

Does God dwell in the detail?

The daily grind of Christian teaching

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Life is full of surprises. Twelve years ago I began my teaching career as a teacher of foreign languages in a secondary school in a small town just outside Nottingham, England. I felt clearly called into education, but was only just beginning to figure out what that calling might mean. As I cast around for books which might help me, I stumbled across North American Reformed writings on education which trickled across the Atlantic by various circuitous routes. I met, for instance, an Anglican vicar who had once taught philosophy at Trinity College in Palos Heights. He began to supply me with books and photocopied articles, many of which emerged from a distant but important-sounding place called Calvin College. I got to know new names such as Gloria Stronks, Harro Van Brummelen and Nicholas Wolterstorff, names which came from America but sounded curiously Dutch. Now, just over a decade later, I feel grateful and surprised to be not only teaching at Calvin but giving this lecture as part of the College's 125th anniversary celebrations. I can bear first-hand witness to the influence which the educational reflections emerging from this college have had in little-dreamed-of, far-off corners of the educational world, and it is an honor to become a part of that process.

The books and articles that I read gave me some answers to some of my questions, but I think their more lasting impact was to saddle me with a bigger and more permanent question. The question had to do with how the great truths of the faith related to the daily grind, the everyday detail of my work as a teacher. In this lecture I want to first dwell at some length on why this should be a problem and then offer some partial answers. In the context of this unlikely dialogue between a liberal arts college in Michigan and a small secondary school classroom in central England, it is perhaps geographically appropriate if I approach matters by way of a detour to Iceland.

The Christian gospel came to Iceland in the tenth century, and immediately led to tensions between those who accepted the new religion and those who resisted it. Stephen Neill, in his history of Christian missions, describes the 'Althing', or great gathering of local assemblies, of the year 1004:

“The heathen men summoned a great gathering, and there they agreed to sacrifice two men out of each quarter and call upon the heathen gods that they would not suffer Christendom to spread over the land. But Hialte and Gizor had another meeting of Christian men, and agreed that they too would have human sacrifices as many as the heathen. They spoke thus: “The heathen sacrifice the worst men and cast them over the rocks or cliffs, but we will choose the best of men and call it a gift of victory to our Lord Jesus Christ, and

we will bind ourselves to live better and more sinlessly than before, and Gizor and I will offer ourselves as the gift of victory of our Quarter.”¹

I mention this episode because it colorfully captures an element of the Reformed Christian vision of education which appealed to me as soon as I encountered it. When I began teaching I had come across a view which went something like this: Christian teachers can best witness to their secular colleagues by showing excellence in their work. Being a Christian teacher simply means being a good Christian and a good teacher - not so much teaching any differently as teaching *well*. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, as the Scripture puts it. Doing everything as working for the Lord, we should commend the Gospel by associating it with educational excellence. Hjalte and Gizor display something of this spirit: if the heathen offer human sacrifices, then we will offer them too, just as many as they offer. If they offer the worst men, then we will outdo them and offer our best men. In doing so we will be offering a gift of victory to Christ.

At the same time, our medieval Icelandic brothers show pointedly why such a call to excellence is insufficient, even dangerous. If I had stopped reading half way through their declaration, we would probably have found little to admire – *Christians* excelling by offering human sacrifices? But they go on to change the terms. The heathen sacrifice by throwing folk off cliffs, but *they* will sacrifice by binding themselves to live more sinlessly. In order to excel in a Christian way, Hjalte and Gizor carry out a daring redefinition of the practice concerned, one enabled by the language of the New Testament. They will offer *living* sacrifices, an image perhaps so familiar to us that we forget its strangeness.² Without this redefinition, they would have found themselves achieving excellence at the wrong thing, being just as good as the heathen at something which should not be happening at all. This thought should inject a healthy sense of unease into our strivings for educational excellence.

This brings me back to the Reformed educational tradition, for this tradition has repeatedly insisted that Christian education should *not* simply be regular education done better, but rather education reworked on a Christian basis. This insistence comes out in talk of a Christian worldview, a Christian philosophy of education, a Christian mind, biblical foundations for education, or the integration of faith and learning. Behind such language I detect the healthy unease to which I just referred, the desire not to be caught up in the pursuit of an unexamined excellence. Instead, there is a desire to know whether we are pursuing the right project in the first place, to know what particular kind of excellence will really channel grace, life and peace. It was this unease, with its accompanying desire, that captured my attention as I entered teaching, leaving me permanently delighted and burdened with the question of how I could teach not only well but Christianly.

