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FOSTERING COMMUNITY AND A CULTURE OF LEARNING IN SEMINARY CLASSROOMS: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Abstract

While a syllabus can helpfully outline the various topics and expectations for a course ("explicit" curriculum), it is increasingly realized that all learning is framed by an "implicit" curriculum. These "implicit" values and convictions about pedagogy that instructors (and students) bring to the classroom greatly influence the quality of learning, but they are often unexamined or unexpressed. Effective learning happens when these values are shared, explored and critiqued in the class. In this essay, the author provides practical ideas and suggestions to explore the pedagogical values of instructors and students. His goal is to deepen the learning experience through fostering community and a culture of learning in the classroom.

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It is not uncommon for seminary professors to devote meticulous attention to the development of course syllabi. This is good strategy, as a well-designed syllabus encapsulates clear learning goals and instructional strategies. Some professors may presume that they are the major cause of successful learning and adopt a predominantly teacher-centered orientation in course design. This notion is increasingly suspect because a higher conception of learning results from active student roles (Huba & Freed 2000; Thompson, Licklider and Jungst 2003). Indeed, successful seminary classes are as much a product of students' attitude and involvement in learning as it is a teacher's performance in teaching (Simoniatis 2002). This teacher-learner dynamic is determined by more than a course syllabus. Elliot Eisner argues persuasively that it is not just the "explicit" curriculum (syllabus) but the "implicit" curriculum (values that students, but especially teachers, bring to the classroom) that effectively structure all learning (Eisner 2003).

Through my 10 years of teaching at two seminaries, I have reflected deeply on how we can become more aware of the "implicit" curriculum. How can we as teachers, share more openly about some of the underlying pedagogical values that frame our teaching? Do we provide opportunities for our students to voice their pedagogical convictions? How can we explore these implicit values together in a more meaningful way, and when is the opportune time to do this in a course? What follows are some reflections from my own journey of learning.

The best environment for learning in class is one in which expectations between instructor and learners are clear. Some scholars advocate entering into a formal "learning contract" with learners (Knowles 1986; Hansen 1991); others prefer a Christian "learning covenant" (Wickett 1999). While these models are helpful, the process of entering into an "agreement" can be complex and at times intimidating for new students. I have found that a less formal model of shared pedagogical values is more suitable in seminary settings because seminary students are generally more mature and focused in their learning. What then are the elements of a learning community and how does one foster a culture of learning in a seminary classroom?

The First Class

A good time to explore "implicit" curriculum issues is during the first class of a new course. Students are eager to find out about their new course and requirements, but they are also keen to know more about you as professor. Thus, even before I introduce a course, I share a brief story, a personal narrative of how this course and its key ideas have impacted my life and ministry. This personal openness often brings a certain warmth to the classroom paving the way for more open sharing. I would then invite students to introduce themselves, and to share some of their motivations and expectations for taking the course. After the introductions, I would review the course and requirements. The final section of this first class session is perhaps the most important hour as I outline some of the fundamental values that frame my teaching. My presentation, "Fostering

Community and a Culture of Learning," usually generates a stimulating discussion as students view my pedagogical framework and explore their own educational convictions.

Fostering Learning Community

A common metaphor of my classes is that we are a community of learners on a journey of discovery. While students are not new to the idea of community, its application to classroom learning intrigues them. For many, learning has been a private, lonely and competitive experience. Their common question is, "Are there viable alternatives?" I share with students that learning community happens when we build relationships with each other, demonstrate mutual respect and nurture sacred space for learning.

Building relationships among learners. With increasing number of commuter students who only attend classes once or twice a week, building community in seminaries presents a significant challenge. Faculty and students often express a desire for community, and even cite theological foundations for it, but community is more commonly professed than experienced. Seminary schedules are overloaded and students struggle to balance personal or family life with ministry, work, and academic study. Community will not happen unless we consciously and deliberately shape our schedules and events. The following are ideas I have found helpful in building relationships and fostering learning community.

