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# Clarifying "Faith-Learning Integration": Essentially Contested Concepts and the Concept-Conception Distinction

Ken Badley
*George Fox University*, kbadley1@gmail.com

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*THE LANGUAGE OF "faith-learning integration" remains popular among evangelical educators in both K–12 and higher education. Some observers suggest for theological and educational reasons that Christan educators replace integration language with other language. Even its advocates do not agree on what would count as integration. This article suggests that both the concept-conception distinction and W. B. Gallie's category of an essentially contested concept shed light on the phrase. If faith-learning integration is an essentially contested concept, or is a concept subject to conception-building, then Christian educators may never agree on what counts as a paradigm case.*

## Faith-Learning Integration: A Plethora of Meanings

At a recent conference of Christian teacher-educators, participants had the opportunity to hear—in one double session—presentations of two dramatically different understandings of faith-learning integration (Cox & Sweezy, 2008; Matthias & Wideman, 2008). The first pair of presenters described in detail an approach by which teachers were to help K–12 students integrate faith with learning by having them search Scripture for all references that included a particular word, in this case, words related to juvenile delinquency (Cox & Sweezy, 2008). The second pair of presenters described correlations they found between the personal integrity of several professors at an evangelical college and the degree to which those same professors' students believed their professors demonstrated faith-learning integration in their teaching and scholarship (Matthias & Wideman, 2008). None present missed the pointed contrast between the two presentations. Neither did anyone show surprise that Christian scholars would use the phrase "faith-learning integration" to do such different work. This lack of surprise may root itself in the simple historical reality that for decades faith-learning integration language has served radically differing Christian understandings of education. That long history of varied usage notwithstanding, some present protested that the two proposals did not describe equally good instantiations of faith-learning integration. Besides bearing the freight of these differing understandings, the phrase itself suffers from ambiguity because its three component words—*faith*, *learning*, and *integration*—all carry several potential meanings (Badley, 1994).

Christian educators have tried in various ways to implement or encourage faith-learning integration. In the sphere of campus life, many institutions require students to attend chapel or to participate in Christian service activities. Some colleges close the college library on Sundays. Many Christian schools and colleges require that their students sign lifestyle agreements regarding sexual activity and alcohol and drug use. Some school days or classes begin with devotions, a prayer, or a religious song. Some classrooms are decorated with Bible verses or posters with Christian themes. Some mount a small cross over the door. Curriculum and courses offer another venue for expressions of Christian faith. Some individuals and institutions accept or reject textbooks based on their alignment with Christian principles. In some Christian schools and colleges, portions of library books are defaced or removed if some individual or committee deems them offensive to Christian standards. Professors may craft assignments in ways that they hope will allow matters of faith and spirituality to arise naturally, an approach that some Christian educators in public settings also take. Professors and teachers certainly will develop and assess assignments in view of the Christian institution's mission. Some may draw mathematics examples from Old Testament genealogies and the reported ages of various people when their son was born and when they died.

The character and attitudes of teachers and professors offer another obvious venue for faith-learning integration. Some teachers or professors may pray for each of their students by name every day, while others believe that the greatest commandment, or the fruit of the Spirit, or the list of desirable qualities in Philippians 4:8–9 should guide all their actions throughout the day, especially their interactions with and speech about others, whether living or dead. Institutions may see their recruitment and dismissal policies, their staff/faculty development processes, and the approach they take to mission statement revision as sites where the light of faith shines on the details of education. This catalogue of practices is obviously not exhaustive; neither is it limited to those using faith-learning integration language. But such varied practice illustrates the range of work that Christian educators call on integration language to do.

A small but growing number of scholars have recently voiced objections to this popular phraseology. Some object to "faith-learning integration" on theological and educational grounds (Glanzer, 2008; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2004). Others have raised complaints about (and some have attempted to clarify) the linguistic and semantic difficulties that seem to inhere in the language itself (Badley, 1994; Hasker, 1992; Joldersma, 1996; Nelson, 1987). Three recent authors of dissertations who set out to observe faith-learning integration in the field all had to work through the still-challenging task of definition before they could engage in observation (Matthias, 2007; Miller, 2006; Millis, 2004).

