

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

7-9-2019

Teaching Christianly at the Graduate Level

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Recommended Citation

Holtrop, S. (2019). Teaching Christianly at the Graduate Level. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1085

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Abstract

"[Adult learners] crave more integration of their Sunday philosophy and their Monday practices."

Posting about transforming culture through education from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/teaching-christianly-at-the-graduate-level/>

Keywords

In All Things, universities and colleges, graduate work, Christian education

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

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July 9, 2019

Teaching Christianly at the Graduate Level

Steve Holtrop

“Teaching Christianly” remains a stimulating and ongoing challenge for us all in our undergraduate courses—I haven’t met a Christian college where that’s not the case. However, we are now faced with a burgeoning enrollment at Dordt University. There are eight tracks in the Master of Education program, with 190 students enrolled this summer—another good challenge! Further, the Graduate Studies Office has begun recruiting for the fall start of the Master of Public Administration (MPA) graduate program, and the board has approved moving forward with plans for two additional graduate programs in other areas. Although our existing and prospective graduate students are adult professionals who have checked out our website and know Dordt is a Christian university, many begin our graduate programs with little to no experience in being taught “Christianly” or sense of how they can go back to their own classrooms in the fall and teach “Christianly.”

Of course, there’s not just one Christian way to teach. In the same way God gave the members of His church different gifts, Christian teachers bring different academic qualifications, life experiences, and Biblical perspectives to “teaching Christianly.” I think God deliberately made us all different so that we’d have to complement (and compliment) each other to get the job done right!

I teach my undergraduate education majors in Philosophy of Education that there are different Biblically-informed Christian perspectives on teaching. For example, a Christian view of the student may focus on the amazing way humans are made in the image of God and, even at a very young age, exhibit evidence of divine creativity, love, fairness,

justice, empathy, and striving for excellence—attributes encouraged by passages such as Phil. 4:8 and Gal. 5:22-23. Christian teachers focusing on this view of the student may be inspired by Dewey or Montessori to find ways to explore, celebrate, and develop the individual gifts and passions within each student.

A contrasting Christian view of the student has traditionally focused on the need to control and discipline the student's natural tendencies toward sin: laziness, obstinacy, lack of ambition, rebellion against authority—tendencies that lead to behaviors that can be self-destructive, disruptive to the education of others, and sometimes dangerous to the school and community. If teachers are unprepared to deal with this, or are theoretically opposed, then not a lot of learning happens!

Both perspectives are right... right?

An “every square inch” view (Kuyper), a “Christ transforming culture” view (H.R. Niebuhr), or what many at Dordt like to call a “kingdom building” view may allow us to acknowledge and work with both Christian perspectives. If we're preparing students for their callings, their roles in the kingdom, and their tasks (whatever those end up being) in transforming culture, then we work with both their fallenness and their amazing individual gifts. We use “backbone” discipline (discipling) instead of the alternatively discouraging extremes of the “brick wall” approach, or “jelly fish” discipline (B. Coloroso). We're providing basic training for kingdom roles—intellectually, morally, creatively (N.H. Beversluis). We're teaching for justice, responsibility, and Shalom (N. Wolterstorff). We're not just *informing* students; we're helping to *form* them (J.K.A. Smith).

We can go through the same dichotomies and then look at a Kuyperian/Niebuhrian kingdom-building, which opens up Christian views of the teacher (cop or coach?) and of the curriculum (time-tested canon or exploration resources?). We can similarly analyze different Christian approaches to the purpose of education and the meaning of “calling” and “work” that await our graduates. All of it is wrapped up in our definition of “truth,” which is really at the heart of our individual worldviews. Retired Dordt philosopher John Van Dyk once said that our worldviews aren't as solid and foundation-like as we would hope, since our daily experiences and new learnings and process of sanctification constantly adjust our worldviews—as a chiropractor adjusts our bones after a slip on the ice!

Returning then to Dordt's influx of graduate students, these are adjustments they have to deal with, and that's what our master's programs have to offer them—adult, professional worldview adjustments. Unlike the undergraduates, who have been told since Kindergarten, “trust me, you'll need this someday,” our graduate students fit right

into the part of adult learning theory that says the best learning is that which is relevant and applicable right now in their jobs and lives. Most of them go to church on Sunday and devoutly want to have a Biblical perspective on their profession. Then on Monday morning, in the case of our Master of Education students, they're right in the trenches trying to decide how as Christian teachers they view their students.