Class list. A proper introduction of class members is essential to building community. In my first class each participant fills a 3X5 card with the following details: name, contact (phone and email), program, brief personal background, course expectations and how they feel as they begin their first class. Upon completion of the card (about 5-7 minutes), each student takes about 2-3 minutes to share with the group. While this introduction takes significant time (about 45-60 minutes for 25-28 students), I remind students that we can only learn together when we know one another.

In larger classes, I would review the course outline and requirements after half the students have introduced themselves. Personal introductions resume after a class break. The 3X5 cards are then collected and a "class list" is distributed to all class members at the second class. I share with students that a class list is invaluable as they would be meeting for projects and discussions throughout the course. With a growing conviction that teaching is as much a spiritual act, I have used these class lists to pray for my students each week. This discipline helps me to care for students in a more personal way.

Community meal. One of the best ways to know students is through more informal meetings outside class. Since I started teaching, I have invited each of my classes home for a community meal every semester. Students cherish this experience because it allows them to build stronger relationships with peers and faculty. A community meal at home also allows students a deeper knowledge of my family and I. More importantly, it gives students a view of my values as shaped by my discipline. For many years, my wife would cook a Malaysian-Chinese meal for the students but this was

a lot of work! Two years ago, at the encouragement of some students, we decided to have community pot-luck meals. With a diverse student body, our recent community lunch boasted an international menu: Korean bulgoggi; Taiwanese dumplings; noodles & chicken wings Hong Kong style; Malaysian stir-fry chicken with cashew nuts; Italian lasagna; Canadian trifle and Caesar salad!

Joint projects. Another excellent means to foster community is to encourage collaborative partnerships for their final projects. My convictions about this kind of shared learning are twofold. First, one's search for truth is enriched and broadened through the challenge of alternative perspectives. Second, shared learning can nurture the demanding but necessary discipline of working partnerships. Learning is often a lonely exercise in seminary: we have private study carrels; do individual research; write our own papers; and make individual presentations. I remind students that if they do not learn to work collaboratively, they would be ill equipped for ministry (which often entails working with people). As I share the benefits of collaborative work, I also highlight possible pitfalls. For some students joint projects have been an agonizing experience because there was no true partnership, and thus obligations and responsibilities must be stated clearly at the onset. Despite its challenges, students consistently testify that learning to work together was as valuable as the final outcome of their projects. In addition, students are often amazed by the richer outcome because of the synergy of two creative minds.

Discussion learning. I regularly schedule "discussion learning" segments in my courses to encourage community. Students pre-read texts, articles or primary sources related to class themes and discuss/reflect upon ideas together. In a recent research project on the character and assessment of learning in seminary education, my colleague and I found that seminarians deeply value discussion learning. Discussion can inspire students to explore other possibilities in their search for truth because of the diversity and backgrounds of the participants. Students say that they walk away with more than just a professor's lectures or class materials. One student she said that her professor affirmed her humanness through the use of discussion learning, "…he allows his students to express themselves…it makes me more of a human, more of a person." Finally, students appreciate discussion because they are held accountable for assigned readings, which they are tempted to skip in an overloaded theological curriculum (Siew & Peluso-Verdend 2005).

Enabling another's growth. As I end this section on fostering community, I remind students that the primary responsibility of being a member of the learning community is that we contribute to another person's growth. Class members are expected to complete readings in advance of discussions to engage constructively during class interactions. If students find a relevant article or resource, they are encouraged to share with the class. When I read excellent ideas in students' reflective journals or other assignments, I provide opportunities for them to share in class. Through this, I demonstrate that a learning community actively seeks to enable a fellow student's growth. The quality of a class is directly related to its student composition. Few

teachers, however, harvest this latent potential because they fail to nurture a learning community.

Mutual Respect. A learning community is impossible without mutual respect among members of a class. I encourage students to demonstrate respect through active listening, as well as keeping class etiquette.

Active listening. It is not uncommon for students to listen only to the teacher in a class. This is a great pity as students can miss a peer's rich perspective or critique of an idea. I encourage students to be attentive to each other, to practice active listening. It is interesting to note that the three major ingredients of effective discussion learning are listening, questioning and responding. I remind students that perhaps the hardest to nurture is the art of active listening (Christensen 1991).

