
Pro Rege

Volume 24 | Number 4

Article 2

June 1996

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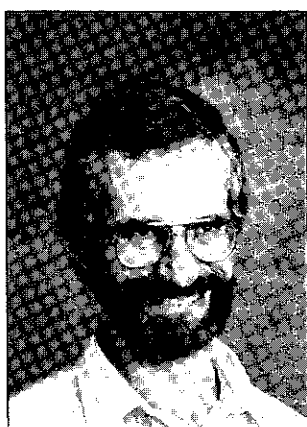
Recommended Citation

Koole, Robert (1996) "Sharpening Our Vision, Engaging in Learning, Renewing Our Practice," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 24: No. 4, 7 - 9.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol24/iss4/2

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Sharpening Our Vision, Engaging in Learning, Renewing Our Practice



by Robert Koole

I am convinced that Christian school teachers need to ask themselves on a regular basis: Am I growing in my thinking about schooling? How can I stay fresh in my teaching? And how can we encourage a reflective atmosphere in our schools? In that connection, I want to reflect briefly on the current context of schools, as well as on ways teachers can continue to grow and schools to change.

Current Context

We live in a culture that too often values the final score more than playing the game; that watches

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more than it reads; that spends more time driving in automobiles than finding new ways of learning; and that spends more dollars on people enjoying shopping than on encouraging learning and studying. Our postmodern culture is characterized by many contradictions. Andy Hargreaves (1995) describes five such paradoxes: Many parents have given up responsibility for the very things that they want schools to stress; many businesses often fail to use the skills that they demand schools produce; more globalism produces more tribalism; more diversity and integration are accompanied by more emphasis on common standards and specialization; and a stronger orientation to the future creates greater nostalgia for the past. These developments call for an informed and balanced response.

In his recent book, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (1995), Neil Postman urges people to ask three major questions: What is the purpose of education? What erroneous stories have we been telling our children? And, what narratives can provide truthful, unifying themes for our educational system? In a way that reminds us of Bob Goudzwaard's *Idols of Our Time*, Postman argues that the erroneous narratives or false gods currently in vogue do not contribute to building up a confident, tolerant, caring, and supportive public. These false gods include the god of economic utility, which encourages students to learn in order to get a well-paid job; the god of consumerism, which tells students they are what they have accumulated; and the god of technology, which tells students that technology is their savior. These false gods cannot provide meaning and do not provide answers to life's most important ques-

tions. In the words of Psalm 115, "those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them."

We live in a postmodern world that considers all knowledge to be subjective and tentative. Starratt (1993) summarizes the postmodern worldview with a series of don'ts: don't trust the government, don't trust the banks, don't trust salespeople, don't trust the police, don't trust your insurance company, don't trust your minister, don't trust your lawyer, don't trust the scientist, don't trust anybody, don't trust your mind or emotions, don't trust logic, statistics, scientific proof, don't trust language, and don't even trust yourself. All with all, he suggests "the modern world stripped of all illusion is not a pretty landscape. The disenchantment of nature and society and of the human person by science carried over to the disenchantment of science itself. Nothing is pure, all is tainted by uncertainty, egoism, calculated manipulation" (103).

In the postmodern era people find themselves at a loss, pessimism prevails, and there appears to be little meaning or purpose to life beyond mere existence. Peter Kreeft (1989) in *Three Philosophies of Life* builds a case for Ecclesiastes being *the* book for our time. He explains how the writer of Ecclesiastes describes life without hope and without meaning, where everything is chasing after wind, grasping after shadows, a wild goose chase with no goose.

The writer of Ecclesiastes considers five toils, five human attempts to find meaning: philosophy to fill your mind, hedonism to fill your body, materialism to fill your pocket, ethics to fill your conscience, and religion to fill your soul. Not one of these five toils brings ultimate happiness. According to Kreeft, Ecclesiastes is *the question* to which every other book in the Bible provides *the answer*. In answer to human questions of meaning and purpose, the Scriptures provide meaning by revealing how God became human, sharing the human life, so that human beings might share the life of God.

