EMPOWERING STUDENTS FOR LEARNING AND MINISTRY

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Introduction

> *[14]For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, [15]from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. [16]I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, [17]and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. [18]I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, [19]and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.* (Ephesians 3.14-19, NRSV)

One of the primary goals of any international deliberation on ministry education is the empowerment of students for the sake of ministry. Christian religious educators do not neglect students in their preparation around issues of cultural differences, economic challenges, learning patterns, student outcomes and even the very nature of the ministry that students face. This paper, however, asks not just what teachers will do <u>for</u> students as they acquire knowledge for ministry. This project addresses what educators must do to, with and through students as they, as Christians, continue to learn to advance God's Reign. Fostering an ability to participate with the

Holy Spirit in strengthening students' ongoing comprehension of the love and fullness of God is quite a challenge for any educator. It is a challenge educators have received. One primary goal for ministry preparation is to empower students to become life-long learners throughout their ministry for their own sake and for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Assessing the situation

Before discussing how to empower students one needs to recognize why educators empower them. One deep assumption is a common agreement that knowledge is in and of itself empowering. Teaching the perennial truths of the gospel and wisdom of God testifies to the fact that educators believe that the possession of such knowledge will not only deepen students but also empower them for ministry. The content taught is crucial, the practices of the church as well as the symbols, concepts and narratives that surround the great gospel of God in Jesus Christ. Educators trust that this material will lead students into a truth that will truly set them free. This content is a primary means by which students are empowered, there can be no denial of this fact or educators subvert the very nature of their task. When such content is completely sacrificed for technique then the source and substance of ministry is always at risk, susceptible to the whims of culture and the latest fad.

Beyond the possession of new knowledge and new learning educators must also ask if there are specific practices that will support, enhance and extend the knowledge students receive. In essence, can educators teach in such a way that will empower students to continue to learn throughout their lives? Is there a way of enhancing both content and method that is faithful to tasks of ministry (and faithful to the Gospel)? Is there a way of teaching that moves students beyond the mere possession of dry, disconnected facts to the true realm of ministry? Are there approaches that will turn students into lifelong contributors to the ongoing search for new and

faithful ideas for ministry? One cannot address these issues without an understanding of our selves, of students, and of the nature of sound education.

Once a preliminary understanding is established, there are three basic approaches that empower lifelong learners by blending diverse technique and content into a unique yet consistent style. This blending often weaves three basic, interdependent, approaches: formation, discernment and transformation, into an intricate pattern or mosaic of teaching and learning. Practices within each approach may vary based upon cultural settings. The approaches encourage complementary methods that provide the balance to insure empowering education.

Preliminary Motivations for Empowerment

Before such a mosaic can be crafted educators must understand their own motivation, their calling to empower student learning. The call to empower students first proceeds under three assumptions: the calling of educators, the calling of students and finally, sound education demands teaching that empowers.

The Educator's Calling

Every administrator and teacher is called to their specific vocation. In a sense they are stewards of the grace God has given as educators and therefore called to faithfully model holiness and discipleship before their students. They are called to their task out of courage rather than fear (Palmer, 35-60). Fear results from a false belief that one must control and hide what one knows or does not know. Fear comes from an individualistic sense of deficiency in one's own abilities or knowledge. But as God's holy stewards educators learn that they are to empower students out of gratitude to God who has given the ability and "power" to teach (a humbling power at best).

Educators teach out of God's abundance rather than a sense of deficiency. This does not remove personal responsibility to learn everything possible about the very ministry they teach (humility is not an excuse for sloth). Educators, however, recognize that their worth is not determined by what they know, it is determined by the grace God gives. Educators seek to empower others by the very grace they receive.

The Students Calling

Just as Paul recognized the gift of God at work in Timothy educators must also see the call of God in the lives of students. This vision does not ignore students' responsibility to live up to the calling they receive. Students, like teachers, are called to endeavor to be everything they can before God for the sake of ministry. Educators must, however, recognize that often students are "works in progress" (growing in grace). Teachers must learn to develop an Eschatalogical vision rather than an existential ideal. Teachers must resist the tendency to existentially compare students to an "ideal" of what these people should and ought to be. Instead they must see students as the persons they are becoming as ministers and communicate this goal. Educators should tell students often that they are ministers and teachers (though they sometimes do not act like it!) so that they begin to take seriously the notion that teachers take them seriously. The key moment in all students' lives occur when they no longer think of themselves as merely students but as ministers, teachers and co-learners. Teachers and administrators hopefully will practice education is such a way as to foster this emerging identity.