The quality of class dialogue is directly related to the physical setup of a class. When chairs are arranged in straight rows, the subtle message is that the locus of authority rests with the teacher alone ("teacher speaks, students listen"). Students sit in a semi-circle in all my classes because this arrangement is the most conducive to conversation and dialogue. It's amazing how often I have to rearrange the chairs each time I go to a classroom. Most classes have students seated in straight rows and teachers may not even realize the message they unconsciously send! Students sometimes feel uncertain with my new arrangement in the beginning of the course and some would sit behind. My simple response is, "Please join us in the circle because we value your ideas and contributions." This comment usually puts students at ease because it affirms them in the learning process.

Class etiquette. A common problem in seminary classrooms is students arriving late for class or returning late after a break. A late arrival disrupts learning and is disrespectful to other members of the learning community. I encourage students to honor our time of learning, and to view punctuality as a matter of class etiquette. To model this value, I am often in the classroom about 10 minutes early. Arriving early allows me to set up (e.g. MS PowerPoint presentation) and to catch up with students on a more personal level. To encourage a punctual return after break, I direct students to the clock in the classroom, noting when I will resume teaching (and I resume on time). Cell phones ringing in the middle of a lesson are especially disruptive! I share with students that turning off their phones is also a matter of class etiquette. While these are negotiated and affirmed at the beginning of a course, I have found that flexibility, respect, and being a model are more effective ways of dealing with this problem than direct encounters.

Sacred space for learning. Parker Palmer insightfully notes that classrooms can be places of immense fear (Palmer 1998, 35-39). Some students fear a mockery of their rudimentary ideas. Others are concerned that they do not grasp new ideas, risking academic failure. Teachers too have their fears. We may be concerned about how our lessons will be received, and we certainly do not want to be irrelevant or unpopular. Amidst all these fears my goal is to develop a sacred space for learning which honors both creative play and silent reflection.

Creative playfulness. Educators increasingly realize that to teach is to create opportunities for learners to engage with ideas and resources. Such encounters can lead to cognitive restructuring, where old mental schemes are challenged by new ideas. Jean Piaget calls this cognitive disequilibration, which for him is the "engine of cognitive growth" (Flavell 1992). I encourage students to embrace cognitive disequilibration and to nurture space for creative playfulness. For me, intelligence is creativity at play.

Pregnant silence. It is not uncommon for students to be silent when I provide opportunities for question and dialogue. Silence may result from unclear questions on my part. Sometimes, students may be reflecting deeply over the questions, making the moment a "pregnant" silence. Professor Ted Ward, my doctoral mentor, noted insightfully that a "pregnant" silence is when students are mulling over implications sparked by a disturbing encounter with truth. As teachers, we tend to interpret silence as a symptom of a problem in the class, and we are tempted to take control and fill the space with our words. Palmer advocates creating classroom space that honors silence as well as speech (Palmer 1998, 82).

Fostering a Culture of Learning

Students and instructors come to class with very different values and convictions about what constitutes learning. To establish a culture of learning it is imperative that instructors and students understand each other's roles and expectations.

Instructor. An excellent metaphor for "instructor" is that of a guide or a fellow pilgrim on a journey of learning. A brochure of an executive MBA program at the University of Singapore describes an instructor as a "guide on the side, not a sage on the stage." I like this metaphor because it implies that the teacher is not the only one with knowledge in a class. I often share with students that since I have taught the course numerous times, it is not my first journey. However, while I am familiar with the "map"—key ideas, current issues, and major resources—I am new to the uncharted areas and will explore new trails with them.

