Caution: Slippery When Wet

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Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
There is a tensive character in the general topic assigned to a promotion paper at Messiah College. On the one hand, faculty members are charged to explore what it means to "integrate faith and learning." On the other hand, campus educators are to investigate how such integration takes place within "a specific discipline." While we are expected to bring these two activities together, to place them side-by-side, indeed to overlap them in a single paper, they are embedded with very different assumptions and they evoke contrasting images. When I reflect on my life as a faculty member at this College I am not comfortable with either task. "Faith and learning integration" does not catch for me either the embodied character of teaching nor the dissonance of challenging students to take on strange, new ways of thinking and acting. Furthermore, the task of relating this concept to a single academic discipline suggests an instrumental, empirical realm far removed from the emotionality of learning.

I know just enough about both of these areas to be uncomfortable as I approach them once again. In my last promotion paper I wrote that faith-learning integration is akin to a hierarchical exercise which imposes a single point of view and defies debate. Shortly after writing that paper, I published another essay in the Christian Scholars Review in which I wrote on teaching, faith and the modern language classroom.¹ Frankly, I was tempted to submit that essay

¹ This essay challenged Christian Colleges to develop a multi-cultural mind instead of simply tolerating the presence of cultural diversity. I used the paradigm shift from the simple to the complex in current foreign language education as an analogy to highlight the complexity involved in attempting to achieve multi-cultural diversity within the confines of the Christian idea of faith and learning.
for this promotion review. It would make the grade, but it does not reflect the tensive character of these tasks as I understand them today. So where do we go from here?

Marget Buchmann, the educational philosopher, wrote that for teachers ultimately "uncertainty and imperfection are overtaken by a need to act." And so it with this paper. Just like teaching, the task of writing this paper is approached with all the dichotomies inherent in the act of doing it. Is teaching an art or a science? Is the integration of faith with learning an art or a science? Indeed, is such integration possible? Do teachers and students approach this task in the same manner? Do they demonstrate that they approach it in the same manner? Can multiple models for faith-learning integration coexist on a single campus?

What Are The Essentials?

One place to begin is to ask the question that all academics ask: "What is it, if anything, that the institution defines as essential for all students?" At Messiah College, we answer this question through a mission statement, a narrative of "Foundational values," and a list of College-Wide Educational Objectives. Embedded in each of these statements rests a commitment to bring faith and the academic disciplines to bear on each other, to mutually shape the other. I often wonder how students make sense of this commitment which is discussed, understood, and articulated in so many different ways by the College faculty, even within a single academic department. In my own progression through the faculty ranks I have changed my thinking in several significant ways, and I have written three completely different promotion papers. This is indicative of the challenging nature of this task.

In recent e-mail correspondence with a Messiah graduate who is completing graduate work at Dartmouth College, I asked about her experience with faith-learning integration during her undergraduate years. Laura responded:

I have thought about the faith-learning paradigm, and I don't know if it's theoretically possible, never mind practically. I definitely believe faith was integrated into learning (at Messiah), but I don't know that the two can mutually coexist. It seems that students who were highly "religious" weren't very academic, those who tended toward intellectualism were cynical about faith. After all, learning is about knowledge; faith requires belief where there isn't knowledge. It seems that either faith or learning must be diluted to co-exist. One cannot be a devout fundamentalist and an intellectual. I think the intersection of faith and learning was prefigured by the expulsion from paradise. After tasting from the tree of knowledge, one cannot remain in Eden or ignorance. Sometimes I think religion should be separated from the rest of life. Our spirituality affects every dimension of who we are, but it isn't every dimension, the same is true with the life of our minds- one component of our complex being. I enjoyed my time at Messiah, and I learned a lot from it, but I think my faith would be more stable if it hadn't been infringed upon by my studies. Maybe it would have stayed sacred if it had been separate. It became largely a deconstructive dialogue between reason and interpretation of my experience.

It's clear that during her undergraduate years Laura considered the faith-learning task. Her brief reply indicates that she had encountered the idea in many different ways, and that in both curricular and co-curricular settings she evidenced the struggle.