Sound Educational Theory

Empowering students to learn and think on their own has long been the goal of the best theorists in education. Comenius, Pestalozzi and Montesorri are but a few names from history who took

seriously the lives and abilities of their students (Reed and Prevost, 1993). Teachers can also look to the founder of modern education in the United States, John Dewey (1938), who opposed nineteenth century forms of lecture and rote memorization. Educators can attend to the writings of Lev Vygotsky (1978) exploring the elaborate, relational, world of language and learning in Russia. Teachers can also learn from Paulo Friere's (1988) work helping peasant farmers become active creators of knowledge rather than remaining passive objects with empty minds. Education occurs best as students learn to actively participate in their own knowledge construction. Students will inevitably interact with knowledge if Jean Piaget and Jerome Bruner are correct (Yount, 1996, 73-101, 196-202). Theorists believe students' minds are designed to organize, create and synthesize information. The quality of such cognitive interaction, however, is often determined by opportunities to "exercise" one's mind and also become increasing self-aware (called meta-cognition) of one's capacity to reflect, critique and create afresh and anew strategies for ministry (Yount, 225-26). It is only when students recognize and exercise this basic ability that education becomes a life-long process rather than a formal and limited stage of life.

Belief in the three assumptions free educators called by God, free students as recipients of the same calling and sensitize all to the educational reality that empowering students enhances the quality of learning. Knowing these assumptions provide the framework for crafting an educational strategy that encourages life long learning.

Crafting an empowering education

With the three assumptions in mind, there are three basic approaches that administrators and teachers must practice to empower students to become teachers and ministers in their own right. When teachers and administrators form community, teach discernment and provide students

opportunities to transform the world, they empower students for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Providing Community.

Educators must seek ways to help students know they are becoming part of a particular learning community and also part of a particular vocation, the practice of ministry, which has a rich heritage. Often students come to educational settings out of a community that has supported them and assisted in the initial exploration of their calling. When entering ministry training they often find a new academic world that can be strange and fragmented into discrete classes and regimented schedules. These students must find both home and heritage in their learning. They should also discover an environment of accountability and grace. They should live in an environment of care and of respect.

John Westerhoff (1992, 272-78) argues that there are eight aspects of communal life that educators and administrators can organize and use to empower students in giving them a sense of identity:

1. Developing communal rites (those repetitive, symbolic and social acts which express and manifest the gospel and its implied faith and life);

2. Improving our community environment (including architectural space and elements that enhance that environment);

3. Ordering our time (particularly around the rhythm of Christian calendar as much as the academic calendar);

4. Ordering our communal life (organizing the polity, programs and economic life of the community as well as developing supportive behaviors that encourage participation);

5. Providing consistent discipline (including structured devotional practices and interpersonal guidelines within the community),

6. Encouraging social interaction (motivating as well as guiding interpersonal relations);

7. Providing role models (exemplars and mentors); and

8. Exemplifying a particular language (which name and describe Christian behavior).

Administrators and teachers must take seriously every activity, discerning if it is representative of a redemptive community. Through community practices students know that they stand together for the sake of God's kingdom

Educators and administrators must seek to develop practices that provide identity for these students. The practices can be simple and repetitive. Teachers may use regular greetings in each class or employ simple phrases such as: "The Lord be with you….and also with you" or open each class with a lit candle to signify the presence of the Holy Spirit as the true agent of learning. Teachers can also use regular prayers (the Lord's prayer), specific times (chapel and common meals), regular actions (prayer around an altar or singing at the beginning of class), and even particular dress (a shirt with a school insignia) to communicate a sense of unity without undue uniformity. When such intentional practices are used in an atmosphere of grace, not legalism, they communicate a sense of belonging. If western, industrial, educational systems have

anything to learn from other cultures it is that human autonomy cannot be pitted against community. Community must be sought both formally and non-formally. Community building activities, even sports, cannot be relegated solely to “extra” curricular activities. The more intentional educators and administrators become in creating community, the more opportunities will be available to students to embrace and identify with that community.

Being part of the Christian community and ministry has historical significance as well. Students should be reminded again and again of their calling, not merely as an obligation but as a heritage. In truth, the “apostolic tradition” is not merely about the blood-line of popes. The apostolic tradition is about the history of brave men and women who have given their lives across time to serve in the name of Jesus Christ. Students are empowered when they realize they are part of something bigger than themselves, but also something to which they contribute in the ongoing, unfolding heritage. Simple actions can create a sense of school heritage. Heritage is communicated through a group photo of each senior class; through a senior retreat where students are blessed and sent forward by their teachers; or through a senior banquet where the entire student body is invited to laugh, cry and bless those about to leave. Students become part of a tradition that they re-tradition by their presence. They are empowered as they inherit both a heritage and a destiny.