Where should Christian educators turn in these circumstances? Perhaps they should follow the recent arguments of the Jacobsens and Glanzer, that a proper understanding of the Christian scholarly vocation demands other language (Glanzer, 2008; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2004)—a possibility deserving serious consideration. On the other hand, Christian educators may want to retain integration language in the hopes not only of saying more clearly what they mean but also of addressing the concerns that critics and even some advocates of the phrase

have raised. When this language is used to name competing visions of Christian education, do its users imply either that the various visions are not actually in competition or that, if they are, some have gotten faith-learning integration right and others have somehow missed the mark? Or, if Christian educators wish to retain the language, should they first agree on criteria by which they can judge between rival conceptions? I will return to these questions at the end of the paper.

In the central two sections of this paper, I review insights from two conversations as yet not considered in the faith-learning integration discussion. I do this in an attempt to clear away some of the underbrush in which those who discuss faith-learning integration seem to get entangled too frequently. The first of those conversations began with the work of Walter Gallie (1956, 1962) who posited the existence of a linguistic category that he called *essentially contested concepts*. Integration of faith and learning seems, *prima facie*, to fit Gallie's category. The second conversation, regarding what several refer to as *the concept-conception distinction*, follows the lead of social scientists, ethicists, and legal scholars such as Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls, who have argued that people add their own prescriptions and visions of what ought to be—their own conceptions—onto concepts such as democracy, justice, and education. "Faith-learning integration" appears to be exactly the kind of important language that the concept-conception distinction might help stabilize semantically.

Without a doubt, Christian educators need to continue generating new ideas about how best to carry out the high calling of Christian education, whether at the K–12, undergraduate, or graduate level. Disagreement or confusion about phrases such as "faith-learning integration" is not all deleterious if it leads Christian educators to generate new and better educational ideas. But disagreement and confusion may also consume energy that we might usefully direct elsewhere. Thus, I suggest the following as a means to help clarify some important language that, were it clarified, would facilitate continued—and possibly more fruitful—conversation and debate about our how to fulfill our God-given tasks in the world of education.

## Essentially Contested Concepts

In a paper presented in 1956 at the Aristotelian Society, W. B. Gallie suggested a new category of concept: *essentially contested concepts*. In the half-century since he presented his paper, his idea has garnered attention in law, ethics, aesthetics, political science, and several other disciplines where concepts central to the respective disciplines engender long-running arguments (Connolly, 1974; Garver, 1990; Higginbotham, 1998). To define very briefly, essentially contested concepts are those concepts that feature centrally in debates but about whose meaning the participants in those debates cannot agree. Gallie's category may aid Christian educators attempting to clarify "faith-learning integration." One might conclude from the conference session I described at the start of this article that "integration of faith and learning" is essentially contested because so many who use the phrase view other users of the same phrase as confused, if not philosophically or theologically then perhaps educationally and, at minimum, linguistically. Some

users of faith-learning integration language likely are confused, but I would like to assume in what follows that unconfused people can disagree about what constitutes faith-learning integration. In other words, if faith-learning integration fits Gallie's category, then disagreement about what does or does not count as integration will not necessarily indicate confusion of the kinds I named just above. Gallie's insight may aid Christian educators if it helps us sort through some of the linguistic confusion that often attends the use of this popular phrase. If Gallie can help clarify linguistic confusion, he may thereby create space for Christian educators to disagree without drawing the wrong conclusions about those on the other sides of the disagreements.

Gallie lists seven conditions for a concept to warrant his designation "essentially contested." First, the concept must imply appraisal or valuation; one uses the concept to signify an achievement that one values (1956, p. 125). With its connotations of wholeness and connection, and its overt morphological connection to integrity, the phrase "integration of faith and learning" meets this condition; a certain community of Christian educators considers it positive language. But two features of faith-learning integration language bear noting here. First, even the root term, *integration*, is not universally positive. Because of talk of "racial integration," for example, racists would typically consider the term negative. Second, as I have noted already, not all Christians, but some—mainly evangelicals and some fundamentalists—employ faith-learning integration language. Further, as I note in the introduction to this article, a growing number from among those communities question the continued usefulness of integration language.