As guide, I also do my best to prepare for each class. This often includes a review of lessons in the previous week. Revisions are wonderful teaching events because students often do not get it the first time. Even if they do, some soon forget. During review, I sometimes link previous lessons to larger course objectives. These integrated reviews aid learning by helping students maintain an overall framework for the course (Brunner 1966; Gregory 1884/1992). During reviews, I also reflect and share how some of the theories have been personally meaningful in recent ministry experiences. Students often appreciate such an integrated perspective in a scholar's life. This sharing can be an excellent model of reflective praxis (active reflection and reflective action), a core value in my pedagogy.

Learners. After sharing what they can expect of me as instructor, I review with my students what I expect of them as learners. Effective learners are best described as

inquisitive inquirers and excited explorers (retaining the learning "journey" metaphor). I encourage students to read their materials with an open mind and to value the concept that, "all truth is God's truth." (Gaebelein 1954/1968).

Another expectation of learners is that they should reflect deeply upon their readings, especially in light of their contextual realities. A good way to encourage this reflective praxis is a biweekly one page journal where students detail how readings and class learning is challenging current perspectives and/or building new frameworks for life and ministry.

Professor Ward has a simple but profound diagrammatic model of effective learning. From his study of successful professional development programs he found that an essential criterion of good learning is the dynamic interaction between theory and life. He thus developed his "rail fence model" of learning (see Figure 1). This model depicts graphically how "theory" and "life experience" (horizontal pieces of fence) come together through dynamic discussion, case studies and sharing (vertical pieces of fence). Using this model, I encourage students to nurture reflection and practice, not just in journaling but also in class sharing and discussion.

Figure 1: Ted Ward's Rail Fence Model of Learning (Ward's Doctoral Class)
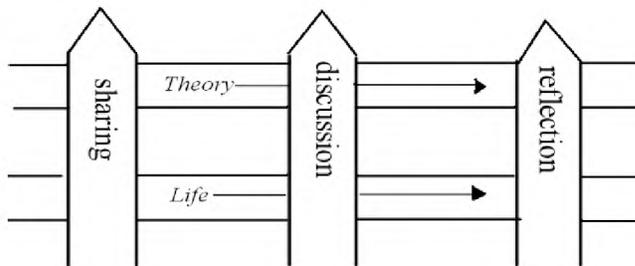
A few years ago, I interviewed 30 seminary students in Toronto to investigate how their spirituality is being impacted by their studies. In one of the interviews, a bright, mature student (with a doctorate in geology) shared that his most valuable assignment was from an OT class. His OT professor required them to journal each week on how class lessons applied to their life and work. For this student, this one assignment was the most stimulating in his entire divinity program because it helped integration of learning and life (Greenman and Siew 2002).

Another important expectation of learners is that they should engage in thinking with me. One might think this is superfluous in a seminary setting, but many students fail to engage in class preferring knowledge in "packaged" form. I introduce students to the helpful work of Ron Pritchard and David Perkins on the different forms of critical thinking. Creative thinking, described as "looking out, looking up, around and about," deals with being open minded and curious. Reflective thinking, described as "looking

within" encourages metacognition, a looking inward at oneself to discover what one does and does not know. Critical thinking is described as "looking at, through and in between...seeking truth and understanding, being strategically skeptical." For Pritchard and Perkins, to think critically is to look with certain filters, to assess and evaluate with important criteria (Pritchard & Perkins 2002). I encourage students to think critically in all these aspects as we encounter and evaluate various theories through the course.

Shared Paradigm for Effective Pedagogy

Since students (and teachers) hold diverse values about teaching and learning, they come to class with a variety of pedagogical paradigms. What paradigms for teaching should we adopt as a class? What obligations do these have for our learning together? In this last section, I introduce students to key educators who have shaped my pedagogical convictions. My goal is to encourage self-reflection and critique among the students, and to establish a shared paradigm for effective pedagogy.

Paideia framework. In his sharp critique of contemporary education, Mortimer Adler highlights that 85% of all class time in the US is filled with teachers talking at students. He laments that teachers talk with their students less than 15% of the time (Adler 1992, 87). Adler labels this as wrong pedagogy. For him, teaching is more a "cooperative art" (like farming and healing) than a "productive art" (like carpentry and cooking) where the result is solely dependent upon the work of one party.