For anyone who has dwelt at any length upon Paul’s breathtaking vision in Colossians 1 of all things, things visible or invisible, things in heaven or on earth, all kinds of powers and authorities reconciled to God through the cross of Christ, this is an inspiring desire. I soon found, however, that it can also be a deeply frustrating one. The big vision was exciting, but tantalizingly unspecific. I knew that I needed to become more humble, patient and kind, and that was challenging enough, but what it meant in particular for teaching German to beginners was far, far from obvious. I found myself somewhat in the position of the musicians in a poem

¹ Neill, S. (1986). *A History of Christian missions*. 2nd. Ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, p.91-2.

² Cf. Romans 12:1.

by Austrian poet Ernst Jandl titled “*Das fanatische Orchester*”, or the fanatical orchestra.³ In Jandl’s poem, the conductor raises his baton, and in response the musicians swing their instruments into the air. He taps his baton on the edge of his music stand and they smash their instruments on the floor. He wipes sweat from his brow and they mime a battle with raging floods of water. And so it goes on. At first glance the musicians’ behavior seems wild, out of control, but it soon becomes clear that they are in fact fanatically trying to obey – every slight gesture from the conductor brings forth actions from the orchestra which correspond to it in some way. The strangeness of the musicians’ behavior comes not from disobedience, but rather from desiring to obey without understanding *how* to obey. They cannot discern which of the conductor’s motions are significant and in what way. This is where exhortations to teach Christianly left me for a while as a foreign language teacher. I had a healthy desire to obey but no clear idea of exactly what that meant I should *do*. Several factors contributed to the difficulty.

In the first place, I found that recent Christian educational discussion has been rather selective. Discussions of how creation and evolution should be handled in science teaching, or of what to teach about sex were not hard to come by. But I taught foreign languages, and they rarely entered the discussion. It was not unusual to find books claiming to give a Christian survey of the whole curriculum, but either dealing with foreign language learning in a couple of sentences or passing it over in silence. Christians teaching different subjects still receive widely varying levels of stimulation or support for Christian reflection, and this seems to me to remain a serious issue if the Christian community cares about the growth and fruitfulness of all of its teachers.

To make matters worse, the Bible seemed equally uninterested. The only mention that I could find in the Bible of any practice characteristic of the foreign language classroom was the pronunciation test in Judges chapter 12. You may remember that Ephraim fought with the men of Gilead. When the Gileadites got the upper hand and captured the fords of the Jordan, they asked every survivor who passed that way to say “Shibboleth”. Those whose faulty pronunciation revealed them as being from Ephraim were promptly slain. Not exactly a promising basis for a “biblical” approach to foreign language education. Apart from anything else, it would probably not do much for enrolment.

As I began to read more widely and attend conferences of Christian educators I soon heard that the answer was to develop a Christian worldview. Yet what I heard and read was often very general in focus – a Christian view of life, the universe and everything. My task was more specific – I was teaching foreign languages in a compulsory, mixed-ability secondary school context. What I heard seemed to imply that if we could just get clear on the outlines of a Christian worldview, applications to specific issues would simply follow. What I found was that even when I had done more than the average amount of reading about the nature of a Christian worldview, the connection with teaching German adjective endings to fourteen-year-olds on a Monday morning still seemed murky to say the least. Now don’t get me wrong, I found discussions of a Christian worldview invaluable, but they still seemed to lack purchase on the daily grind of lesson plans and learning tasks. It seemed as if the most natural impulse of Christians when they set aside time to look Christianly at their work was not to examine concrete pedagogical issues, but rather to write mission statements. I often felt that even

³ Jandl, E. (1981). *die bearbeitung der mütze: gedichte*. Darmstadt, Luchterhand, 1981, p.60.

though God occupied the moral and conceptual high ground, and this was no mean thing in itself, the devil retained a firm hold on his traditional residence among the details.

Now part of my problem was (and is) still having a lot to learn, but it is also worth considering the parallel between the project of Christian education and other efforts at curricular redefinition and reform. The one that I know best is the recent discussion in Britain concerning the place of spiritual development in the school curriculum. In the late 1970s Her Majesty's Inspectors, then the body overseeing educational standards, tried to counter perceived fragmentation in a discipline-based curriculum by identifying eight 'areas of experience' which should be addressed across the whole curriculum.⁴ These included the "spiritual" area of experience, an inclusion that helped to spark over two decades of debate. The relationship between religion and spirituality remains a subject of hot discussion to this day; suffice it for present purposes to say that talk of spiritual development in British education means something broader and more ambiguous than what Christians might mean by the term, but that spiritual development as understood by Christians is potentially included.⁵ In 1988 the idea that teachers should address the spiritual development of learners across the curriculum became a legal requirement, and the heat was turned up in 1992 when schools began to be inspected on this basis.⁶ There are now regular national conferences and a growing quantity of publications on the topic.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the effects in actual school classrooms have been decidedly patchy. Regarding the eight areas of experience, inspectors found early on that there was strong tendency for schools to simply align the areas with the existing disciplinary distinctions, assigning the aesthetic to the art classroom, the spiritual to the religious education teacher, and so on.⁷ In other words, the common pattern was to pour the new ideas into the existing educational moulds, thereby largely neutralizing their impact. Some words of Jesus about new wine and existing wineskins come to mind. Almost a quarter of a century later, there has been some progress,⁸ but still the idea of addressing the spiritual development of learners across the curriculum has been far more readily grasped and applied in some subject areas than in others. There has been a corresponding unevenness in the quantity and quality of published guidance – in some areas of the curriculum virtually no concrete guidance has been made available.

