

Journal of Education & Christian Belief

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Book Reviews

Jeff Astley, Leslie Francis, John Sullivan & Andrew Walker (eds.)

The Idea of a Christian University

Reviewer: Andrew Marfleet (p.89)

Catherine Gidney

*A Long Eclipse: The Liberal Protestant Establishment
and the Canadian University, 1920-1970*

Reviewer: William Katerberg (p.91)

Robert Jackson

Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality:

Issues in diversity and pedagogy

Reviewer: Trevor Cooling (p.92)

John Ippolito

Ethics and Education in Linguistically Diverse Classrooms

Reviewer: Clarence Joldersma (p.94)

Sara Wenger Shenk

Anabaptist Ways of Knowing

Reviewer: John Sullivan (p.95)

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Editorial: Reconciliation in the Classroom

RELATIONSHIPS IN THE classroom figure prominently in nearly all the articles in this issue, with a particular emphasis on the relational theme of reconciliation. Relationships are clearly a basic element of the educational process - the relationships of students to one another, to their teachers, to their parents, to the subject matter and to the persons and things represented there, to society, and to themselves all impact the ways in which teaching and learning take place and the particular outcomes that are achieved. The relationship of teacher and learner to God gives the educational process a further basic context. To state that such relationships impact education seems a truism, yet much public discussion of education takes place as if learning outcomes were controllable exclusively through the application of correct technique and rigorous testing. This issue of the journal focuses on the relational context that constantly colours classroom interactions, and asks in a variety of ways how the fact of broken relationships of various kinds and the Christian call to reconciliation might relate to our educational endeavors.

The theme of reconciliation draws educational realities into close proximity with core Christian concerns. At the heart of Christian faith are themes of forgiveness, healing, restoration, the reconciliation of persons with God and consequently with one another. Insofar as broken relationships negatively impact teaching and learning, and reconciliation can restore those relationships to health, Christian spirituality has a direct bearing on the teaching and learning process. A story recently recounted to us by James Bradley, a college mathematics educator, illustrates with startling clarity how this relational complex of broken and reconciled relationships can directly affect the learning even of something as apparently technical as mathematical reasoning. Here is the story in his own words:

“My students were leaving after the first introductory statistics class of the spring semester, but one young man stayed behind to talk. Brian was a Social Work major and told me with some conviction that he did not want to be enrolled in statistics. He did not like mathematics. He was only taking this course because it was required and every effort on his part to get the requirement waived had failed. Furthermore, he was a second semester senior and he could not graduate without completing this course. He wanted to know how much mathematical knowledge I expected him to bring to the course.

His manner intrigued me – he seemed to be challenging me but he also had warmth, openness, and an obvious intelligence I found appealing. Thinking that this would relieve his anxieties, I explained to him that basic arithmetic plus some of the skills students normally gain in a year and a half of high school algebra would suffice. He replied, ‘I’m not sure I can do those things’. I invited Brian to stop at my office the next day – I had a diagnostic test that would help the two of us identify more specifically which (if any) of the mathematics skills that are prerequisite to introductory statistics he might lack.

The test began with addition of whole numbers – problems like ‘ $6 + 8 = ?$ ’. That was the only section of the test on which Brian was consistently able to give correct answers. For example, one question asked ‘ $4 - 7 = ?$ ’. Brian wrote zero as his answer. His explanation to me was that if someone has four things and tries to take away seven, he certainly wouldn’t have any left! I replied, ‘Brian, you strike me as a very bright young man. How did you ever get through elementary school and high school with this many gaps in your understanding?’ He thought for a long moment and replied, ‘When I was in first grade, one day my teacher held my arithmetic homework up in front of the class as an example to the rest of the class of how not to do the assignment. I was so angry at her that I vowed that I would never learn mathematics for the rest of my life.’ I was stunned. I said, ‘But you had to complete arithmetic and at last some algebra to graduate from elementary and high school’. He replied, ‘I just memorized skills long enough to get through the tests, then I forgot them’. I said, ‘Brian, what your first grade teacher did to you was a terrible thing. This may sound strange to you, but you need to forgive that teacher.’ He looked at me like I was a creature from another planet. ‘I’m serious’, I said. ‘Your hurt feelings and your anger toward your first grade teacher are an obstacle to your learning. If you want to get through statistics, you’ll need to forgive her.’ ‘Well’, he replied, obviously unconvinced, ‘I’ll think about it’.