Called to Renewal

In this postmodern era, we are called to renewal. We must pray with David, "create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your

salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me" (Psalm 51:10-12). With the apostle Paul we need to recognize that the gods of this age blind people to the light of the gospel. We are called to let the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ shine through the darkness. And although we have this treasure in jars of clay, our bodies as earthen vessels still reveal the life of Jesus. We are Christ's ambassadors—in Jesus Christ we are a new creation—and God is making his appeal through us (cf II Corinthians 4 and 5).

Walter Wright proposes renewal as an antidote for entropy. Entropy is the opposite of growth—everything in our schools, everything in our teaching and learning will gradually erode, run down, even break down unless it is maintained, revitalized, renewed. Our school relationships and activities need ongoing change and renewal. Continued growth can occur through occasionally writing down your personal vision of a good school, your vision of teaching and learning. Taking time to write it down, to share it with a colleague, to discuss it as a faculty and as a community of parents and teachers will bring renewal and lead to revitalized plans and program changes.

But there is a critical ingredient: If our vision for schooling focuses on what we can achieve, what we can teach, what we need to feel good about, renewal will always be just out of reach. But renewal will come when we focus our vision on what we can give in service of God and others. We follow in Jesus' footsteps, for he has already done what needs to be done; we find our purpose and meaning in what he has done for us. Renewal enables us to bring a reforming perspective to Christian education that respects and builds on the past, actively works in the present, and looks to the future.

Nick Wolterstorff (1992) added an insightful dimension to our thinking about Christian education. He urged Christian educators to go beyond the notion of mandate. He challenged us to think of teaching and learning as extending an invitation to our students. It is as if God says, "Come explore my world, discover its inner makeup, delve into its depths and reach into its skies. May you flourish and take delight in all that is there."

Likewise, instead of thinking primarily in terms of what schools have to offer students, we can also think and act in terms of what students have to offer to each other and to the community of learning in the school. What students bring to school becomes

as important as what they take from school. What students know contributes to what others learn. What they offer becomes as important as what they have to do. A Christian school thereby becomes a community of learning in which the people of God gather together for the purpose of learning.

Renewing Ourselves as Teachers

In an excellent book, *Improving Schools from Within*, Roland Barth (1990b) argues that the relationships among the adults in a school are critical. If students are to value learning, the adults in the school, teachers, principal and parents, need to model learning for them. We need to be a community of leaders and learners who show by the way we live and work together, by the way we teach and learn, that growing in knowledge and understanding is one of the distinguishing features of who we are as God's people. As principals and teachers we need to be involved in our own learning, doing the kinds of things we hope students will do.

When a school recasts itself as a learning organization, it will not become stale but will keep on renewing itself. In *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge (1990) writes,

Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we were never able to do. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life. There is within each of us a deep hunger for this type of learning. (14)

This holds for adults as well as their students. Barth (1990a) makes the point that the way we model (or don't model) learning is crucial to student learning,

What it is that individuals are learning is important, but the very fact that teachers, principals, and students are learning is, I believe, far more important to the development of a community of learners. Thus a major responsibility of the adults in a community of learning is to engage actively in their own learning, to make their learning visible to others in the community, to enjoy and celebrate their learning, and to sustain it over time—even (especially) when swamped by the demands of their work.

With everyone learning, then similarities and differences, as well as the ties that bind a community together, will also surface.

We learn best when the community in which we live signals in everyday ways that learning is valuable and worthwhile. Some students will say, "I learn best when I can share ideas with others." Others will realize, "I learn best when my teacher tells me what I need to know." Still others: ...when I have a chance of passing; ...when I can sing it; ...when I can get help from others; ...when I'm open to new ideas and new ways of looking at something. It should not surprise us that the same diversity holds for teachers. A school does not improve when it is a place for important people, who know everything and do not need to learn more, to teach unimportant people, who need to learn because they don't know very much. Instead, schools improve, students learn best, principals and teachers grow and flourish, when a school is a community of learning, a place where all participants—students, teachers, parents and principals—discover and experience the joys, the difficulties, and the satisfactions of learning. When that happens, we will continue to grow in our knowledge and understanding of what it means to provide the best possible Christian school in our own communities.

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