A significant part of the problem has been the existing subcultures of teachers working in different subject areas. Teaching a particular discipline draws the teacher into a particular set of issues, conversations, and professional traditions. It accustoms the teacher not only to a particular branch of knowledge, but also to a finite range of teaching techniques, student expectations and accepted standards of success. There are certain kinds of discussion which do and do not take place in the related professional journals. In short, the culture of post-

⁴ HMI (1977). *Curriculum 11-16: Working papers by HM Inspectorate: A contribution to current debate*. London, HMSO.

⁵ See Smith, D. (1999). *Making sense of spiritual development*. Nottingham, The Stapleford Centre.

⁶ HMSO (1988). *Education Reform Act 1988*. London, HMSO; Gilliat, P. (1996). Spiritual education and public policy 1944-1994. *Education, spirituality and the whole child*. R. Best. London, Cassell: 161-172.

⁷ See DES/WO (1983). *Curriculum 11-16: Towards a statement of entitlement. Curricular reappraisal in action*. London, HMSO.

⁸ OFSTED (2000). *The annual report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools: Standards and quality in education 1998/99*. London, The Stationery Office.

elementary education is made up of complex subject or departmental subcultures.⁹ Education is not a seamless entity, to be converted at a single stroke. Conferences on spiritual development are still largely attended by specialists in religious education, citizenship education, or personal and social education. Teachers in areas such as Art or English Literature have had a relatively easy task relating to talk of the spiritual in learning. In the field of foreign language learning there has been little response. Learning goals have since the 1970s been predominantly pragmatic, focused on the acquisition of basic communicative skills to enable practical transactions to take place on trips abroad. Moreover, for several decades the dominant way of talking about teaching among foreign language educators has been in terms of teaching “method” or “methodology”. A “method” in modern times tends to mean a procedure that is repeatable without variation in different times and places or by different people, is under careful control, and will guarantee particular outcomes if followed correctly. It is not a concept with much room for the spiritual.¹⁰ In these ways and others, the existing subculture of foreign language education was not receptive to talk of the spiritual, and the professional publications read by foreign language teachers have left spiritual development undiscussed in spite of its statutory status.

It is not hard to see that this kind of dynamic poses challenges to attempts to secure an integrally Christian education by first articulating a Christian worldview and then applying it in a trickle-down manner. Education is not a single vessel into which a Christian worldview can be poured from above. It is often more like a loose network of tribes, each possessing its own subculture which will by turns resonate with and resist the Gospel in its own particular ways. Achieving the kind of Christian transformation which the Reformed tradition has envisioned has to involve a lot of detailed dialogue with the natives. In my remaining time I want to illustrate this kind of dialogue as I have experienced it in the context of foreign language learning. I will focus on particular examples, but will try to suggest some broader implications for the project of Christian education as I go along.

I mentioned above that I found general descriptions of a Reformed Christian worldview helpful, but only up to a point. Worldview books commonly talk in terms of creation, fall, redemption and final consummation. The world in all of its dimensions is originally created and enjoyed by a loving God, caught up in the consequences of human disobedience, and open to a process of redemption which was achieved through the death and resurrection of Christ and is now proceeding to its final completion. Now these truths surely do have implications for teaching and learning, but notice that they are *global* truths. They have in view the world as a whole with all of its peoples. Foreign language education, on the other hand, has begun to move away from a view of language either as abstract grammatical structure or generalized communication skills and towards an interest in the interplay of language and culture and the dynamics of cross-cultural encounter. I was therefore particularly interested in how we should approach local differences in language and culture. The immediate issue was not whether language *per se* was created but rather how speakers of one language should approach learning another; not whether people in general are fallen or redeemed but how to approach

⁹ See e.g. Siskin, L. S. (1991). “Departments as different worlds: subject subcultures in secondary schools”. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 27(2): 134-60.

¹⁰ Smith, D. (2000). “Faith and method in foreign language pedagogy.” *Journal of Christianity and Foreign Languages* 1(1): 7-25; (2000). Spirituality and teaching methods: Uneasy bedfellows? *Educating for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development*. R. Best. London, Cassell: 52-67.

differences between particular cultures. Here the broad categories start to become more slippery – how, for instance, shall I accurately discern the traces of sin in another culture when I am in some measure looking through the eyes of my own culture, which is no more pristine than theirs? Again, I do believe that the big truths of creation, fall, redemption and consummation have a bearing on such local questions; they form the bigger context. I felt, however, a need for something more fine-grained to be added.

