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Book Reviews

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Surviving Diversity: Religion and Democratic Life
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Whatever Happened to Religious Education?
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Editorial: Pedagogy as Method, Ecology and Home

DESPITE CONCERTED ATTEMPTS to render it thoroughly susceptible to the methods of inquiry of empirical science, teaching remains something of a mystery. As with other complex, multi-faceted human activities, we tend to get a collective grip on the process of teaching by assuming its similarity with other areas of our experience. At certain points in history and cultural space certain similarities may loom larger than others in our thinking, and in so doing subtly shape how we think about and even how we go about teaching. Consider, by way of parallel, how we think about another mystery, love. Once we start to think of love mainly as, for instance, a physical force (“He was immediately attracted to her”, “I could feel the electricity between us”), that metaphor may gradually color how we approach and experience our relationships.

A common (perhaps the most common) modern way of thinking about teaching is in terms of the language of method and technique. These terms, with their roots in natural scientific and medical inquiry, suggest that teaching is what Walter Ong calls a “routine of efficiency” (Ong, Walter J., *Ramus, method and the decay of dialogue* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1958), p.225). Methods and techniques are things that we apply to reality for the purposes of predictable control – the terms are suggestive of processes that have a straightforward cause-effect way of bringing about desired results on a regular basis. They imply processes that are repeatable (they should work in the same way in different settings and with different students) and that are largely, if not entirely, independent of contingent factors such as the personality, character or spirituality of the teacher (Smith, David I., “Spirituality and teaching methods: Uneasy bedfellows?” in Best, Ron (ed.), *Educating for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development* (London, Cassell, 2000) pp.52-67). The language of method and technique meshes effortlessly with other essentially technological language for learning, such as the common image of the mind as a computer – a complex but essentially predictable machine that processes input and produces corresponding output, both understood as forms of information. In broader terms, the language of method and technique fits smoothly with the technological mindedness of our age, discussed in this issue by Quentin Schultze.

Schultze argues that our faith in information processing as the basis of progress and our high cultural investment in communication technologies lead us to neglect important aspects of communication, especially the relationship of love to listening, the role of the Holy Spirit in communication, and the fact that we are multimedia entities – that our whole lives communicate, and not just the packets of verbal information that we consciously emit. All of this suggests that seeing teaching as the application of efficient method is too limited, that there are other, non-methodical factors at work. Picking up on an increasingly common metaphor in recent discussions of classroom processes, Schultze suggests that we could think of the classroom as an ecology (p.17).

While the term ecology still has resonances from natural science, the emphasis shifts from the physical to the biological, suggesting at least some room for unpredictability. An ecology is a highly complex environment in which a very wide array of factors constantly interact to sustain or threaten life. The overall state of an ecology is sensitive to apparently small changes in any of the various factors, and the different factors interact, meaning that the result of a particular change is hard to predict reliably. An ecology is too complex to be simply reproducible or transferable from one location to another, and different ecologies may cause different forms of life to thrive or die out. If a classroom is indeed an ecology in these senses, rather than a laboratory where methods are clinically applied, the implications for the study of teaching are potentially profound; it has been suggested recently that chaos theory (popularly familiar in the form of the famous “butterfly effect”, whereby very small and apparently irrelevant actions can have large effects on an environment through their interaction with the whole complex of environmental factors) is relevant to research in classrooms, and that older research models that try to plot the relationship between a single cause and a single

effect are thus decreasingly useful (see e.g. Larsen-Freeman, Diane, "Chaos/complexity science and second language acquisition" in *Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 18 No. 2 (1997) pp.141-165.).

Perhaps ecological images for classroom processes will allow for more open discussion of some factors that method language tended to exclude. If the classroom is a living environment in which a wide and open-ended variety of factors interact, then factors such as the spirituality, character and beliefs of the teacher or the learner and the ethos of the school and the classroom become serious candidates for examination as affecting the ecology in non-trivial ways. Whereas method talk suggests a focus on those results that are reproducible by the mechanical application of consistent means, ecological talk suggests the need for more complex and attentive forms of pedagogical care.