At least one reader of Gallie has argued that this first condition is in fact the core of Gallie's argument: that "the major source of a concept's essential contestedness is the normative standard embodied by its criteria, [that] its rival uses express competing moral and political perspectives" (Gray, 1978, p. 392). Inasmuch as discussions of how best to bring Christian faith to bear on educational tasks are normative at their core, Gray could easily be writing specifically about faith-learning integration when he summarizes Gallie in this way. One reviewer of an early draft of this article, in fact, suggested that arguments ostensibly about faith-learning integration may be arguments about competing understandings of Christian faith itself.

Faith-learning language also meets Gallie's second condition, that the concept in question must be complex and multidimensional (p. 125). One catalogue of faith-learning integration models includes five different understandings of faith-learning integration: *incorporation* of the one into the other; *fusion* of the two; seeking *correlations* between the two; *dialogical*, where conversation is fostered between faith and scholarship; and *perspectival*, where one views and carries out one's scholarship from the standpoint of a Christian worldview or perspective (Badley, 1994). At least two categories warrant adding to that catalogue: *incarnational*, where one bears witness by living as a member of the body of Christ within the academic world (a model that different Christians in the academy will interpret in myriad ways); and *appliqué*, where one simply identifies a Bible verse to go with any lesson or theme, sometimes literally copying that verse into the lesson plan from a prescribed list. Besides pointing to these markedly different

models of faith-learning integration, we might note that a given instantiation may result intentionally or unwittingly; students often take away something not intended by the curriculum committee or by their instructor, and they likewise often do not take away that which was intended. This latter case points to yet another complexity: particular instances may demonstrate varied degrees of success. Finally, Christian educators' answers to the question, where does faith-learning integration happen? vary widely, from the curriculum, the student, or the teaching moment to the ethos and even the wider faith community. With all these variables at work, faith-learning integration obviously meets Gallie's criterion of complexity and multidimensionality.

Gallie's third condition, that different people must *initially* (emphasis his) be able to describe the concept in different ways, has obvious links to his second condition (p. 125). The conference session I describe in the introduction illustrates Gallie's condition perfectly: two teams of presenters, both using the salutary language of faith-learning integration, present quite different pictures of what counts as integration. Likewise, a reading of either the continuous stream of books about Christian higher education or the more sparse literature in which authors attempt to disambiguate "faith-learning integration" reveals wide variation in how people understand the concept in question here and the tasks of Christian scholarship (Carpenter & Shipps, 1987; Davis, 2005; Gaebelein, 1954; D. G. Hart, 2001; Heie & Wolfe, 1987; Hermann, 1985; Medhurst, 2004; Shipps, 1992).

Fourth, Gallie stipulates that a concept must be subject to alteration to suit different circumstances and that "such modification cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance" (p. 125). In a footnote, he adds that a concept must be "persistently vague." The Christian scholarship discussion, whether carried on with or without integration language, illustrates the kind of openness, vagueness, or modifiability that Gallie stipulates for a concept to fit his "essentially contested" category. When one moves from Tertullian's *Prescription against Heretics* and Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* through Erasmus's *Education of a Christian Prince* and Melanchthon's *Orations on Philosophy and Education* to the writings of Frank Gaebelein and Arthur Holmes, one sees shift upon shift in how Christian scholars have understood their vocation. The writings of Glanzer and the Jacobsens indicate further, recent modifications. Barring the outright rejection of the term for which some now call, one in fact might expect that Christians' understanding of the scholarly and educational vocation will continue to undergo modification until the eschaton. Neither I nor my readers can predict in advance what language Christians will prefer to describe their scholarly and teaching tasks in the years to come. Thus, faith-learning integration meets Gallie's fourth condition, as it did the first three; as a concept, it is essentially contested.