It was this kind of dissatisfaction which led Barbara Carvill and I (Professor Carvill is my colleague in the German department, and much of what immediately follows I learned from her) to dwell on the biblical theme of hospitality to the alien.¹¹ I will summarize briefly the biblical material. There are numerous places in the early books of the Old Testament where the Israelites are reminded that their community arose out of the foundational experience of being aliens in a foreign land among speakers of an unfamiliar tongue. Reflect on this, they are told, and be sure that you remember it when you encounter aliens in your land. The various statements of this reach a climax in Leviticus 19. Verse 18 of this chapter was later included by Jesus in his summary of the law: it says, “love your neighbor as yourself”. That sounds right, we might reply, but who is my neighbor? Leviticus 19 replies a few verses later with a slight reformulation. Verse 34 reads: “love [the alien] as yourself” (Leviticus 19:34).

Loving the stranger as oneself appears to be a paradigm case of loving one’s neighbor as oneself, a task which stands close to the heart of our human calling. We find the connection again in Luke 10:25-37, where a scribe comes to Jesus and asks him to interpret Leviticus 19:18: who is my neighbor anyway? In response, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, and instead of answering the scribe’s question, he concludes with a crafty multiple choice question of his own in which all the most desirable responses have been eliminated in advance. The scribe (like many Christian readers) probably expected the answer to be: your neighbor is the person in need, the man lying wounded by the roadside. Jesus excludes this answer by the form of his question: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” (v.36) Now we are down to three choices, but the priest and the Levite are hardly compelling candidates for the title. The answer is: the one who had mercy on him, the Samaritan. Note that of the four initial possibilities, three were Jews, while one was an alien, a Samaritan, ethnically different, mistrusted, avoided. Once again, the neighbor turns up in the guise of the stranger, and we are told: “Go and do likewise” – emulate this foreign neighbor who himself loved a stranger, a Jew.

The point is driven home even more sharply in Matthew 25:31-46. Here again the question of what must be done to inherit eternal life looms large (v.46, c.f. Luke 10:25). The divine King is seen separating the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the unrighteous. The righteous are told:

“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, *I was a stranger and you invited me in*, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” (v.35-40)

¹¹ See Smith, D. I. and B. Carvill (2000). *The gift of the stranger: Faith, hospitality and foreign language learning*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans.

The unrighteous are those who failed to do these things. Again, the kind of welcome given or not given to the stranger is presented as one of the marks of discipleship, one of the signs of responsiveness to God - or its absence.

In a seminal article¹² Barbara Carvill suggested that foreign language education in the Christian context should be seen as a preparation for exercising hospitality to the stranger and for being a good stranger when visiting overseas. This is intended literally, that is to say, students should be well prepared to receive foreigners who visit or settle in their area and to be sensitive travelers abroad. However, it is not just intended literally. Hospitality to the stranger is also offered as a basic image for the process of learning a foreign language. Learning a foreign language is not simply mastering words and structures, but making a space within oneself for that which comes from another culture, and interacting with it in love.

Against this backdrop I began to notice that the reasons commonly given for learning another language were usually couched in terms not of love for the stranger, but rather of love for the self. If I learn another language I will become more employable, or I will earn more money, or I will be able to have better vacations, or I will be a more educated person. It also became easier to notice how many of the dialogues practiced in many course materials were concerned with getting services while abroad, and how rare it was for communicative functions such as forgiving, encouraging or consoling to be practiced. I began to increase the amount of biographical material from the target culture in my courses in place of the consumer-oriented texts which filled the textbook, wanting my students to make space in their lives for Germans or French people who were fully human, who chose and hoped and wept and struggled as well as shopping, going on vacation and booking plane tickets. In these and other ways, all still very incomplete and in progress, the shift to thinking about my teaching through the lens of hospitality to the stranger began to change what I taught. The image connected with existing concerns in my field, in particular the interest in cross-cultural communication, and at the same time it challenged other parts of the subculture, in particular the emphasis on pragmatic goals and the tendency to think of communication skills outside of any ethical context.