Two further articles in the present issue of this journal address aspects of classroom ecology. Todd Ream attempts to provoke more discussion of the impact that particular educational environments, including implicitly the pedagogical choices made by teachers, have on students' sense of self. He posits factors such as ontological security or insecurity, our sense of time, our fears and our relationship to death as significant factors in the overall shape of teaching and learning. In suggesting that the overall college environment affects students with regard to these issues, and thus develops their sense of being in healthy or unhealthy ways, Ream's article seems closer to ecological than to methodological ways of thinking about teaching.

Laura Barge is also concerned with the spirituality of students, this time with a focus on a particular area of the curriculum. She sees a variety of types of literature as addressing in different ways the numinous spaces that have to be filled with God in Christ or with some substitute, whether that be an alternative transcendent reference point such as the artistic imagination or a cosmic sense of absence as in the writings of Beckett. Once again, the underlying understanding of teaching goes beyond the relationship between particular techniques and particular learning outcomes and reaches towards the learner's sense of self, exploring how it is affected by the approaches adopted in the literature class.

Barge touches upon and suggests a step beyond the language of ecology when she points out that the problem raised by Beckett's portrayals of people "thrown into a world that is notoriously ill-suited for them" (p.49) is that in Beckett's world the environment, or "habitat" in which humans must subsist is not a "home". Applied to the classroom, this suggestion that what humans need is not just a habitat but a home connects with images of pedagogy that predate the modern preoccupation with method and technique.

Instead of seeing teaching as a technology practiced upon the learner, we might consider the implications of an image from thirteenth century France. In his history of the concept of schooling (Hamilton, D., *Towards a theory of schooling*, (Basingstoke, Falmer Press, 1989) pp.39-40), David Hamilton mentions in passing that the boys who studied at the nascent University of Paris were accommodated in hospices. Here they lived under a communal rule that, in an echo of the monastic pattern, gave shape to their daily living as well as their daily learning, their master being concerned with their spiritual as well as their intellectual formation. These hospices, in which boys both learned and lived under a communal rule, were known, among other names, as "pedagogies". This suggests a non-technological image for teaching: a pedagogy is a home, a holistic human environment in which learners undergo both intellectual and spiritual formation according to a common rule and under the guidance of a leader whose character is as relevant as professional skills. Not only data transmission and skill acquisition, but also patterns of who speaks to whom, about what, in what spirit and under what explicit or implicit group norms come more to the fore. Teaching becomes, as Parker Palmer puts it, "an act of hospitality towards the young" (Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998) p.50) and it becomes deeply relevant to ask whether the home has a nurturing spiritual climate, and not just whether it is a venue for efficient exchange of information.

These images of home and of hospitality lie at the heart of Steven Bouma-Prediger's and Brian Walsh's reflections in their contribution to this issue. They see upward mobility as a metaphor that alienates people from their local habitation and encourages vandalism of the earth. In its place, they propose that education aim instead at homemaking. Education for upward mobility is "education for wayfaring nomads who know nothing of the virtues of dwelling, the importance of roots and love for place" (p.55). Christian education should be for "the shaping and formation of Christian community"

and community must refer to “a placed people” (p.63). Education should therefore aim at homemaking and, because home without hospitality is akin to “a fortress of exclusion and self-protection” (p.67), it should also promote hospitality to the stranger.

The articles that follow are disparate in their specific interests: Bouma-Prediger and Walsh are concerned with Christian higher education in a postmodern culture; Schultze questions our understanding of educational technology and its relationship to wisdom; Barge seeks to map aspects of the relationship between literature and spirituality; Ream wonders what impact Christian colleges have on students’ sense of self. Running through all of the articles, however, is a shared sense that pedagogy is much more than a matter of discovering the most efficient technique for transferring particular information and skills. Pedagogy inevitably overflows such confines to draw in wider aspects of the selves of teachers and learners. Different pedagogies invite students into different homes that may be formative of our sense of self in different ways. What kinds of home might best allow beings who are spiritually rooted and ethically responsible, beings made in the image of God, to flourish? Putting the pedagogical question in this way gets us close to the heart of how faith might relate to the processes, and not merely the contents of education.

John Shortt & David I. Smith