



Christian Perspectives in Education

Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Fall 2007*

Article 4

November 2007

Preparing Tomorrow's Classroom Leaders: Challenges for Christian Higher Education

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Recommended Citation

Watson, Ph.D., James E. and Uecker, M.A., Joel T. (2007) "Preparing Tomorrow's Classroom Leaders: Challenges for Christian Higher Education," *Christian Perspectives in Education*, 1(1).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cpe/vol1/iss1/4>

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A list of student “attitudes and experiences” (Beloit College, 2005), associated with the entering college freshman class of 2004, was shared with a class of pre-service teachers. After having heard the list read, one student volunteered an additional item for the list. She maintained that this group of teenagers had most likely experienced only power windows when riding in cars. She made this observation after her nephew was not able to raise her car’s manual window because he could not find the push button. He did not know what the hand crank was for!

This illustration might serve as the basis for a metaphor describing what is happening in the classes of Christian institutions’ teacher education departments and, as a result, in the future classes of those who are being trained to be tomorrow’s classroom leaders. Faculties are thinking and teaching *cranks* when students are thinking and needing *push buttons*. The challenge is to teach these future teachers/leaders through transferable methods that will connect to their minds and hearts without losing the foundations of the absolute truths of God’s Word. Further, these methods must be transferable. It is no longer sufficient to teach with *cranks* in a push-button world. As understanding of the challenge of teaching and training tomorrow’s classroom leaders is sought, a clear understanding of the philosophical forces in play for the minds of students and the impact of these philosophical approaches on epistemology and pedagogy is needed.

Philosophical Background

There are many philosophies of knowledge at work in society and in educational institutions; however, there are two that predominate: modernism and postmodernism. Both of these approaches are in contrast to a biblical view of knowledge. These systems of thought are committed to certain truths about the nature of knowledge, the question of its attainability, and

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the methods for acquiring it (Grenz, 1996). Such epistemological assumptions bear directly on theories of learning and instruction (Allan, 2004; Kilgore, 2004).

Modernism is the philosophical move away from material, objective truth available outside of an individual to a view of truth that is abstract and knowable only through rationality and the senses (Gromala & Bicket, 2007). This modernist worldview appeared during the Renaissance, rose to prominence in the Enlightenment, and was the dominating influence through the late 20th century. Modernism marked a major change in the belief about how humans might acquire knowledge.

Prior to the Enlightenment, revelation and experience were the primary means to knowledge discovery because it was believed that God enabled truth about reality to be known. During the Enlightenment, knowledge was still considered accessible to the human mind, but Enlightenment thinkers rejected the revelation of God as the primary means to acquiring this knowledge. Instead, human reason and experience were believed to be the best means to understanding reality. The revelation of God was considered relevant for understanding religious experiences but omitted from disciplines like science, education, and even some theological traditions. This thinking is the dualism that Schaeffer wrote of in *Escape from Reason* (1968) and *The God Who is There* (1968b). What occurred in philosophical thinking was that humans replaced God as the starting point in the search for knowledge.

The modernist mind assumed knowledge was objective, an entity outside the knower, accessible to the human thinker and inherently good (Grenz, 1996). Because knowledge was seen as inherently good, despite removing God, the modernist thinkers still maintained that the acquisition of knowledge was a totally worthwhile undertaking. This eternal optimism in the

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knowledge capabilities of humankind rendered a view of human progress as inevitable and capable of freeing the world from its social ills. Education was viewed as a tool for equipping people with knowledge and producing students who would help eliminate problems like poverty, disease, and crime. Francis Bacon best summed up this modern notion of the great potential for knowledge in his famous phrase “knowledge is power” (Grenz, 1996, p. 59).

Postmodernism is an oft-used term that escapes a simple definition. It has been referred to as a cultural style (Payne, 2000) or an intellectual outlook (Grenz, 1996), attitude (Cosgrove, 2004), condition, or trend (Bloland, 2005). Crockett (2003) equates postmodernism with a religion lacking any religious teachings. Adding to the difficulty of defining postmodernism is the belief in the existence of several forms of postmodernism, each deriving from a particular culture (Besley, 2003). The evasiveness of a concise definition has led one author to claim that postmodernism can never be defined; it can only be described (Payne, 2000).

Most descriptions of postmodernism necessarily relate it to its predecessor, modernism. Postmodernism represents a criticism of and reaction against modernism. Specifically, postmodernism rejects the very foundations of modernism, namely its view of knowledge as objective, attainable, and inherently good. One author described postmodernism as “an expression of the experience of the total failure of the ‘modernist project’ of modern and recent history” (Davydov, 2004, p. 83). To put it simply, postmodernism is “anti-modern” (Grenz, 1996, p. 12).