Once community is formed there are other activities that must be employed with students individually and corporately. Students must become practitioners of an ancient-yet-modern ability. The ability to critically and creatively discern their world and their ministry. Discernment is the second major task for empowering students.

Teaching Discernment.

Educators empower students by teaching them the power of discernment, to think and exercise judgment on their own. Teaching students how to critically and creatively discern the truth and the presence of God is no simple task. Discernment is a spiritual as well as an educational exercise of that requires learning how to critically understand the assumptions behind our world and while creatively imagining how our Christian resources can be applied for ministry.

Critical thinking can be a difficult task for student and teacher alike. It takes courage to release one's control of knowledge and trust the Holy Spirit to guide both faculty and student in the pursuit of truth. This type of thinking begins by asking hard questions of the historical, cultural and psychological assumptions that influence the very textbooks educators use. It means allowing students to develop questions rather than teachers always providing the answers (Kasachkoff, 1998). Teachers must make students aware both of the framework of any good argument and how often students… and their teachers… tend to miss the small inconsistencies of their lives.

Students can utilize several basic questions to help them critically understand the nature of any argument or writing. The field of journalism teaches six basic questions to ask in any situation: who, what, when, where, why and how? Educators may arrange these same questions to assist ministry students systematically investigate any subject. Such questioning can include the following when reading or writing a report:

- What general themes or topics does the argument/writing cover?
- Who is the intended audience?

- What are the major claims or assertions in the writing?
- What evidence is offered to back up these claims?
- How is the evidence arranged or ordered to support the argument?
- Is the evidence valid? (Coherent, consistent and pertinent to the claim?)
- What assumptions are made in accepting these claims?
- Why are these assumptions made?
- How would the claim change if we did not agree with the assumptions?

Students gain a deeper understanding of their subject and also of their own capabilities to think critically through these questions.

Students can partially learn about critical thinking by reading other critical thinkers. Through their writings we explore how these authors challenge assumptions, examine the evidence and demand that people provide clear, consistent and congruent arguments to back up claims to truth. Teachers can help students to be specific in their research and observations, to think logically, and to listen to their fellow students through peer review. Educators can teach students how to work together as groups to analyze case studies for information and suggest appropriate modes of action. Students can hone their skills through group discussion, role-play and active debate.

Teachers can encourage students to develop a criteria by which to judge the quality of any new information and we can challenge them be consistent with their judgments.

Self-reflection becomes a part of the critical process as well. Students must explore their own heritage and early training. They must learn how to affirm the positive aspects of their history while becoming alert to poor influences and faulty training. They must distinguish between their own “felt needs” (often desires) verses the real needs of their lives. Most of all they must become aware that thinking is an active process rather than a passive reception of knowledge.

Critical thinking, however, is not enough for quality discernment. Students must also think constructively, creatively and imaginatively of the possibilities of the future (Brookfield, 1987, 114-132). Critical thinking without a constructive, creative, balance can result in cynicism and despair. Students must appropriate alternative ways of thinking, appropriate new models and paradigms, and appropriate the resources of Christian hope.

Students can be encouraged to brainstorm, to try new ideas, to respond with creative projects rather than standardized written evaluations. Students can also reflect on how circumstances might look different in a new setting as well as create new options and outcomes for ministry. Students must feel free to see with “new eyes,” to approach any circumstance with a fresh perspective based on the possibilities given by God. Students should work in an environment that graciously challenges them to think in ways they have never thought before yet graciously allows them to fail and return for a new day.

The combination of critical and constructive thinking result in authentic discernment. Students are empowered as they possess the ability to carefully critique the answers of the past yet creatively envision the possibilities of the future. Many faculty fear often that critical

discernment can turn certain students against them. To the contrary a lack of critical and constructive thinking skills will often leave our students at the mercy of the next new teacher (and new fad) that comes along. Students given simple answers to stale questions will tacitly begin to believe that they cannot think for themselves. Their disbelief will result is a type of passive submission to any new simplistic formula for ministry by other teacher (whether good or not). Simple answers to simple questions are not sufficient (unless teachers want simple minds).

