

Educating in a post Christian society

Like most Christians, I find myself increasingly challenged to live and work in a world that seems to pay less and less attention to the God to whom I am committed. Recently, I came across an old book, *Celebration of discipline: A path to spiritual growth*, by Richard Foster. I remembered enjoying reading it some years ago and found that I was quickly challenged by its contents. I thought it might be my challenge to relate some of the issues raised in this book to us as Christian teachers and educators.

Part 5 Study

As teachers and educators the discipline of study should be of second nature, except that time crowds study out in a busy day of work, family and social obligations. Christians face the same pressures and often have guilt about not spending enough time in pray and Bible reading.

Of all the spiritual disciplines *study* ought to be the most natural to those with academic training to enter their profession. For some teachers study was a means to an end and not an object of delight. Having completed the necessary degrees further study does not come easily to the majority of teachers. Some teachers do not read in the area of education unless it is part of a professional development course that requires and sets time aside for such activity. Even those who make an attempt to read rarely read widely resulting in views on change and innovation can be faddish and incomplete.

As Christian teachers, there is an even greater imperative to read and to study both in terms of our profession and our faith. We are reminded that our lives will be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Rom 12:2) and that knowledge of the truth will set us free (John 8:32). Unlike other religious and world-views, that truth is found in the person of one man, Jesus Christ, because God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ. (2Cor 5:19). Dr Anna Hogg, in her famous article on the aims of Christian education (JCE Vol 5 No 1) makes it clear that the pursuit of truth is not an option for Christian teachers but the whole game. Whether in government or non-government schools, failure to pursue truth is more reprehensible for Christians, because they claim to know the truth (Christ).

The discipline of study is essential for Christian teachers. The acquisition of knowledge is subject to a range of learning theories that will not be the subject of this article, but rather what follows is a more practical approach, the elements of which are likely to be found in most approaches, and follow Foster's book.

Repetition

This element can be unimportant when applied to repetition of trivia or information that supports indoctrination rather than thinking. On the positive side we often don't understand complex matters the first time we hear them or are able to think through the implications, for example, standards-referenced assessment or justification by faith. If we are only given one chance to understand then we may not become very informed people. What is worth knowing is worth repeating and study needs the element of repetition if we are to truly know. Other aspects of society, like advertising, rely on repetition and so should learning the important things of life.

Concentration.

Focussing the mind on the subject of study is essential to deepen knowledge.

Comprehension

Concentration and repetition will lead to comprehension as our minds are applied to the subject at hand. Comprehension is that breakthrough that occurs when we can say "Yes, I can understand that". We pursue truth through more than one source because some understandings take longer to come than others.

Reflection

Achieving comprehension and understanding about a point of view, theory or opinion does not equal truth. Reflection against other readings, views and understandings, and for Christians, reflection on their knowledge of God through the Scriptures is also essential. Knowledge is not equal to wisdom unless it reveals the very nature of God and leads to words and actions consistent with that nature.

Studying written words

Reading can occur at different levels. You can read to find out what the author is saying, you can read to understand what the author meant at the time of writing and you can read to evaluate whether what the author is saying is correct in today's context.

Often, without really understanding what the author is saying or what it means in the context of when it was said, we can engage the third reading first. How often do people complain that they have been misunderstood or taken out of context. There is always an obligation on the reader to understand what the author is actually saying. Then analysis follows, which involves other perspectives, opinions and the reader's own experiences. Whether an article on the latest educational theory, a policy statement, a new syllabus or the Bible these principles hold true, and it is this latter book that should be our prime focus.

Given all these matters, finding time to study both as teachers and Christians can be difficult. I am fortunate to have a job that requires study to fulfil my role in providing educational advice and developing curriculum and professional development support for teachers. It is my study time as a Christian that requires me to be disciplined and part of my commitment to *TCFNews* is to ensure that I study and apply God's word.

Study does not have to be an individual experience. Joining study groups (committees) on professional issues and within your church can be important and where other perspectives and opinions inform understanding.

Studying the world

If seeking the truth is for Christians the primary aim of education then its pursuit will be in the real world as well as the written world. A Christian education will embrace the sciences where observation and testing of scientific theory will provide knowledge of the world and of its creator. While the environment is important to all teachers, Christian teachers will want to focus on environmental issues because the broken relationship between God and humans is part of a broken relationship, between God and creation. Just as individuals are reconciled to God in Christ so eventually will creation. Conservation and preservation are Christian concerns.

Observation of the real world also involves people and relationships, other cultures and the built environment. Study involves posing and examining real world and everyday questions. For example, (22 November 2003), Should the baby-boomers share their wealth with generation X? Is Australia more likely to be a target for terrorism because it invaded Iraq? Should tribunals determine custody rights for separated parents? Is it right to hold the children of asylum seekers in detention centres?

Probably more than any other group in society, teachers need to embrace the discipline of study. It is study that will keep their content knowledge fresh, it is study that will ensure pedagogical decisions are appropriate and it is study that keeps them abreast of the latest changes and directions in education. Reading, talking and listening might be the basis of an early childhood education but it is the basis also for everyone who values study.

For Christian teachers, all these virtues of study are true and even more relevant as they seek, not only to know the truth but, to have others discover that truth through languages, the sciences, the arts and the humanities. The whole curriculum, not only religious studies, testifies to the creator God who was so concerned for humans that he sent his only son to take the penalty for all our sin upon himself and died on a cross so that we could have access to him.

As Christian teachers and educators we seek the truth in all things so that the nature of God might be revealed in the world. For this to happen, *study* is a discipline that we must embrace.

John Gore