Postmodernism views knowledge as centerless (Grenz, 1996). While the center of modernism was based on the belief in an objective reality, postmodernism views knowledge and reality as subjective. That is, knowledge is personally constructed. There is no overarching

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narrative for reality to govern the interpretation of the world. Postmodernism champions the end of any metanarrative (Sellers, 2003). To the postmodern mind, there is no absolute truth, only relative truth. Knowledge is constructed within a person's particular social and cultural context. In postmodern thinking, truth is no longer knowledge to be learned or discovered, but rather a preference to be created and chosen.

Postmodernism has also questioned the modern emphasis on individualism and replaced it with a preference for community. Modernism championed the right and opportunity of the individual to obtain knowledge and advance in society. This individual pursuit fostered competition between those seeking to advance themselves (Grenz, 1996). Postmodern thinkers focus on cooperation of groups as the means to solving human problems instead of competition between individuals.

In addition to rejecting the modern preference for individualism, a postmodern thinker also rejects the modern exaltation of reason and pursues a more holistic view of the person (Grenz, 1996). Other ways of knowing, like emotion and intuition, are given equal weight with human reason. The intellectual component of a person becomes less important in the postmodern tradition, and the spiritual becomes an important aspect of one's personality in the effort towards becoming a whole person (McKinney, 2003).

Postmodernism rejects the modernist principles that assert that knowledge is objective, attainable, and good. Postmodernism abandons the modern conception of knowledge and replaces it with the belief that knowledge is subjective, unattainable, and potentially good or bad. These beliefs have a direct impact on our theories of epistemology and pedagogy.

Philosophical Impact on Education

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The early days of the 21st century are seeing changes in society that are amplifying the impact of postmodern thinking. These changes include globalism, the way people think about life and work, the rapid changes in technology that have seemingly compressed time and space, and even terrorism (Bloland, 2005; Milliken, 2004). These societal shifts are challenging the manner in which education is delivered in today's higher education institutions. Recently, Cisco posted an email announcement for a "BisWise TV" episode. It stated: "Today's students need 21st-century skills to succeed. Schools must change to deliver those skills..." (Cisco Systems, personal communication, May 10, 2007). These changes represent only one of the many challenges to be faced.

Today's universities reflect the influence of the modernist view of thinking. Students are taught in a logical progression with the professor being the holder of knowledge and the student being the receiver (Bloland, 2005; Willis, 1995). This manner of thinking is evidenced in carefully ordered rows and columns of student desks dutifully focused on the center lecture spot from which the learned professor waxes eloquently. The "waxing" may be enhanced by the use of PowerPoint, but this technology is merely used to facilitate note-taking. Educators teach this way because they were taught to think and teach as modernists (Bloland, 2005).

The modernist approach to knowledge in the field of education is referred to as objectivism. According to objectivism, the chief learning outcomes in education are the discovery, mastery, production, and application of knowledge. This pursuit of new knowledge was guided by the scientific method and was championed by Rousseau and Bacon (Oelkers, 2002). The application of knowledge was thought to result in effective problem solving, personal advancement, and societal progress. Because knowledge was viewed as inherently

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good, modernist educators theorized that learners should relentlessly pursue knowledge and the power that its attainment brings to the knower. The discovery, mastery, and production of knowledge as learning outcomes were the guiding factors for teachers as they considered their roles in the learning process.

Modernist teachers have developed roles intended to facilitate these goals and transfer them to the students. The teacher is considered an expert resource for the students, capable of providing answers and direction when needed. Because of such authority, it is incumbent upon the teacher to create methods for delivering knowledge in such a way as to promote mastery.

The role of the learner in a modernist classroom is also focused on facilitating the attainment and mastery of knowledge. The learner is considered responsible for respecting the authority of the teacher as a knowledge expert and being willing to discover and receive knowledge delivered by the teacher. The learner is encouraged to ask questions in the search of answers—questions which do not challenge the expertise of the teacher. Students in modernist classrooms derive personal satisfaction from possessing the right answers and facts, and using such knowledge in real world applications. Students are able to demonstrate their mastery of knowledge when teachers assess their intellectual performance (Martin & DePison, 2005).

The learning process in the modernist classroom is viewed as a uni-directional flow of knowledge from teacher to learner. Because of this view of knowledge, the modern teacher often delivers lectures with minimal interaction with students, except for students to clarify statements or ascertain facts. Students demonstrate they learn when they show in writing, or orally, that they understand the facts and are able to make a useful application of such knowledge to life.