Gallie reminds his readers several times that these four conditions rank above the last three in his stipulated definition of essentially contested concepts. Still, Gallie's fifth condition warrants our attention, for it recognizes the public aspect of disputed concepts. On Gallie's account, members of the linguistic community who use a contested concept do so "aggressively and defensively" (p. 125), by which he means that they do so aware that others use it differently from their own

preferred usage. Gallie refuses to specify what percentage of users must use a concept in this aggressive and defensive way to satisfy his criterion. With reference to the faith-learning conversation, many users are aware that the phrase's meaning is contested and therefore that to use it implies they must "maintain" it against other uses. But many users demonstrate no awareness of contested usage; a reading of printed or online material related to Christian K–12 and higher education will reveal that many enter the faith-learning integration discussion with little overt "appreciation of the different criteria in the light of which the other parties claim to be applying the concept in question" (p. 125). Rather than speculate whether faith-learning integration satisfies Gallie's fifth criterion or explore what failure to do so might imply, I will repeat Gallie's own emphasis on the first four criteria and suggest that we leave his fifth for future study.

If faith-learning integration satisfies even Gallie's first four conditions, we may have found a partial solution to some of the confusion that often accompanies use of the phrase. On Gallie's account, disagreement about the meaning of "faith-learning integration" within the discourse of Christian scholarship and education does not indicate confusion or stupidity any more than disagreement about the meanings of evidence, beauty, or democracy indicates confusion or stupidity within the legal, artistic, or political communities. With this category of essentially contested concepts, Gallie may have given Christian educators a significant component part of a framework in which to agree to disagree about what counts as faith-learning integration.

## The Concept-Conception Distinction

We turn from Gallie's essentially contested concepts to the distinction between the concept of faith-learning integration and various people's conceptions of it. At its simplest, if "faith-learning integration" were to appear in a dictionary (which, to my knowledge, it does not), most Christian educators would likely agree with what the lexicographers and editors proffered there, so long as they kept the definition brief. That is, the phrase has a sort of core meaning roughly related to making or seeing connections between Christian faith and scholarship or education. Even at this brief length, a definition might contain stowaway ambiguities and might cause some disagreements. For example, what does *faith* mean: a body of doctrine, a way of life, something else? What does *learning* mean: a body of knowledge, a process, an undergraduate's education, a professor's work in a Christian or public university? Which sense of *integration* (of the many catalogued elsewhere) is implied? Thus, even my suggesting that "most Christian educators" could agree to a short definition may put me on thin argumentative ice.

Even if a dictionary definition of the concept of faith-learning integration were to succeed in garnering substantial agreement among Christian educators, that agreement would almost certainly not extend to the level of conceptions of integration. Scholarly dictionaries might offer more than the basic definition, noting that *integration* is a positive term, that it connects etymologically to wholeness, and so on. Parallel to those likelihoods, a dictionary of religious or Christian education might note that many in the Christian community consider

faith-learning integration a good thing (and that some do not). In this regard, I want to note that two of the most recent, major dictionaries of religious education include no article on faith-learning integration (Benson & Griffith, 1991; Cully & Cully, 1990). For my purposes, such omissions barely matter; dictionaries will not settle the faith-learning discussion, mainly because Christian educators' disagreements do not find their source in someone's having missed the etymological or lexical mark.

Those who distinguish concepts and conceptions usually do so along these lines. A concept represents or contains the agreed-upon, core meaning of a term. A conception includes layers of normative and programmatic meanings that a concept's users build onto the concept. With reference to conceptions of faith-learning integration specifically, users of the phrase specify such matters as the model of faith-learning integration they prefer, the degree to which they wish to see their preferred model realized in a given situation, what examples even count as integration of faith and learning, and, therefore, implicitly what criteria to use when making appraisals about the integration of faith and learning.

