Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning

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Recent literature on social practices recognizes that people grow and become who they are not through rationally thinking about ideas, but through embodied participation in activities that are shared with a community and focused on particular outcomes. Christian tradition has developed practices such as contemplative prayer, meditation, second reading, fasting, hospitality, silence to help people grow in their character and spiritual depth. These practices can also help intellectual development and guide one’s mind into deeper reflective places.

The editors David Smith and James Smith are passionate about using Christian practices to foster deeper learning and formation, rather than just information consumption. Both teach at Calvin College, a liberal arts college in Grand Rapids, USA. David Smith is Director of Kuyers Institute of Christian Teaching and Learning, which conducted a three-year research project funded by the Wabash Project on the Education and Formation of People in Faith. They invited teachers to study the literature on practices and then redesign a course based on one or more Christian practices. Ten of the teachers who took up this challenge reflect on their experience in this book. Half of them are from Calvin College; the other half from a range of other theological colleges.

They highlight a number of practices into their teaching of theology, philosophy, history, literature, economics, science, politics and the arts.

The basic argument of the book is that adopting Christian practices for pedagogical purposes will strengthen and deepen teaching and learning. There are ancient and diverse Christian practices that lend themselves to be adopted as teaching methods or community building exercises that enhance learning.

For example, a first-year literature seminar was reshaped around the metaphor of pilgrimage, inviting students to dwell deeply with the texts to acquire wisdom rather than rushing the material with a tourist-like mentality. Another teacher used the prayer labyrinth to invite students to contemplate the freedom and restraint of physics as a subject. A nutrition teacher invited pre-nursing students to eat meals together. A philosophy class reflected on Saint Aquinas’ virtues and vices. A social science class adopted fixed prayer hour to think deeply about their topic and make connections with the re-ordering of time. An adolescent psychology teacher created, welcomed and talked with about their students. As the book was read and they held their guests, the teachers still covered course material and sometimes adjusted the amount of content to allow more space for going deep with carefully chosen material and reflecting on the new practice.

This reviewer’s favorite chapter was David Smith’s Teaching Practices and Christian Pedagogy: Engaging Charity with Text. Smith adopted the slow reading approach of lectio divina (divine reading) and invited students to use it with repeated reading of selected texts. He asks, “how can we encourage a charitable reading stance to receive the message of the texts?”. His semester timetabling and reading selections helped students do this, by the posture of curiosity engendered by his teaching. One class he engaged with reading the assigned text, sat down and continued reading, then remarked, “You know, I’ve read this novel four times, and this is the first time I’ve thought I’ll teach it. I was still in this class, trying to figure why I’d ever watch a movie in such a page 47. Did that somehow engage us more? Can anyone help me out? In place of an exam, final assessment options included meditating on one of the pieces, discussing it with a friend and summarizing the discussion in a final paper, or writing a letter to a friend outlining how a close reading of one of the texts could influence the course. Student evaluations appreciated the deeper reading the course encouraged, and some said they learned to also ‘read’ new people in ways with less judgmental latency.

The book is still as best as a collection of examples of reflective practice. It narrates the teachers’ reshaping course aims, teaching methods, reading selections and assessment. The pedagogical experiments do not always work as the teachers hoped and were often harder work and emotionally stirring. Some students still read shallowly, expressed anxiety about grades and resisted group space, but other students showed profound learning, and most importantly for the development of professional practice, the innovative approaches gave the teachers experience to reflect on and grow from.

Another strength of the book is its integration of learning and faith practices. Against the secular trend to keep religious practice out of the classroom, it invites Christian tradition to be utilized and evaluated. This makes sense in an American Christian higher education context; but may seem strange for Australia. However it points in sensitive directions for introducing practices for students of different faiths who often also exhibit different religious lives.

Some of the chapters examined had a seminar was too short to introduce and adopt practices meaningfully. This suggested to the reviewer that theological college could adopt practices for teachers and students to practice over semester subject. A slow reading practice like ‘lectio divina’, a reflective practice like journaling, and a contemplative practice like ‘lament prayer’ that reflects on what life-giving and what life-damaging would be three good practices across a course.

Teachers of theology, religion and spirituality still obviously be most interested in this book. It will also be of interest to teachers of non-theological subjects in Christian higher education contexts, or teachers anywhere who want to offer students meditative or prayer group space that other students showed profound learning, and most importantly for the development of professional practice, the innovative approaches gave the teachers experience to reflect on and grow from.

Across the disciplines teachers are grappling with educational structures and student expectations that are limited by consumerism and instrumentalism. Discerning use of Christian practices can help teachers and students to move beyond just acquiring information to foster deeper learning and character formation.