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Claerbaut (2004) posits that even though the university setting is still primarily based on a modernist approach of “naturalism and its relatives, reductionism and empiricism, there is a powerful strain of postmodernism running through the academic world, particularly in the student culture” (p. 58). Where is this new thinking occurring and what is changing?

Postmodernism views knowledge as uncertain, subjective, and personally constructed, rather than discovered or attained. In educational circles, the manifestation of the postmodern approach to knowledge is referred to as constructivism (Colliver, 2000; Green & Gredler, 2002; Kinchin, 2004; McInerney, 2005; Null, 2004; Riley, 2006; Wheijen, 2005).

In the postmodern educational approach of constructivism, the belief is espoused that classroom practices must change to meet the new postmodern approach to knowledge (Green & Gredler, 2002). According to constructivism, neither the teacher nor the learner truly possesses knowledge or truth (Allan, 2004; Edwards & Usher, 2001; Kilgore, 2001; Martin & DePison, 2005; Micewski, 2003). In the postmodern classroom, “the transmission of truth is a nostalgic dream” (Kilgore, 2004, p. 48). Knowledge is not an entity that can be delivered or received. Rather, knowledge is co-constructed by teacher and learner (McInerney, 2005; Null, 2004). This conceptualization of knowledge strips the teacher of any authority derived from knowledge possession and eliminates claims to mastery of the content. The result is the diminution of the expertise of the teacher. In the words of one author, postmodern pedagogy marks the “death of the teacher” (Kilgore, 2004, p. 48). The teacher now becomes the *director*.

In the postmodernist view, the inability of the teacher to master knowledge also applies to the student. Attempts to attain knowledge only result in the realization of its elusiveness. This postmodern view of knowledge leaves the teacher and learner to collaborate in their educational

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experience, creating knowledge while simultaneously, and skeptically, confessing its uncertainty (Kilgore, 2004). The goal of education no longer becomes the mastery of knowledge but rather the collective development and responsible use of it. The knowledge that is gained is one that is relative to the student's own construction of meaning.

The influences of postmodern thinking are played out in ideas that must be addressed in teacher training. This influence is reflected in the type of teachers that are expected to be produced: reflective practitioners (Willis, 1995). Since knowing completely is not attainable, as professionals, we must keep making our own intuitive interpretations (Weiss & Wesley, n.d.).

In addition, the postmodern philosophers assert that there are no common "meta-narratives" for society and culture. This assertion leads Dottin (2001) to establish that the conceptual framework created for NCATE review is "a unit's dominant meta-narrative or meta-schemata" (p. 2). There is no longer a universal reason for an education department to exist, but each must justify its own existence.

With the proposed lacking of a common meta-narrative and the assumed fact that there is no objective reality, multiculturalism has become the dominant approach because all viewpoints are to be valued equally. Claerbaut (2004) even concludes that multiculturalism is the "one universal value affirmed in postmodernism" (p. 54). The *grand narrative* of American culture is no longer to be accepted since each culture's grand narrative is equally valid (Klages, 2003). This acceptance of the grand narrative of all cultures gives rise to the call for single culture schools (Asante, 1993) and plays a role in the growing percentage of Christian students believing that there is more than one God and that differing religions are of equal authority. Within the postmodern approach, knowledge and truth are both relative.

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The postmodern view even influences the manner in which guidance is dispensed to our students. Gone are the days of “40 years and a watch.” Now, students are advised to prepare for multiple positions and, most likely, differing areas of emphasis and for a life of constant learning. All of these life events will take place in tenuous situations for health care and retirement (Bloland, 2005). Some are even offering that students plan their own curricula based on their self-reflection and that these plans are to be reconsidered on a yearly schedule (Willis, 1995).

Philosophical Impact on Christian Students

The changing nature of education is easily seen as is the fact that student culture is also changing. It is from this student culture that the next generation of classroom leaders will come; their educational, intellectual, and cultural environments are, in many ways, completely different from those who will prepare them to teach future generations (Migliazzo, 2002).

Beloit College’s annual *Mindset List* provides an indication of the difference in the life experiences of the students who populate or will populate the classrooms of Christian institutions. Just a few that reflect how they are impacted in a postmodern sense are as follows:

- They are wireless, yet always connected
- “Google” has always been a verb
- Text messaging is their email
- Mr. Rogers, not Walter Cronkite, has always been the most trusted man in America
- Brides have always worn white for a first, second, or third wedding
- They have always been able to watch wars and revolutions live on television. (Beloit

College, 2005)

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This short list portrays a student experience much different from most of today's teacher educators, different in experience and different in thought. This difference is affecting Christian students as well, especially as related to the relative nature of knowledge and truth. Smith and Denton (2005), reporting on their survey of over 3,300 youth, provide some profound findings on this relativism and their summary of these findings is very important to our understanding of the students coming to Christian college and university classrooms:

It appears that these conservative Protestant youth have not been very successfully inducted into their tradition's distinctive commitment to Christian particularity, evangelism, the need to accept all that the Bible teaches, and serious church involvement...it certainly does appear to represent a large current-day gap between what most conservative Protestant pastors and leaders want their teens to assume and believe and what many conservative Protestant teens actually do assume and believe. (p. 77)

These findings are also supported by Barna's "Third Millennium Teens" survey as reported by McDowell and Hostetler (2002).