Laura's response is quite different from that of a second student, Todd. Todd and I met at a community meeting where he represented his employer, Dauphin Deposit Bank, and I served as a member of the local school board. After the meeting, even though I did not know he had been a Messiah student, Todd approached me to express his enthusiasm for his alma mater:

God brought me to Messiah, and my professors taught me how to live. They were godly men who were not afraid to sit down and tell me how my faith must be worked out in business. They prayed with me, they know the Bible, they made learning contracts to keep me accountable in my studies and in my devotional life. They lived the idea of faith

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2 Laura's e-mail was written in response to my lament about the subject of this paper. She responded in an "off the cuff" manner to my initial question. "Did you experience faith and learning integration at Messiah?"
and learning. It was a great experience.\footnote{Todd’s response was given without a question prompting him to talk about faith and learning integration. In his mind, he greeted a professor from his alma mater and simply affirmed the quality and substance of Christian education that he found in his time here.}

Todd has thought a lot about faith and learning, and he affirms that the College’s mission in this regard has been satisfied.

Yet the dissonance between these two points of view is interesting, if not disturbing. Did Laura and Todd attend the same college? Were they involved in the same learning enterprise? How could the faith-learning task be interpreted so differently by two students who were on this campus at the same time, with many of the same faculty? What is responsible for the disparity between these stories?

Two Overarching Assumptions

Despite the powerful contrasts between these alumni vignettes, it is evident that the students’ comments hold at least two things in common. First, the faculty who taught these students have certain convictions about God and what a world conformed to God’s wishes might look like. The faculty have made certain critical judgments about how education in the Christian college contributes to this ideal, and they have helped students to make similar judgments as well.

Second, the classroom instruction which influenced the alumni perspectives projects a point of view that organizes the educational paradigm and defines community values within the common learning environment. The students point to very different paradigms of learning which they experienced and within which learning took place. Nevertheless, each alumnus experienced teaching and learning environments in which faith was considered, even within the context of the individual academic disciplines. While the particulars of each graduate’s conclusion differ substantially, they hold in common the College’s commitment to the faith-learning integration project. And so, once again, where do we go from here?

My plan is simple: let’s consider the college learning environment to be a highway construction site.\footnote{In my way of thinking, metaphor is the substance and nature of language. Successful metaphors can help shape a reader’s unspoken beliefs into convictions that make sense. Metaphors create contexts and constitute not only the details but the structure of arguments. We should make metaphors and encourage our students to do so as well. They are hard pressed to counter and give reader’s something to hold on to long after the details of the particular argument are forgotten.} Because the context is under construction, students who enter the college need to be alerted to this fact through an invisible sign which greets them as they enter this virtual environment. Faith and learning under construction! There are other signs along the way as well. In the Freshmen Seminar students are warned. In this seminar students consider their place in the universe and discover that they are not at the very center. In an early history course students discover they must Here students learn that much of what they thought they would accomplish in this life may not happen, here they discover that what they thought was an idea original to them has, in fact, been considered by many before them. In a modern language class they encounter an uncertain roadway where the construction sign warns of Here students meet new perspectives and myriad interpretations of the world; the way others view the world, students discover; is both different and valid; sometimes, in fact, what other cultures believe makes more sense than the particular culture of the student. The introductory course in the student’s academic major carries a more hopeful sign. There is comfort here; this is a world to which the student is intuitively attracted; peers in this
One approach to faith and learning formation in the construction site is the classroom. Todd's perspective reflects the classroom. The goal of faith-learning integration in classrooms is to bring a Christ-centered discipline to the Christian choice of vocation. There is to find fulfillment in the Christian life. That way is to discover God's plan for our life, and to put that plan into action. God's plan for our life is orderly and reasonable. With Christian discipline, our mutual obligation is to learn the game plan and to follow it. In thankfulness for our salvation, we must search for the biblical plan and live by it. Accordingly, students in classrooms are taught analytic methods of Bible study, and they are encouraged to adopt careful habits of life that resonate with the biblical plan that the scriptures point out. Students learn to associate with peers and organizations that are similarly disciplined. They are warned of the excesses of all human-centered approaches or of emotional responses to God. God's power, human sinfulness, and the authority of the Bible are maximized. 