Now note something important. Hospitality to the stranger is, I believe, an important theme for educators to reflect upon insofar as they deal with other languages and cultures, for it addresses specifically our relationship to those who are outside our cultural grouping. Moreover, it seems to occupy a position of some importance in Scripture – it appears repeatedly in the books of the Law, again when Jesus offers and illustrates his summary of the Law, and once more in Jesus’ depiction of the final judgement, surely all theologically significant junctures. Nevertheless, this theme is not given much attention in most of the general descriptions of a Christian worldview that I have read. This suggests to me that broad worldview categories are often more like the edge pieces of a jigsaw than the foundation of a building – even if they have been correctly identified as edge pieces, they leave a lot of unexplored space and may not yet depict some important parts of the picture. Exploring that space may require us to augment our broader understanding of the Christian worldview. Working our way out from the particular, as well as in from the frame, may lead to new emphases, and these may have something important to say to the whole. The idea that welcome to the stranger is one of God’s yardsticks for judging whether what we are doing is

¹² Carvill, B. (1991). “Foreign Language Education: A Christian Calling.” *Christian Educators Journal* 30(3): 29-30.

Christian has implications not only for the foreign language classroom, but also for various other areas of the curriculum and for the educational institution as a whole.

So far so good. But we are still some way from that Monday morning grammar lesson. And here is the point at which many would suspect that the trail runs cold. Teaching literature confronts us with the issues of life, teaching culture can attune us to the fruits or absence of faith, in advanced language classes we can discuss deep human issues.....but surely grammar is grammar. How could there be a Christian approach to adjective endings? This doubt is strengthened by the professional subculture mentioned above, which has seen the act of teaching a language as primarily a question of finding the most efficient method. Once we are accustomed to thinking of the act of teaching as a routine of efficiency, the idea that there would be a way of doing it more *Christianly* begins to sound faintly absurd well in advance of any more detailed discussion.

Let me suggest, then, another change of image. Instead of seeing teaching as method or technique, a technology practiced upon the learner, what if we adopted an image from thirteenth century France. In his history of the concept of schooling, Hamilton mentions in passing that the boys who studied at the nascent University of Paris were accommodated in hospices. These hospices, in which boys both learned and lived under a communal rule, were known, among other names, as 'pedagogies'.¹³ Here is an image to frame what follows: *a pedagogy is a house*, a holistic environment in which learners undergo both intellectual and spiritual formation according to a common rule. Being raised in a different house may (though not with technological efficiency or predictability) lead to developing a different character.

Let me give you a quick tour of two houses to illustrate what I mean. To return to the grammatical issue which I mentioned in passing, suppose that two high school teachers wish to teach the correct use of adjectives in German. One teacher draws inspiration from Gertrude Moskowitz's manual of teaching techniques, *Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Classroom*. Two of Moskowitz's activities have been chosen. The first is used to practice the use of adjectives in personal description. Each student is asked to imagine that he or she is going to give a speech before a group of people, a public lecture or an after dinner speech. The person who is to chair the event is a stranger who does not know the speaker. The speaker is therefore called and asked to draft a suitably glowing self-description which can be used for the introduction. Students are told that "they don't have to be modest but should point out all of the terrific things about themselves and be honest".¹⁴ The prepared introductions are brought to class, and each student is "introduced" by a partner using the introduction which he or she prepared. In another activity, encouraging practice of comparative forms, the teacher brings a recording of various sounds – birds singing, bells ringing, applause, rain on a roof, and so on. Students are asked to relax, listen to the sounds, and note their feelings. Afterwards they can discuss their feelings with the whole group – "the birdsong made me feel happier than the bells".¹⁵ For each of these activities, the linguistic forms needed are modelled appropriately by the teacher, but student utterances are not directly corrected.

¹³ Hamilton, D. (1989). *Towards a theory of schooling*. Basingstoke, Falmer Press, p.39-40.

¹⁴ Moskowitz, G. (1978). *Caring and sharing in the foreign language class: A sourcebook on humanistic techniques*. Cambridge, MA, Newbury House, p.82.

¹⁵ Adapted from Moskowitz, p.180-181.

Our second teacher is working with the textbook *Charis Deutsch*, and has again chosen two activities.¹⁶ In the first, students are presented with various adjectives which could be used to describe character - honest, determined, foolish, serious etc. After familiarization with the vocabulary, they are asked to draw a circle round words which others have used to describe them, a rectangle round those which they would use to describe themselves, and a triangle round any which represent aspirations. The sorted vocabulary is then inserted into a provided framework which enables students to construct a poem about their identity. Finally, they read a brief account of the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and read *Wer bin ich? (Who am I?)*, a poem written in prison towards the close of World War 2.¹⁷ In the poem Bonhoeffer first reflects on others' praise of his courage and calm in prison and then contrasts this with his own inner sense of distress and weariness. He finally leaves the question of who he really is in God's hands. In a second activity, which practices comparative forms, students have listened to a recording in which golfer Bernhard Langer discusses his priorities in life, and have completed comprehension activities. They are then given nine boxes arranged in a diamond pattern. Below them are nine words, which are to be cut out – *sport, food, money, education, love, television, family, friends, faith*. Students work in pairs, with model sentences provided as cues. One partner places a word on the grid, saying, for example, "food is the most important." The partner responds with another word, perhaps moving the first – "No, I think love is more important than food." They continue until they have negotiated a shared hierarchy of values.