However, these findings are not new; Schaeffer (1968) reported the beginnings of this trend in 1968:

I find that everywhere I go – both in the United States and in other countries – children of Christians are being lost to historic Christianity...They are being lost because their parents are unable to understand their children...This lack of understanding is not only on the part of individual parents, but often also churches, Christian colleges and Christian missions...We have left the next generation naked in the face of twentieth century thought by which they are surrounded. (p. 139-140)

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Students are coming to classrooms with life styles and thought lives that have been and are being influenced significantly by the relative world of truth and knowledge. This new *Christian* way of thought is best illustrated by Miller (2003) in *Blue Like Jazz*:

Everybody wants to have a conversation about truth, but there isn't any truth anymore.

The only truth is what is cool, what is on television, what protest is going on on what block, and it doesn't matter the issue; it only matters who will be there and will there be a party later and can any of us feel like we are relevant while we are at the party. (p. 121)

Those who are being prepared for tomorrow's leadership roles pose a significant challenge to those who seek to teach them from a Christian epistemology. The challenge is to maintain fidelity to a biblical worldview while at the same time reflecting on the appropriateness of pedagogical methods. To meet this challenge, Christian teacher educators must be prepared to have their worldviews clearly established so that they can choose from best practices those methods that best reflect their commitments.

A Christian Pedagogical Response

Biblical knowing incorporates the whole person: there is not a separation of the mind and the soul (Scriven, 1999; Schaeffer, 1968). Lindsey (1998) states: "...cognition is an essential part of knowing [but] it is only a portion of the whole content of knowing" (p.131). If the entire person is to be included in the educational endeavors of Christian institutions, then course offerings will need to be carefully constructed to assist students in building not only the facts as a foundation, but to develop the ability to think critically. This whole-person focus calls for classes to be offered where critical questions are allowed and encouraged. Claerbaut (2004) calls for an education that assists students to "critique, develop, and refine" (p. 308). Knowledge is not

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to be something that is taken in to give an individual power, but it is to be transformational in its impact (Lindsey, 1998). The challenge is to develop pedagogies that value both “critical rationalism and theistic authority” (Migliazzo, 2002, p. 313-314) while at the same time clearly stating to students, from a biblical perspective, why this particular pedagogical approach has been chosen.

Within this changing pedagogical world are the influences created by new technologies. These create budgeting decisions when seeking to upgrade teaching labs to reflect the classrooms in which students will teach. There will also be demands for funding as new course delivery methods are introduced. These new technologies are being used to further the postmodern view of the role of the teacher. If students can now discover and create their own realities of truth, the teacher merely needs to guide the student in his or her exploration and discovery. This guidance does not need to be given in person, but rather, through the aid of technology, can be done at a distance without the teacher ever having had *personal* contact with the student. How often is it asked by prospective students, “How much of this program can I do on-line?” This question reflects an approach to learning and also shows the new meaning of community to a generation that builds *community* through FaceBook and blogs. Christian teacher educators are challenged to define what is meant by a *community of learning* and how this idea will be conveyed by a college’s distinctive ethos to students only *known* electronically.

Concluding Ideas

In establishing a biblical epistemology as the foundation for course offerings, there is a challenge to develop a clear articulation of the biblical basis for course approaches. This challenge calls for more than just adding scripture and devotions to classes. Teacher educators

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must know why they know and be able to give clear biblical reasons for their knowing. Lindsey (1998) states: “By tacitly accepting the rationalistic Enlightenment ideas of knowledge, overlapping it with Scriptures, we are guilty of trivializing knowledge” (p. 122).

An example of beginning to make this kind of declaration is reflected in Watson (2005-2006). Here it is asserted that beyond the technical aspects of classroom assessment, it is necessary for educators to provide a biblical foundation for the reasons they assess in the manner in which they do. This foundation is to be incorporated into the manner in which assessment ideas are discussed and illustrated.