The concept *conception* is itself subject to conception-building. A few restrict it to an individual's understanding of a concept. Piaget (1960), for example, uses "conception" this way in his discussion of how children understand numbers. On his account, a child with a conception of numbers can use them correctly. The great majority using this distinction differ from Piaget by allowing—with many prescribing—that people add their own prescriptive and normative conditions to the core concept. To illustrate, the narrow conception of *conception*, applied to our question, might produce something like this: to integrate faith and learning is to seek, see, or point out connections between one's faith and what one is learning. The wider conception of a *conception* might be caught in this sentence related to the question at hand: "The whole of [scriptural] truth . . . must be related to life to be known for what it really is. So it follows that for Christian education to adopt the principle that all truth is God's truth means not only words but also deeds" (Gaebelein, 1954, p. 35). While recognizing that the current faith-learning discussion has reached a far more nuanced level now than was the case when Gaebelein's book appeared in 1954, I cite Gaebelein here to honor his having originated the use of faith-learning integration language in *The Pattern of God's Truth* over half a century ago. Obviously, this quotation does not constitute the totality of Gaebelein's conception; it catches only one feature of it. But a single feature of a specific conception illustrates my point: in defining the concept of faith-learning integration, a given dictionary might never require that deeds go along with words. Adding Gaebelein's deeds condition leads one away from the level of the concept of faith-learning integration and to the level of conceptions of faith-learning integration, the level at which one encounters various Christian educators' specific normative commitments and their visions of the good life.

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have put the concept-conception distinction to good use. Political philosopher Ronald Dworkin (1988), for example, recognizes that people attach different meanings to concepts as they respond day-to-day to various situations. For Dworkin, the task remains to identify those particular questions. In his case, they regard autonomy; in ours, the connections

between faith and learning. Another political scientist, Steven Lukes, uses the concept-conception distinction in his analysis of power (1974), arguing the view that the concept of power contains a common meaning to which all could assent, but that different people build onto that common core their conceptions of power.

John Rawls (1971) has become perhaps the best-known user of the concept-conception distinction. Like Dworkin, Lukes, and many others (Baldwin, 1997; Clarke, 1979), Rawls works within the rather straightforward distinction between the concept of justice and the many rival conceptions of it (p. 5). He then proceeds from making the distinction to promoting his own conception as that which can be defended more easily than any other conception. This move toward advocacy of a particular conception as well as several of Rawls's remarks warrant consideration by users of faith-learning integration language. First, Rawls insists that a shared or public conception of justice is necessary for society to function (p. 5). We will return briefly to this assertion with reference to integration of faith and learning in the last section of the paper, raising there the question whether Christian educators need to agree on a shared conception of faith-learning integration. Second, Rawls argues that different conceptions of justice share common elements, an assertion consistent with my description of the connection between concepts and conceptions and with the idea of a shared or public conception (p. 6). In fact, Rawls expects people to agree about somewhat detailed features of what a good conception of justice ought to accomplish within society. In requiring that those promoting rival conceptions achieve such agreement, Rawls throws out a significant challenge to Christian educators, a second matter to which we must return.

Third, Rawls does not view the human propensity toward conception-building as a weakness of concepts, and, fourth, he accepts that the concept-conception distinction "clearly . . . settles no important questions" (p. 6). Rawls's final two observations about conceptions of justice certainly connect with any attempt to understand the faith-learning integration debate. The first of these also anticipates a discussion to which we must return in the final section: Rawls believes that a conception can be judged or ranked but that doing so requires one to "take into account its wider connections" (p. 6). Finally, Rawls describes how these rival conceptions—so important to our lives together—actually arise out of worldviews. On his account,

> a complete conception . . . is more than a conception . . . it is a social ideal. . . . A social ideal in turn is connected with a conception of society, a vision of the way in which the aims and purposes of social cooperation are to be understood. The various conceptions of justice are the outgrowth of different notions of society against the backdrop of opposing views of the natural necessities and opportunities of human life. Fully to understand a conception of justice we must make explicit the conception of social cooperation from which it derives. (pp. 9-10)

Were Rawls discussing Christian education instead of justice, he could have writ-

ten these very words with reference to rival understandings of faith-learning integration.