Students who practice discernment will design their own complex questions to seek and imagine new answers. They will live with a complex vision of the Kingdom of God, not swayed by simplistic-yet-false formulas for ministry. They will be ready to embrace the hard task of ministry with enough depth of knowledge and vision of God to make a difference. Discernment is a goal that empowers students to continued learning. This learning also emerges in the exercise of ministry, a transformational task that students must also experience early.

Transforming the World (through a vision of the Kingdom of God).

Along with the need to provide a formative community where students practice discernment, educators and administrators must provide opportunities for students to concretely engage and transform their world. One hopes that teaching gives students a new vision of the world under Christ. Teachers must also give students an opportunity to make this vision concrete. More than simple imagination students must begin to experience transformation in their hearts and through the activities of their hands. “Service-learning” is a popular new educational strategy in the west, where students learn through service to the community. “Servant-learning” has always been a part of ministry education, where the student exercises servant ministry as an expression and avenue of learning. This means assigning meaningful ministry work that makes a difference as students accomplish their learning goals. It means also allowing students to experience the pain

of failure on occasion and also learning to overcome failure. Learning by doing is itself transformed into transformational action through reflection on the very act of ministry. Students who become “reflective practitioners” are empowered to learn and minister in every circumstance.

Creating a transforming environment for reflective practitioners requires a number of necessary ingredients.

- There must be sufficient knowledge of both the setting and the assigned ministry tasks for the student to be faithful and effective in ministry.
- Students must constantly be reflective of their attitudes regarding ministry since self- motivation and self-reflection are crucial.
- The ministry must be authentic and sustained long enough to provide a credible experience for the student to reflect upon. The ministry experience also needs to include debriefing to insure the depth and quality of learning.

The right combination and timing of each ingredient (knowledge, attitude, and experience) is crucial in creating the opportunity for transformational learning (Kim, 1992).

The following three practices assist in the “art “of becoming a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987). First educators can assign students to create ministry covenants before entering a ministry setting. The covenant design compels students to explore their new ministry setting and think in advance how their efforts will help them reach new personal goals while making a difference in

their ministry. Students can also meet together during ministry to discuss key issues and reflect with each other on their respective roles and the progress of their ministry. Finally students can end an experience with times of self-reflection (writing a paper) and mutual discernment with their supervisors (including exit interviews and evaluations).

Arranging opportunities for authentic ministry (versus field exercises that do not help either the ministry or the student) is a major challenge in some settings. The level of commitment may vary with each institution, with the availability of ministry, and with the demands of the formal academic life. Teachers can always encourage students to remain in ministry to some degree, if only to constantly remind them why they are involved in education. In some places ministry might have to occur either within the institution or through the agency of the institution. In these circumstances students have to have enough authority in their actions to realize that they are engaged in authentic ministry. Colleges and universities often employ students to represent their institutions. The teacher or administrator can often stress to them that their vocation is that of ministry and not public relations. Singing groups become worship teams and “presentations” become moments of witness and proclamation. This different perspective of seeing students as ministers becomes crucial as they engage in ministry in the broader community.

Mature students can become accountable not only to teaching each other but to teaching the larger society. Knowledge is no longer a private exchange between the individual student and teacher. Knowledge, particularly student knowledge, becomes a resource for ministry to the world. In advance classes students can often display their learning through presentations for the larger community either through student symposiums, local workshops, or via internet presentations to persons around the world. Their learning is turned into teaching. By becoming teachers, they become better learners.

Conclusion

Education is more than the transfer of rote knowledge. There is the old folk proverb that in order to save a starving person it is better to teach them how to fish than to give them fish. However, it is not even enough to teach a person how to fish unless one can empower them with enough confidence and vision to believe in the results of their fishing. It is also not enough if persons cannot discern critically when the fishing is good and creatively how to store fish for the bad seasons. Ultimately it is of little worth for the community unless they can teach others to fish as well.

If the real goal of ministry is life-long learning, students must be empowered to embrace the idea that they can continue to learn beyond the formal academic setting. Education does not end because the students-becoming-ministers know they can continue to learn and to see their learning translate into transforming moments. Such students continue to build community, to discern the possibilities of false and true ministry, to transform themselves and their world.

As noted in the introduction the challenge for each teacher is to participate with the Holy Spirit in strengthening their students' ongoing comprehension of the love and fullness of God. Educators become a part of the generations who have done the very same thing for them. And educators and administrators become part of a heritage of ministry that extends beyond themselves into the Kingdom of God. The good news is that we do not do this alone.

> *[20]Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, [21]to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen* (Ephesians. 3:20-21, NRSV).

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