Christian college and university faculty members should be able intelligently to discuss their faith with their students. These discussions should include biblically based intellectual reasons for why they believe as they do (Claerbaut, 2004; Poe, 2004). If tomorrow's classroom leaders are to be Christian thinkers, then this type of discussion must be a vital part of all that is done in education departments and across Christian college campuses. The teacher education faculties of Christian higher education institutions must have an influence on their colleagues in other departments by espousing a biblical worldview and by conducting courses in light of that view (Watson, in press). As Claerbuat (2004) states: “...not to share the light of Christian insight across our disciplines, is to make the education we offer indistinguishable from the artificial lighting of the secular mainstream” (p. 24).

In the face of this encroaching presence, there is reason for optimism. Teacher educators who teach in Christian institutions must be firmly convinced that the truths of scripture and of a biblical worldview do not have to take a second place in the world of ideas. Christian scholars and academics are not second-class citizens in the world of scholarship. Through study, these

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individuals should be able to articulate clearly their biblical foundations, knowing that they will stand the tests of careful scrutiny. Schaeffer (1968b) stated: “It is possible to take the system the Bible teaches, put it down in the market place of the ideas of man and let it stand there and speak for itself” (p. 85). It is with this confidence that we can recognize the opportunities for dialogue afforded by postmodern thought.

Poe (2004) summarizes these opportunities by asserting that postmodern thinkers are 1. personally centered, 2. institutionally alienated, 3. epistemologically confused, and 4. spiritually impoverished. Christian teacher educators must rise to the challenge presented by postmodernism’s claims and influences on today’s Christian students. Through the means of a carefully reasoned biblical apologetic, the claims of Christianity can be made known to today’s students. To take advantage of the postmodern opportunities, it will be necessary to clearly articulate a Christian faith in a scholarly and relational fashion. The following are four suggestions for beginning to assist in the development of these opportunities.

First, teacher education departments should create conceptual frameworks that assure a clear reflection of a biblical worldview in the discussion of epistemological, pedagogical, and anthropological beliefs. The support for these beliefs must be based on scriptural principles that are shown to be reflected in the scholarly literature base. In conveying the knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to conceptual frameworks, faculties will need to be intentional in expressing to their students the biblical foundations for these ideas. Here also, it must be shown that the educational philosophies of faculties are founded in the truths of God’s Word. In addition, faculties must be intentional in sharing this foundation with their students.

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Secondly, education faculties of Christian colleges and universities must be scholars who can carefully give a reason for the hope that they have. Thinking cannot continue to be separated into that of *Athens versus Corinth*: scholarly/reasoned religious approach versus faith-only approach. The challenge is to synthesize these two approaches in a manner that gives voice to Christian scholars. The biblical worldview should not allow a separation of *head* matters from *heart* matters.

Thirdly, there needs to be a commitment to reviewing course offerings and to evaluating how programs are delivered to assure a reflection of biblical thinking rather than simply meeting a predetermined degree sequence. Course offerings may need a radical realignment in order to meet the needs presented by today's challenges. An example of the impact that can be made as a result of this process is the teacher education offerings of Columbia International University (CIU).

In facing this challenge at CIU, the education faculty eliminated the state certification aspect of the undergraduate program. At the same time, they re-created the manner in which the courses were to be offered in the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT), a program that leads to state certification recommendation. Under the new configuration, the undergraduate program leads to Association of Christian Schools International certification and now allows students to have experiences that reflect CIU's ethos and mission. Students complete practica in Christian schools and participate in student teaching placements in Christian schools around the world. The graduate MAT is a full-time program with classes offered in sequential blocks. The classes are taught by a number of professors, each focusing on his or her specialty. The schedule for classes allows for integrated field placements.

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These changes were implemented after a careful analysis of the biblical foundations and beliefs of the department. It was then substantiated that best practices reflected these biblical principles. By making these changes, the programs now more closely reflect CIU's core beliefs.

Fourthly, pedagogical techniques are to be informed by biblical principles and a biblically based anthropology. To accomplish this, careful study of the teaching techniques employed by Jesus (Brown, 2006) is suggested along with an examination of how these truths are reflected in the effective teacher research. Brain-based research will need to be related to the unity and majesty of Creation. The biblical truth of the dignity and uniqueness of each life should be affirmed, and then students will need to be assisted to develop teaching strategies to reach diverse learners.

The challenge before Christian educators is to reach present and future students in ways that meet their learning needs while at the same time maintaining Christian foundations. However, this challenge is not new. Paul, in writing to the church in Colossae, addressed a situation that is similar to the challenges faced by Christian educators seeking to train tomorrow's classroom leaders. His words speak to today's situation:

My purpose is...that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments...See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world rather than on Christ. (Col 2:2-8)

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