These two teachers are teaching the same point of grammar, and may well be using many of the same words. Yet each is building a different pedagogical house. Moskowitz, the creator of the activities used in the first classroom, states openly that she wishes to bring learners to realize that "we all know what we need and what is right for us. We just have to tune into ourselves to find the answers. We are our own gurus."¹⁸ Her techniques are, I think often creative and interesting; however, they consistently have learners talking primarily about themselves and their own feelings. No place is given to any challenge from voices from the target culture. Moskowitz's pedagogy consistently excludes any expression of negative qualities or feelings, and self-denial is explicitly rejected as an unacceptable attitude.¹⁹ The two activities described above are aptly titled "Me power" and "I hear happiness". Another humanistic theorist of language teaching, Beverly Galyean, captures the central emphasis well in her dictum that humanistic pedagogy "views all learning as learning about oneself".²⁰ There is a commitment to emotional sensitivity and self-exploration, but humility or hospitality to the stranger do not appear to be on the agenda.

The textbook used by the second teacher comes from a Christian curriculum project in which I have been involved, one concerned with spiritual and moral development across the school curriculum. There are some surface similarities between the activities described and those found in humanistic pedagogy, but there are also significant differences. The Bonhoeffer poem is explicitly suspicious of the public praise which the "Me power" exercise courts, and challenges learners to reflect upon the discrepancy between others' compliments, their own

¹⁶ Baker, D., S. Dobson, et al. (1998). *Charis Deutsch: Einheiten 6-10*. Nottingham, The Stapleford Centre.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, D., C. Gremmels, et al. (1998). *Widerstand und Ergebung : Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*. Gütersloh, Chr. Kaiser Verlag.

¹⁸ Moskowitz, p.188.

¹⁹ Moskowitz, p.2, 25.

²⁰ Galyean, B. (1979). "A confluent approach to curriculum design." *Foreign Language Annals* 12: 121-128.

character ideals and the realities of their present inner experience. The comparative exercise is drawn from a longer sequence which asks students to reflect on their commitments (not merely their feelings) and how these affect their priorities in life. The underlying aim is to challenge students to face spiritual issues through encountering them in the lives of members of the target culture and then discussing them with their peers.

Now I mean to make no inflated claims for the formative effects of a single learning activity (though on occasion these should not be underestimated). Instead, I am asking you to imagine a classroom in which one or the other of these approaches *consistently* frames the learning agenda. Each offers a way of teaching the same grammatical forms, and on that level each will probably be successful. However, each also seeks to form students in particular ways which go beyond the linguistic. Any pedagogy, if practiced consistently over a period of time, includes an element of spiritual formation.

Notice that I have not tried to meet skepticism as to whether there could be a Christian approach to teaching grammar by embarking upon a theology of grammar. This brings me to another observation Christian education more generally. The faith-learning integration movement has produced fine work along the lines of developing a Christian understanding of the subject matter of the various disciplines.²¹ In this context it is perhaps understandable that discussions of whether there can be a Christian approach to language teaching or to math teaching (substitute the unlikely discipline of your choice) can end up revolving unhelpfully around the question of whether there can be a Christian mathematics or a Christian grammar. What gets neglected in this kind of discussion is the fact that once math or grammar enter the pedagogical house, they are not just math or grammar any more. They are caught up in that complex web of human interactions which we call education. Think of an egg getting taken up into a cake – a theology of eggs would only get us so far if what we wanted to know about was the flavor of the cake. It seems entirely conceivable that an impeccably worked out Christian view of science or history or foreign languages could be taught in a way which is pedagogically uninspiring or even with a pedagogy the ethos of which runs counter to the very Christian convictions which have been espoused. A Christian view of each subject is a fine and necessary thing, but it should not be too quickly confused with a Christian approach to *teaching* that subject.

Jerome Bruner has recently put the matter this way:

“Any choice of pedagogical practice implies a conception of the learner and may, in time, be adopted by him or her as the appropriate way of thinking about the learning process. For a choice of pedagogy inevitably communicates a conception of the learning process and the learner. Pedagogy is never innocent. It is a medium that carries its own message.”²²

Bruner’s formulation not only reiterates the value-laden nature of pedagogy, but also highlights a central reason why all this is important, namely that a pedagogy may lead learners

²¹ See Marsden, G. M. (1997). *The outrageous idea of Christian scholarship*. New York, Oxford University Press.