Many others have dealt with the concept-conception distinction (Ezcurdia, 1998; H. L. A. Hart, 1961; Macia, 1998), including some who have elaborated the links between essentially contested concepts and the concept-conception distinction (Criley, 2007). Some have used the distinction with reference to the concept of integration (Ascher & Flaxman, 1993), but to my knowledge no one has attempted so far to apply it to faith-learning integration. I have explored the distinction at sufficient length here to show its possibilities for clearing up at least some of the confusion that sometimes accompanies use of the phrase "faith-learning integration."

## Conclusions

Do we need to decide if one approach—essentially contested concepts or the concept-conception distinction—offers the better solution to our question? Criley (2007), who explored the connections between these two approaches in his recent dissertation, would likely say that this decision is well beyond what our present debate requires. The two categories overlap anyway. Swanton, in fact, concludes that abstract concepts subject to conception-building are the main candidates to become essentially contested concepts (Swanton, 1995). If we take Criley and Swanton's advice, we will conclude that we have no need to choose just one analytic approach to faith-learning integration. Both essentially contested concepts and the concept-conception distinction can bring some clarity to those Christian educators who use faith-learning integration language.

With no need to choose one or the other approach then, I return, as promised, to the question of whether Christian educators should attempt to agree on criteria by which they can judge between rival conceptions of faith-learning integration. Conceptions of the connections between faith and learning find their roots deep in the soil of different individuals' and whole communities' theological and philosophical frameworks. To agree on criteria thus implies agreeing on worldviews, almost certainly an impossible task, Rawls's call notwithstanding. It seems to me that Christian educators' energies would be better spent on activities other than trying to agree on such criteria.

Still, some tasks remain. First, those who use faith-learning integration language often fail to specify the intended locus of integration. Do we envision integration of faith and learning happening in the student, in the curriculum, in the teaching moment, in the institutional ethos, or in the faith community at large? This question requires further attention. Without specifying the locus, we perhaps do not know where to focus our institutional resources and our personal effort. Second, we need clearer ways of assessing how well we have achieved faith-learning integration in specific settings. The very idea of assessing faith-learning integration may strike some as reductionistic and wrongheaded, but accrediting associations and students who pay tuition both want to know where the difference lies, and we therefore must take the assessment question seriously. Some, especially Matthias (2007) and Miller (2006), have pointed the conversation in

good directions, and we need to follow their lead by continuing the search for ways to find out if, when, how, and how well we succeed at our oft-stated goal. If we refuse to take up these last two tasks, we invite the criticism that we are simply using a slogan and, literally, mean nothing by it.

As a community, Christian educators must muster the energy to continue clarifying this important language. And we must continue creating spaces in which we can discuss our competing conceptions of education with our different viewpoints in plain sight. Discussion and new conceptions of faith-learning integration can remain a source of new life for Christian education.

## Notes

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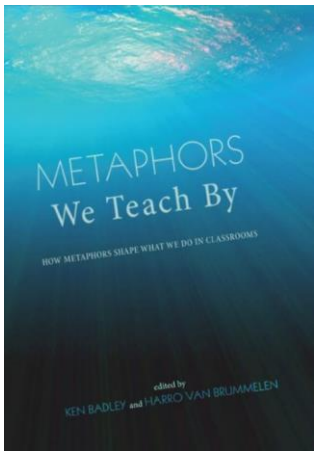


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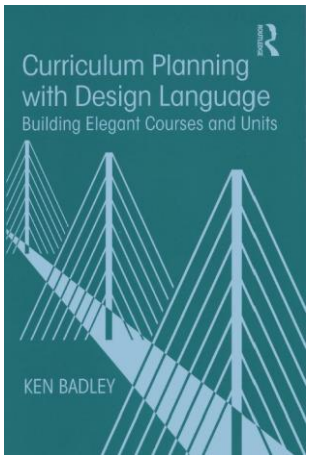


