christian life that will not let me go. One way to enter into the discipline of wrestling with issues is to frame the basic question(s) that our class or lesson answers. This simple practice can make our teaching more focused, and it can open up new ways to respond to such probing. Questions that perplex us can launch us into further reading and study. Asking good questions is at the core of being a good student (cf. Luke 2:46).⁷

RELATING: THE TEACHER AS A FRIEND

The teachers who influenced us the most were typically the ones who showed extra concern for us. The student-teacher relationship is a significant catalyst for educators, greatly increasing the potential for

learning. Yet the particular dispositions listed below may be the most difficult to pursue.

The Teacher as Mentor

One of the best gifts a teacher can offer a student is to provide discerning, evaluative comments regarding how well he or she is learning. Students do not need a teacher who just dispenses information; they can turn to books or audio tapes for that. What is really needed is someone to supervise the learning process, to guide students into taking the next step. Timely correction offers assistance and direction for improvement. Genuine affirmation encourages continuing student effort to learn.

Jesus' most explicit words on servanthood came as a censure to the disciples' inner rivalry about who was the greatest (Matt. 20:25-28; Luke 22:25-27). But he also affirmed them. As he concluded the first phase of disciple training, our Lord popped the critical exam question, "Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15). Peter, speaking for the twelve, boldly acknowledged his deity, and Jesus affirms Peter with praise (16:17-19).

I think most teachers agree that the evaluation and grading task is the most difficult one. Yet we cannot shirk this important duty. As students indicate their level of understanding in the questions asked and comments made or in the assignments submitted, we can provide the evaluative feedback they desire. I have learned that I need a clear standard of excellence to guide me in the act of evaluation. As we commit ourselves to this important practice, we give our students what few are able or willing to offer: pertinent and personal reflections on their pilgrimage.

The Teacher as Colleague

Even though we may be experts and mentors, our theology reminds us that we are fellow-learners in the grace of life. The humble posture of fellow-learner invites our students to come to us freely and without fear. Are students willing to risk sharing their ignorance by asking questions or by expressing new thoughts? How much effort do we expend to identify with our students, to look at the issue from their point of view? Since Jesus, our very God, took on human form to identify with us, we have an example to follow.

But how can we grow in humility? How do we come to empathize with our students' life situations? If we take the lead from our Lord's incarnational ministry, we glean at least two guidelines. First, we realize that no task is too menial; nothing is beneath our dignity. Remember how Jesus washed the disciples dirty feet? So let us help

clean up after class, or receive a student's criticism without defensiveness. Until it comes naturally, we may need to look for menial tasks to do—not for show, of course, but as a school for learning humility. Second, we can be with our students in a non-teacher capacity, where we relate as two members of the family of God. Since we may have to break through cultural perceptions of the teacher-student roles, we probably should take the initiative here.

DOING: THE TEACHER AS SKILLED ARTISAN

The excellent teacher, in wisdom and mastery, creatively crafts the teaching experience as an extension of his or her personality, passion, and teaching abilities.

The Teacher as Doctor

Out of the "black bag" repertoire of instructional strategies, knowledge, and life experience, the teacher is able to diagnose and prescribe the best remedy at the time to meet student needs. Jesus was a master at this, constantly prepared for the "teachable moment." It seemed he always had a story or a pithy saying on hand. The classic parable of the Good Samaritan was in response to the question, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10: 29). When James and John requested the best seats near Jesus in the kingdom (Mark 10:37), he offered a different model of leadership—to serve others.

To be ready for such moments, we need to have a clear idea of our overall plan for student learning—not just the bite-size piece that is up for the next session. With that larger framework in mind, we can easily use any relevant opportunity, whether or not it fits exactly into today's lesson plan (cf. Mark 8: 14-21). Out of the reading and study program we have carved out for ourselves will flow needed wisdom.

Events that stimulate a teachable moment may not always happen in class, but we can bring them to class by referring to cultural practices and recent events that affect class topics. To be alert for such items, we need to be aware of our culture, to become sensitive to what is happening, both locally and around the world. We could set a goal of finding at least one such item each week until it becomes a regular habit. Thus, we make all of life our classroom, and all of our own life experiences become grist for the teaching mill.

The Teacher as Partner

This final disposition may seem a bit strange, but we must ask two fundamental questions: What right do we have to teach, to attempt

to bring about changes in another? In bringing about any changes, who determines toward what ultimate ends we strive in our teaching? If there is no God, then everyone is king and anyone has that authority. But if there is a God, then only God has ultimate authority.

As Jesus was appointed for his ministry on this earth, so we have been appointed for ours (John 17:8; Matt. 28:18-20). That is our ultimate authority; it does not come from a local church, an educational institution, or the state.

Yet we do stand under various degrees of delegated authority, and we are called to a spirit of cooperation and coordination with these partners. There is no room for "Lone Rangers" or prima donnas. We must hold hands and work together to accomplish the task. We stand on the shoulders of our forebears, who have taught us and given us the insights we use. And we stand side-by-side with fellow teachers who share this grand project.

An honest recognition of our ultimate commission and our necessary partnership can nurture a posture of humility before our students. Since we are not God's sole gift to humanity, we can urge our students to take classes from other teachers to round out their education. We may wish to invite fellow teachers to share their expertise in our classroom, so students are not hindered by our own foibles and whims. We pursue the best for our students by not claiming exclusive rights to them. They will rise up to new heights through the labors of many human teachers, not just one.⁸

A century ago, American public educators were required to have "exhibited testimonials of Good Moral Character"⁹ as an essential qualification. Currently, certification is based primarily on one's level of subject mastery and skillful technique. We who, with kingdom priorities, lead teachers into the twenty-first century must be concerned about more than mastery and techniques. We should keep our standards high, for "everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40).

Notes

1. For a more nuanced and detailed discussion of praiseworthy actions, see Swinburne 1989, chap. 2 ("Moral Responsibility and Weakness of Will").

2. "Jesus was an accomplished yet ineffective teacher. He taught well, even masterfully in respects, yet the learning that came about did not correspond to the quality of the teacher" (Dillon 1995, 161).

3. Research related to short-term learning outcomes can help us improve our teaching for certain kinds of effects, such as cognitive outcomes. Yet consideration of a longer scope is necessary for assessing teaching for dispositional and attitude formation.

4. I validated each factor by looking at the teaching ministry of Jesus, a recognized excellent teacher. And I believe Ted Ward exemplifies each of these factors in his teaching practice. See Habermas and Issler (1992), chapters 9-10, for an analysis of the concept of teaching, and Issler (1983) for another approach to a discussion of excellence in teaching.

5. "As a teacher, [I] am primarily a learner, a student among students" (Hendricks 1987, 13).

6. See Adler and Van Doren (1972) for a helpful guide on skillful reading.

7. See Dillon (1988) for the best book on questions in education.

8. For the third and final phase of the disciples' training, Jesus passed on the responsibility to the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:8, John 14:26). See Pazmino (1994) for a fuller treatment of the concept of authority in teaching. Pazmino also discusses the spiritual gift of teaching, an important issue for our topic that was not developed due to space limitations (1994, 71-76).

9. This is excerpted from "Teacher's Certificate" of 1882, in Wilder 1941, 306.

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