²² Bruner, J. (1996). *The Culture of Education*, Cambridge, Mass./London: Harvard University Press. p.63.

to see learning in particular ways. I will try to illustrate this point further by describing an episode from my own classroom when I was teaching high school in England.²³

One morning I was teaching French to fourteen-year-olds. We were practicing for the oral examination at the end of the course. This involved rehearsing a range of personal questions, such as, where do you live? How old are you? What do your parents do? One student was having difficulty remembering the word for an obscure parental occupation, which was a common problem. Whatever the topic, there would always be some students who wanted to say things not covered within the vocabulary which I wanted them to learn. Somehow there were always awkward students who instead of owning cats and wanting to be firefighters kept pink-kneed tarantulas and wanted to be freshwater biologists, despite the fact that those words were not in the textbook and would not be on the exam.

On that day I responded in the usual way, a way learned from colleagues. I suggested that for present purposes the student supply the name of any occupation which came to mind; after all, the external examiner would not really be interested in what this pupil's parent actually did for a living. He or she would just want to hear a correct French phrase in order to evaluate it for complexity, accuracy, and pronunciation. My response echoed a broader pattern of advice that I had picked up as part of the professional wisdom of my discipline. If, for instance, students were asked to design family trees in the target language, beginning level learners with particularly complex families were advised to simplify the facts for the purposes of the exercise, so that they would not overburden themselves with unfamiliar words. Such suggestions had never seemed problematic to me before; wasn't language practice the main purpose of what we were doing?

On this particular day I began to feel uncomfortable with my response. I began to wonder whether the ethics of communication did not matter even in language practice. Should I as a Christian advise students to simplify and change the facts if truth or accuracy were inconvenient? Wouldn't it be more in tune with my Christian convictions to teach students to wrestle with the language they were learning until they could express themselves with integrity?

When I shared these thoughts with colleagues, things got more complicated. My fellow teachers did not agree with me; in fact it would probably be more accurate to say that they thought I was stupid. They had several arguments of which two seemed important. In the first place, they said, I was confusing artificial practice exercises with real communication. What we did in the classroom was, they argued, just role-play for the purposes of learning; to expect learners to tell the truth was to apply an inappropriate standard. In any case, they went on, I had no right to expect my students to honestly divulge personal information in the classroom if they preferred not to do so. What if they didn't want to tell me what their father did? What if their father was in prison?

All this seemed to make sense, and for a while I thought they were probably right. As I kept thinking about it, however, I became less convinced. The first objection seemed wide of the mark, for at least two reasons.

²³ See also Smith, D. (1997). "Communication and integrity: Moral development and modern languages." *Language Learning Journal* 15: 31-38.

For one thing, we claimed in our schools to be following a communicative approach to language teaching. This meant, among other things, that when students used language in the classroom, their speech was to be as authentic as possible – as far as possible it should be a rehearsal of real communication, and not just manipulation of language out of context. We made extensive use of information gap activities, activities in which two or more students are each given part of the information needed to solve a problem, so that they really have to communicate with each other in the new language to get the problem solved. Wasn't there then something inconsistent about appealing to the artificial character of our role-play activities as soon as an ethical issue was raised? If we were trying to get our students to practice genuine communication, did we really want them to pay no attention to the ethics of their utterances in the classroom? After all, what attitudes toward communicating with real live strangers did we want to foster? Does telling the truth only matter when we are talking to members of our own language group? Furthermore, if we regularly implied to pupils that the content of what they said did not matter, were we not sending clear messages that, in spite of our communicative ideals, we were not really interested in what they had to say?

These worries were strengthened when I began to listen to my students. I began to notice that, however sophisticated our distinctions between communication, rehearsal, and role-play, student perceptions were much more down to earth: they tended to focus on the content of an utterance more than on its form. For instance, if I asked eleven-year-olds to do a class survey about pets, it was not uncommon for some of them to do it in English and proudly present me with the results. *I* thought we were rehearsing phrases; *they* thought they were doing a survey to find out about pet ownership. I found a parallel example in an article by researchers who observed an elementary school teacher trying to teach her learners about how laws get made.²⁴ The teacher had created an elaborate simulation in which the learners were marooned on a desert island and had to build a community, eventually engaging in discussion about what rules they would have for their community. Towards the end of the simulation, one of the researchers asked a student what she had been learning. She responded promptly that their teacher had been teaching them what to do if they got stranded on a desert island. As with my pet surveys, the teacher's understanding of what was happening and the learners' perceptions of what was going on were two very different things.

This came to have a direct bearing on my concern about truth-telling. I found with various groups of learners who had been advised to practice flexibility with the facts that, before long, one student or another, especially between the ages of 11 and 13, would come up with the question "It's O.K. to lie in French, isn't it?" If I told students through the way I taught that the content of personal communications was not particularly important, their simple conclusion was that it was OK to lie in the new language. It was all very well for me to have fine distinctions between role-play and real communication, but what if the students perceived themselves as lying? And isn't attending to the perceptions of learners an essential factor in finding out what our pedagogy actually achieves? In the end, I came to find my colleagues' first objection unsatisfactory.