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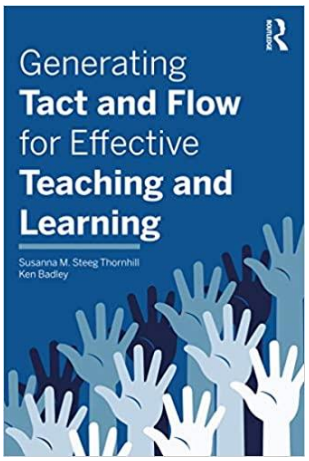
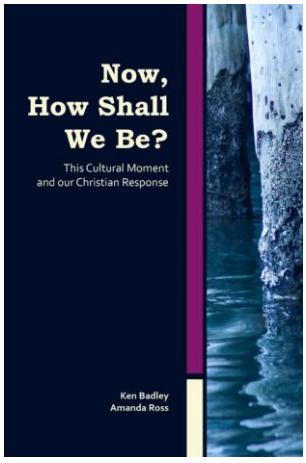
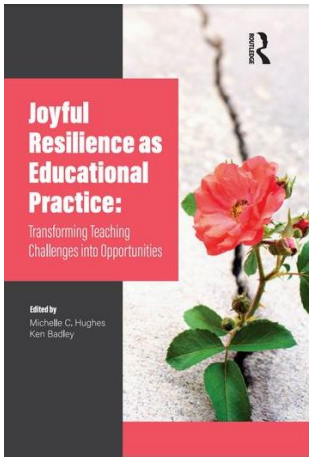


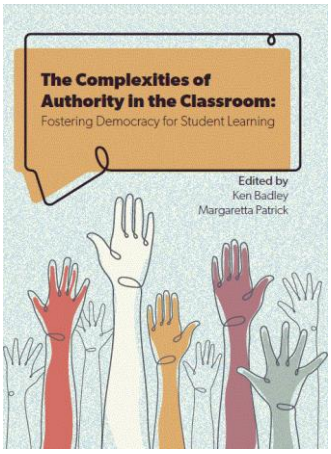

2020




2020

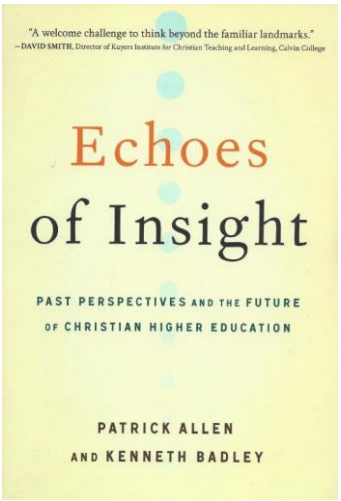



2021

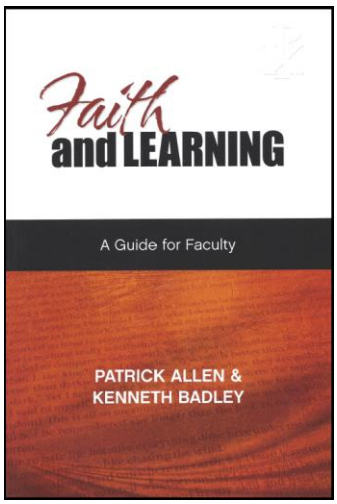



2022

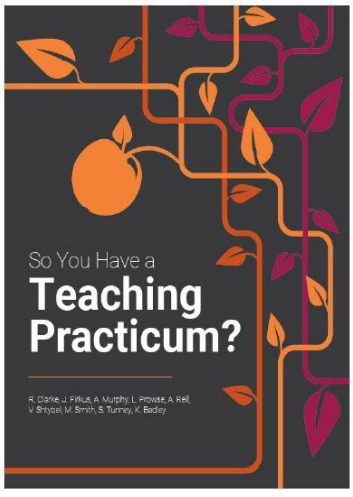
**Education titles with Kenneth Badley listed as author** **Available only on Amazon**




2014




2017




2019