The other approach to the construction site is the classroom. Here the goal of faith-learning integration is not defined by discipline and planning, but by inclusiveness and justice. God is not understood by means of an orderly and disciplined plan. Rather, God is understood in the midst of a world full of inequalities; here the student learns that God expects these injustices to be rectified by those who have the grace to see. While there may once have

Perhaps the label most frequently associated with these type of classrooms is "Reformed" in their theology. As a non-theologian, I hesitate to push this too far, but reformed theology is associated with rational cognitive methods of inquiry. A reformed perspective sets up the ideal that the Christian tradition and/or world view must be set forth in every classroom. The real business of faith/learning integration takes place not in chapel or in the dormitories but in carefully taught theories of discipline and faith integration taught by every professor in every classroom.
been an orderly, divine plan for the world, this has been overturned by sin. Each person needs to have access to the resources that are available to experience the Kingdom of God, both in this world, and in preparation for the next one. Structures and attitudes that deprive some groups of people an equal voice in what they need are deeply sinful. Redeeming grace becomes available when prejudices are understood and structures for change are addressed. Oppression in the world means that groups of people need to for other groups of people and to listen to their points of view. Inclusion, conversation, and seeing the world through the eyes of the other are characteristic of how God’s plan is realized. Pluralism and peace, inclusiveness and justice are important themes in classrooms. Laura’s response points in the direction of the classroom.⁴

The pivotal message of these poles is not hard to identify. Both perspectives acknowledge a common commitment to faith-learning integration. Both poles include all academic disciplines in the faith-learning project. Consequently, the cluster at each pole is faith specific, not discipline specific.

The power of the each perspective is evident in daily conversation and in the tone of voice through which one side of the debate characterizes the other. Clusters of faculty, and students, speak about God’s personal plan for one’s life, about the school’s social and behavioral standards, about the spiritual warfare taking place in the world. Here the authority of

⁴Treading lightly in the theological realm again, the label most associated with these classrooms could be “Eclectic.” These classrooms resemble theologies of some Anabaptist and some Mainline churches. They also draw from secular meanings and seek to allow alternative points of view to stand. Postmodern interpretations are welcomed and celebrated. A systematic imparting of faith and learning and integration is not the goal. These professors would hope that students integrate and synthesize, borrow and make meaning in individual ways, not according to the predominant theory.

the Bible is affirmed and the meaning of Scripture is agreed upon. At the same time, clusters of faculty discuss the importance of the use of language, the plight of racism, sexism and people groups without power, and the short-sightedness of the school’s taboos. These faculty and students are also affirming the importance of the Bible, but these individuals hear many perspectives on the meaning of Scripture.

Within this single construction site, there are two crew at work, assigned to the same project, but approaching the task in two very different ways. The crew is in the remodeling business. This group sees the integration of faith learning as a repaving job, a remodeling of the road. The old is resurfaced with new. The crew bulldozes old roads, sets up detours, and creates several ways of getting from here to there.

Messiah College Under Construction

One of the interesting features of the faith-learning project at Messiah College is that the two types of classrooms, and the two types of road crews, are both embraced here. While the differences between the two groups are as bold as the differences between the perspectives of Laura and Todd, both sides are welcomed at the College. In fact, both perspectives are reflected in the College’s foundational identity documents.⁷

“Messiah College has affirmed a set of values derived from the Anabaptist, Pietist and Wesleyan traditions.” Does this mean that differing interpretations of personal piety, community, and Biblical authority will be listened to?

⁷ Messiah College catalog, pg. 5-6. These quotes are taken from the College Profile, under a section entitled Foundational Values.
"Every person is to be respected and valued, regardless of gender, race, nationality, status, or position, because each person is created in the image of God." Does this mean that all groups have equality of voice and that it is acceptable to disagree based on personal experience, academic discipline, and family heritage?

"While every community develops rules, in Christian communities such rules should always be humane, recognizing the impact they have on the lives of those affected, and should help us appreciate other's gifts and talents." Does this mean we value accountability in order to maintain an environment conducive to growth?

"We must be both creative interpreters of the world around us and creative actors in the world." Does this mean we are not sure of what will come next and we are open to debate about how to respond?

If the College's identity documents and the prevailing climate are open to both poles how does this inform the struggle? What can we learn in the faith-learning integration project to help students succeed in their attempts to fashion a faith-learning response? Does faith-learning integration parallel any other pursuits on campus?