I ran into Brian at a campus social event on Saturday. I asked him, ‘So have you taken any steps toward forgiving your teacher?’ ‘Nah’, he replied, ‘I haven’t thought about it’. I was irritated and said probably too forcefully, ‘I wasn’t kidding. You’re a social work student. So you should understand the extent to which emotional wounds can shape people’s lives. I’m going to be blunt with you. If you don’t forgive that teacher, you won’t be able to pass statistics. And if you don’t pass statistics, you won’t graduate. If you won’t believe me, at least pray about it. See if God thinks this is important.’ Brian’s face looked very pale. ‘OK’, he said, ‘I’ll do that’.

Brian was at my office door when I arrived on Monday morning. He said ‘I did pray about what you said and I think you’re right. But I also think I’m going to need a tutor to help me get all that arithmetic and algebra I didn’t learn.’ ‘Of course’, I replied, ‘I’ll arrange one for you today’.

Brian began his tutoring in earnest the next day. He earned a 69 on his first statistics test. It was barely a C, but it was a passing grade. He earned a 95 on the second test and a 99, the highest grade in the class on the third test. His tutor told me that by the end of the term, he demonstrated mastery of the entire elementary school arithmetic curriculum plus a year and a half of algebra. His final exam grade was 85, primarily because he did not do as well on questions from the first third of the course as on the second and last thirds. But he finished with a B+ in the course and graduated as an Honor’s student in the Social Work program.

The semester with Brian also remains in my mind as the most amazing experience I have had in my teaching career.”

One of the striking things about this incident is that it seems likely that no amount of correctly applied techniques and strategies would have brought about the dramatic improvement in learning that was effected by forgiveness and reconciliation. Learning even in a statistics class turns out to be deeply affected by matters other than cognitive abilities and learning strategies. It is also worth pondering the likelihood that a teacher who was not attuned to the relevance of spiritual and relational concerns to the classroom, one to whom forgiveness did not occur as a relevant avenue to explore, would have failed to help this student to achieve the learning gains that he exhibited.

Such dynamics make the theme of reconciliation more than a fetching backdrop to classroom concerns, and it is this connection between reconciliation and learning that several of the articles in this issue pursue. Jan Gormas, Robert Koole and Steve Vryhof have written on learning as reconciliation and for reconciliation, and explore ways in which the theme of reconciliation could frame an overall approach to Christian education. In order to provide a further perspective on this theme we include in this issue Brian Hill’s seminal article on teaching as reconciliation, which was first published thirty years ago in our sister journal, *Journal of Christian Education*. It appears here with the kind permission of both Brian as author and the Australian Christian Forum on Education as *JCE*’s publishers. Hill’s consideration of the ways in which reconciliation could function as a basic frame through which to view various aspects of schooling complements the account of Gormas, Koole and Vryhof. David Anderson applies the theme of reconciliation and restored relationships to a particular aspect of education, as he advocates a theology of interdependence for the classroom, with particular reference to special educational needs.

Clarence Joldersma continues the relational theme as he argues that the call to teach shows up in the ethical relationship between ‘who teaches’ and ‘who is taught’ rather than primarily in what is taught and how it is taught. It is in encountering the ethical call that comes to us from the ‘face’ of the learner that we encounter the call to teach.

Finally, the remaining article in this issue is by John Sullivan. This is on preparation for leadership in faith schools and argues that there are both distinctives in faith schools and commonalities between faith schools and other schools, both of which need to be provided for in our leadership programmes.

David I. Smith & John Shortt with James Bradley