The other objection I found more persuasive. With the family circumstances of learners seeming to become more complex as the years passed, what right did I as their French teacher

²⁴ Clayden, E., C. Desforges, et al. (1994). "Authentic Activity and Learning." *British Journal of Educational Studies* 42(2): 163-173.

have to ask them to talk in front of their peers about what their parents did, where or whether they went on holiday, or what their house was like? What if their family's inability to afford a holiday became a ground for ridicule at the hands of materialistically minded fellow learners? I was reminded of an incident a couple of years earlier, when I was training to become a language teacher. I had been given a standard oral test to administer to a class of 11-year olds. It contained a sequence of personalized questions including "Do you have any brothers or sisters?" When I put this question to one of my students she burst into tears. Thinking that she was just stressed by the test situation, I tried to be encouraging, and found out too late that her brother had been killed in an accident just a few days earlier. That memory made me quite willing to wonder how a concern for truth could be coupled with the need to protect learners from intrusive, painful, or embarrassing questions.

I began to experiment. My first idea was, in retrospect, stupid. I tried announcing to students that our course materials would involve classroom talk about personal matters, and that if there was any area which anyone would rather not be asked about they should let me know so that I could avoid it. The problem was, this was virtually equivalent to saying to the students: "if any of you have any embarrassing family secrets, please tell the teacher after class".

Two other strategies proved more viable. I decided to be much more explicit about what was going on in a given language activity. If, for instance, I asked them to write about their family, I now told them they could choose one of two genres. They could elect to do a piece of creative writing about a fictitious family and make up all the details. Alternatively, they could choose to write about themselves, in which case I asked them to work at finding the vocabulary and expressions they needed to give an accurate, truthful picture. Both kinds of writing would be given credit in the same way – the choice was up to learners. In this way I tried to remove the ambiguity concerning when we were engaging in personal communication, which required integrity, and when we were playing with language.

In addition, I supplemented the content of my syllabus. I began to teach my students strategies for politely deflecting unwelcome questions, a communicative skill which had not been dealt with in our language course before. In response, some students began using phrases such as "I'm afraid that's none of your business" with gleeful enthusiasm!

This process probably took at least a year. It was an interactive process in which my beliefs and values, my ongoing experience of a particular teaching situation, a set of assumptions and teaching practices characteristic of a particular area of the curriculum, my wider reading and understanding of communicative teaching methods, the advice and objections of colleagues and the responses of my students all contributed. The interaction of these factors led to a series of modifications in the way I approached my teaching, and an ongoing sense that I needed to rethink what I was doing. My Christian beliefs did not provide me with teaching strategies in advance, but they did stake out an area of concern within which my classroom practice could develop and change. Linguist Alan Maley once commented that the learner is not a pint pot to be filled, but rather a home brewery kit in which teacher input ferments.²⁵ Something similar seems to be true about the input of Christian faith into the teaching situation.

²⁵ Maley, A. (1982). "Exquisite corpses, men of glass and Oulipo: Harnessing the irrational to language learning". *ELT Documents 113 - Humanistic Approaches: An Empirical View*. P. Early. London, The British Council.

In conclusion, let me draw some threads together. I see a need in Christian educational discussion for more work which engages Christianly with the particular subculture, the peculiar pedagogical texture of particular curricular areas. General accounts of a Christian worldview and a Christian view of education remain essential, but if the movement is only from the general to the particular then implementation will always be patchy, our understanding will be less rich, and there will always be the danger that the noble sentiments of our missions statements have little genuine purchase on the daily grind. Reflection from within a particular curriculum area can enrich and extend our grasp of what a Christian worldview might be. This does not only mean that we need a Christian view of each discipline; we need Christian work in more areas which focuses on the *pedagogy* and not just on the *content* of particular subject areas. This requires us to become both sensitive to and critical of the varied pedagogical subcultures which make up education; if broad articulations of our mission are not in touch with an ongoing engagement with such subcultures, they may end up detached from much of what we actually do from day to day.

All of this leaves me glad for the unease that I described at the outset, and for the frustration to which it can lead. I pray that both will prosper here at Calvin College. The unease, if we keep it alive, can keep us from settling for a pedagogy which is not being renewed in the light of the Gospel, and the frustration, if we let it lead us to engagement, can show us where we still have work to do. Both are part of a process which begins to look remarkably like sanctification, that continuous renewing of our hearts, minds and actions which applies to our lives as teachers at least as much as it applies to the other areas of our lives. Keeping it at the forefront of our attention as Christian educators could threaten the devil's hold on the detail, and turn the daily grind into the daily arena where salvation is worked out with fear and trembling.