Adler advocates a new model of teaching which comprises three essential elements (Adler 1992, 110). Didactic instruction involves lectures and responses to readings, which aim toward acquisition of organized knowledge. In coaching, teachers nurture intellectual skills of critical judgment as students engage in problem solving and supervised practice. The third element involves "Socratic dialogue," where teachers engage students in active discussion over ideas so as to enlarge understanding of issues (see Table 1). This shared understanding allows me to preview some of the teaching events I will employ in class, and I also invite students' active engagement with my pedagogical approach. It also provides an opportunity for me to review my assignments in the course and highlight their heuristic values.

Table 1: Three Kinds of Teaching and Learning in a *Paideia* School
(Adapted from Adler)

Type of Teaching	Didactic Instruction (declarative)	Coaching (imperative)	Socratic Dialogue (interrogative)
Goals	Acquisition of organized knowledge	Development of intellectual skills (skills of learning, reflection and critical judgment)	Enlarged understanding of ideas and issues
Means	Lectures & responses to	Exercises Journaling	Seminar discussions

	readings	Problem solving Critical responses Supervised practice	

Curriculum as situated event. Patricia King argues persuasively that curriculum should not be conceived as merely a list of topics to be covered, but as a "situated event" involving teacher and learners (King 1986).   Similarly, Connelly and Clandinin describe curriculum as "something experienced in situations," where teachers and learners are dynamically engaged with the resources at hand (Connelly & Clandinin 1988, 3-10). Many students view curriculum as merely a list of important topics to be covered in a course. They have the false notion that teachers alone have nuggets of truth, and thus see teaching as merely information transfer. While content mastery is an important and necessary learning goal, education is incomplete without some form of knowledge-life "encounter." This dynamic is especially important in adult education because adult learners bring important life issues to the classroom. A major goal of adult learners is to seek new perspectives and to reengage life with a greater degree of self-determination (Jack Mezirow and Associates 2000).

Transformational learning. Conventional pedagogy with its focus on information delivery is mainly concerned with the organization and effective communication of content. Success is often determined by whether students can report back what is told. This pedagogical paradigm is increasingly challenged by a "transformational" view of learning. Such a view states that real learning is more than the attainment of isolated concepts. It involves the ability to view ideas within some general framework and to relate them to specific events in one's experience (Elmore 2001). In a similar vein, Simoniatis notes that learning happens when students articulate and intellectually defend their commitments.   A teacher's main task is thus to help learners discern competing truth claims to "the good life," and this involves not merely text learning, but engaging conversations in the classroom. (Simoniatis 2002) After a presentation of these two contrasting perspectives on learning and their corresponding demands for learners and instructors (see Table 2), students are often excited to discuss not just their learning styles, but the nature of effective pedagogy.

Table 2: Conventional & Transformational Pedagogy (Adapted from Elmore 1991)

	Conventional Pedagogy	Transformational Pedagogy
Teaching	Telling	Enabling
Knowledge	Facts	Understanding
Learning	Recall	Framework of ideas and its implications. Evaluating competing truth claims and defending one's intellectual commitments

In sum, if curriculum is a series of engaging "situated events" toward a desired goal, instructors must not merely organize content to teach (Adler's "didactic instruction"), but develop creative encounters in the classroom (Adler's "coaching"). For students, learning is not merely a passive reception of information (no matter how stimulating the lecture), but a meaningful engagement with ideas and truth claims. In the view of "transformational learning," students possess knowledge as they engage in classroom conversations to discern competing truth claims and to defend one's intellectual commitments.

Conclusion

For many students, seminary can be a challenging and lonely educational experience. While many seminarians are highly motivated by a strong sense of Christian vocation, theological studies exact tremendous mental, emotional and financial cost. Professors can make a significant difference in a seminarian's learning journey through the nurture of community and a culture of learning. This calls for a genuine partnership with learners and an open, honest review of shared pedagogical values. The best time to do this is at the beginning of a course as students anticipate a fresh learning experience and seek to better understand us as instructors.

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