They walk into the teacher's lounge (in both public and private schools) and may hear dismayed remarks about "kids these days" (there's an Egyptian papyrus complaining about Egyptian adolescents, so this sentiment goes back a bit). It's confusing to see that some children are cutting corners and trying to get away with stuff, while at the same time hearing all kids have potential and it's our job to help them realize it. What's a Christian to do? These aren't just "what if" discussion prompts in an undergrad philosophy class preparing them for professional life someday. This is real; this is now.

Adult learners *are* still developing, as we all are throughout our lives. Unlike most of their undergrad counterparts, graduate students may already have a job, a well-developed (or at least more developed) sense of life calling, financial independence from parents, a spouse, family obligations, and outside commitments and hobbies. But like many people, they may crave more integration of their Sunday philosophy and their Monday practices. They don't want their personal values and belief system to be bifurcated by their professional values. So, we try to use that urge for integration, not as just a head-knowledge, philosophical construct, but as a natural adult urge to be whole, aligned, and consistent.

Additionally, adult learners are eager to learn *from each other* and ready to soak up concepts and skills that matter to them. I tell my graduate students in curriculum class: *I bring 30+ years in the profession to this course; you all are collectively bringing 400 years!* Let's all learn together and from each other. I can't have been in all the situations they collectively have. Further, as seasoned professionals, they've grown personally with their time management, motivation, seeing the point, and being dependable, responsible, and professional. Are they flawless? Of course not. But their willingness to soak it up is exciting. To be sure, our grad students don't all sign up for Dordt's program initially because they're looking for our level of faith integration, but when we help them make it applicable to whatever professional role they have, we often hear how valuable they found it—talk about value added!

Although adults have usually progressed to some of the highest stages of physical brain development (e.g., getting past that moment when your car insurance goes down) and have reached some of the higher levels of social awareness (e.g., Piaget, Kohlberg), it's harder to gauge people's stages of faith. According to James Fowler, many people do not progress much beyond the 3rd stage out of his 6 stages—remaining at where they

arrived as teenagers, accepting the “conventional” beliefs and authorities of their group. Fowler and M. Scott Peck do, however, see a number of adults moving beyond seeing their beliefs as a structure (albeit often a safety zone or comforting box) in which they find themselves. These upper stages of faith involve making faith one’s own (rather than just imposed) and being more other-directed instead of focused primarily on personal behavior that aligns with the structure.

Our goal with graduate students is not primarily to convert them to a certain Christian perspective on the student, teacher, or curriculum. We see them as kingdom laborers who maybe haven’t had a chance to look up recently and check the map to see where they fit into the process, and see the progress that’s being made. As with all courses at Dordt, our grad courses are infused with a Reformational worldview (our “religious orientation”), a sense of “creational structure” and “creational development” (to use the key “coordinates” from Dordt’s *Educational Framework*)—but where we can really go to town in the grad programs is with the “contemporary response” or the “serviceable insight” that these rubber-hits-the-road professional courses allow. Four of my seven course objectives in my current grad course are aligned to this last curricular coordinate: contemporary response. My students are producing real curriculum projects that they will use in real schools (both public and private), and every project is infused with their re-examined worldviews, their view of the student and the curriculum, and their part of the kingdom-building and culture-transforming that God has called them to do.

Yes, the student is a sinner *and* an explorer. Yes, the teacher is sometimes a controller *and* sometimes an accommodator (and maybe mostly a collaborator). Yes, we’re teaching a lot of head knowledge *but also* a lot of heart-knowledge (whether we realize it or not). Yes, we’re all called to duty *but also* to freedom. Yes, truth is being questioned like never before in our lifetimes. But Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.¹ And he commands us to go into all the world, baptizing,² but also teaching.³ And he assures us that through it all: “Surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”⁴

FOOTNOTES

1. John 14:6
2. Matt. 28:19
3. Matt. 28:20
4. Matt. 28:2