Detour Up Ahead

Taking a detour from the faith-learning integration project into how we teach in this particular construction site points back to the two assumptions mentioned earlier. To this point we have addressed the first assumption, that each road crew rests on convictions about what a world conformed to God's wishes might look like. But the second assumption allows for another line of argument. This assumption states that each type of teaching projects a point of view that organizes the educational paradigm and defines community values within that particular environment. In this detour, the teaching paradigm is at issue. As I stated earlier, the two poles in the faith learning debate rest on distinct teaching assumptions that spill over into classroom learning that is just as controversial in practice as is the faith-learning debate.

Classrooms consider the main job of the professor in any discipline to be the person responsible to initiate students into the subject matter. Paulo Freire describes this as a "banking" approach to learning. He writes, "In the banking concept of education knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those who they consider to know nothing. Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat." In this approach, knowledge is viewed as hierarchical, externally determined and individually attained. Textbooks which include bold lettering of terms to be memorized and examinations comprised primarily of multiple-choice questions are often part of classrooms in the "banking" tradition. We have some of these at Messiah; some professors are busy depositing gold nuggets in the students' safe deposit boxes.

Conversely, classrooms consider the notion that new knowledge is constructed in every classroom. The professor enters the classroom to be changed as well as to change.

*Paulo Freire, a Brazilian working with illiterate adults, evolved a theory which combats traditional education. He would say that this banking notion views education as an instrument to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and to bring conformity to it. In his seminal volume, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" he sets forth his opposition to this traditional form of education and presents new ideas to transform and create change.
Students are part of the dialogical encounter with others and with the professor; collectively they look critically at the world and are no longer willing to be passive. The students’ world becomes transformed and knowledge is agreed to be a combination of creative insight and judgement. In Kenneth Bruffee’s terms, learning is approached as a “social convention.” Information is limited in validity and authority, and the participants in the conversation of the classroom are responsible for creating the form that makes knowledge intelligible and meaningful. Friere calls this “the practice of freedom.” This radical self-awareness which encourages sometimes result in outcomes which the professor didn’t imagine at the outset. Students, such as Laura, respond to and deconstruct the dialogue that develops in a classroom. Learning is a social, collaborative effort.

Teaching practices in these classrooms are distinctive as well. In classrooms spoken and written texts take precedence over visual images and experiential perspectives. What is said, and how the theories are constructed is of vital importance. Hard work and rationality are paramount. In classrooms transformation is the key. Diversity of view is valued, collaborative learning is encouraged, and respect is granted to students as contributors in the learning process.

Hierarchical or multi-cultural? Modern or post-modern? Exclusive or inclusive? The teaching paradigm detour seems to correlate with the issues pertinent to the faith-learning integration project. How one understands and approaches learning is parallel to how one understands and approaches faith.

Polar Opposites Revisited

In looking back on their college experience, both Laura and Todd realized they changed a great deal through their undergraduate experiences. Each came to college with a view toward and selected attitudes about faith and about learning. These were based on earlier learning experiences derived from their homes and churches, the culture in which they lived, and the classrooms in which they studied. Individually, each learned much at the college.

Yet, from the day they entered the construction site their individual struggles were shaped by multiple perspectives, not just the two poles of classrooms and classrooms. Their struggles involved conflicting messages from their parents, their home churches, the generation X culture, as well as the perspectives of the professors and the professors. Through significant exposure to each of these forces, Laura and Todd both underwent remarkable change. Some people sought to “remodel” them. Others tried to allow them to “transform” themselves. [And Laura and Todd’s parents probably hoped that they wouldn’t change at all!] In the end, after significant exposure to each side of the debate, very few
of the Lauras and the Todds who come to this particular construction site accept the whole message of any road crew. Likewise, very few students reject the message entirely either. So where does this leave us in the struggle? Are we to be encouraged with the synthesis these students seem to accomplish?

The strength of the faith-learning integration project at Messiah College is that both poles are given voice and standing within the college community. Both of the dominant views represent differing interpretations of the Christian faith, and of teaching as well, and both represent core values that may conflict. At many Christian Colleges only one of these poles is publicly acknowledged. Minority perspectives are supported through underground attempts, which are seen as hindering the dominant message. The minority point of view is often lampooned as an argument that is less intellectual or too intellectual and is labeled heresy. This official party line type of faith-learning integration is more accurately labeled faith and learning indoctrination. And it does not foster the critical thinking of a liberal arts education. The road crews at the Messiah College construction site might be polar opposites in interpretation of faith learning, but they at least acknowledge the existence of the other and give each other room to work.11

These polar opposites of the class rooms and the classrooms exist in an interesting juxtaposition. They are inverse images of one another, without the other extreme present, the poles would cease to exist. The beauty of the poles is that they must rely on each other to describe each other. In reality the polar opposites in larger debates about faith and learning are much closer in orientation than it might first appear. Both poles seek to understand God, and both sides remain insufficient in reaching that goal. We remain finite as we seek to understand the infinite. We all are seeking to do the first of those bedrock convictions mentioned above: we seek to understand what a world conformed to God's wishes might look like. There is a center, there is an Alpha and an Omega, and that is Jesus.

Nevertheless, in the faith-learning construction site we must be careful not to confuse this absolute with the claim that either pole is the embodiment of it. Faith and learning is outside of these boundaries when either side claims to be the keeper of the truth. Each end of the pole tells the other end that they are not God. And when that works well, faith-learning integration has a chance to be an open ended dialogue between reasonable people who affirm that all the corners of the kingdom are not nailed down. We are all actors in the middle of the debate. We do not have the eschaton by the tail, and God is not in a box of our own making. God may have created the world, but neither side understands all of why or how.

Inverse images have the advantage of needing each other in order to explain one side of the pole. Perhaps the most useful construction sign is the one we began with: CAUTION. As long as the concrete is not settled, as long as we keep building, the construction site is a place of value. Faith-learning integration, as well as dialogues about learning strategies and teaching effectiveness will strengthen the poles. The healthy Christian College is full of debates; new roadways are always under construction, old roadways are under improvement. We are still

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11 It is important to point out that for the sake of argument I have established two poles in the debate. It is probably somewhat more instructive to see the college as a continuum with the two poles as extremes and many professors teaching and considering faith and learning integration from many different points along the continuum between the two poles. This distribution does not negate the importance of the two poles as reference points that define all of the points along the continuum.
plagued with far too many zones. Occasionally things are shaken up with a sign, but the road crews know better than to worry too much about that. We are here for the long haul, and we see how students change and grow and synthesize throughout their four years here.

My particular approach to faith-learning integration is less important than the discussion of the construction project itself. But for the record... I began my teaching career as a classroom teacher. I think many of us do. I knew the truth, I gave students the truth, and they gave it back to me in myriad forms. It was about as much as I could handle as an initiate in the teaching world. In years since those early days in the classroom I've moved a bit on the continuum.

I began my teaching career as an urban bilingual school teacher, faced for the first time in my life by the challenges which characterize the life of the immigrant, the poor, and the forgotten. My first faith-learning integration paper reflected those struggles, that young anger, that idealism that could fight for the right and yell loudly about the cause. I saw up close and personally the damage that was done to people groups without power in this country. My subsequent integration paper was milder, almost mellow in the approach I took to the task. I reflected a bit upon the duties of life here at Messiah, and shared journal entries from over the years. My pronouncements were fewer, my indictments of other points of view were visibly missing this time, my commitments were less transparent.

Today I write as an older, perhaps middle-aged, veteran teacher. I teach, and I help others learn to teach. I am less sure now of the ways to teach with effectiveness than I've ever been. Teaching has been my life, and I am always in awe of the responsibility that the vocation brings with it. So many people look for meaning in small ways in what they do. Everything a teacher does has meaning. We relate to students in so many ways, and the weight of that responsibility hangs heavily on my soul.

One thing I am sure of: teaching is not about "covering the material." It is, rather, about "uncovering the material." The upholstery curriculum is dead. I have moved to being more concerned about student construction of argument, student speaking, student interpretation and involvement than ever before. This has pushed me more toward the classroom orientation. Students should be actively involved in both their learning and in deciding what to learn and how best to learn. Allowing students to assume part of this responsibility revolutionizes the classroom. Performance assessment of tasks takes the teacher out of the center, students quickly realize Friere's notion of the practice of freedom. They learn precisely what they see as integral to who they are. The teacher functions as guide, facilitator, and mentor. As a construction site, the classroom is messy. The entrances and exits keep changing; the traveler must read the signs each day because things are likely to be different tomorrow from how they were yesterday. There is potential for injury, this is sure; for this reason the crews wear hard hats. The upheaval continues, the work of construction is never completed—as one road is constructed, another is repaired, as one bridge is built, another mountain awaits a tunnel. May the construction of each of us on the road crews, as well as the construction itself, never ever be done.
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