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Using Student Consultants to Re-envision Teaching Christian History and Theology

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Introduction

Being a teacher involves consistently revisiting and reworking the learning experience. How best to do that is a challenge that faces all of us. A few years ago I experimented with a process to evaluate and re-envision the introductory year in Christian history and theology. A key component of the process was involving students as consultants. In this article I will provide background for the project, including the process itself and the rationale behind it. Then I will sketch out key learnings from the students' research. Finally, I will make overall reflections and observations, including changes implemented as a result of this project.

Background for the Consulting Project

The Context

George Fox Evangelical Seminary (GFES) is a multidenominational seminary serving a diverse constituency, in which many students come from faith traditions that do not require a Master of Divinity degree for ordination. In addition, entrance surveys reflect that students increasingly describe themselves as "nondenominational."

Heading into the 2000-01 school year, a number of factors converged to bring about a reevaluation of our core Christian history and theology (CHT) courses, a two-semester sequence that combines the disciplines of church history and historical theology. Personally, after five years of professional teaching, I was ready to dedicate time for a pedagogical evaluation, especially since my first years had focused predominately on content issues. Second, our faculty had decided to teach in three-hour blocks meeting weekly, instead of 90-minute sessions meeting twice a week. Lastly, new "smart" classrooms were being installed at the seminary, complete with video projectors, networked computers, VCR's, and other technological amenities. The time seemed ripe, at the very least, to "spice up" my classes with technological bells and whistles. More to the point, my previous experimenting with online resources had shown me (painfully) that making appropriate use of technology and online resources required a considerable re-imagining of the whole teaching-learning process.
The Team Process

Given these factors, I committed a part of the summer to an evaluation and revisioning process. With the help of a faculty mini-grant – one of the programs our seminary built into its use of a grant from the Lilly Endowment for Technology and Theological Education – I recruited a roundtable of students to join with me in the CHT sequence. Through that internal grant both the students and I received stipends. It is not unusual for student consultants to receive remuneration for their work, although students "usually value the intrinsic rewards more than the monetary ones" (Cox and Sorenson 2000, 103).

Each student had taken both semesters of CHT, given evidence of a certain passion for the subject matter, performed well in class, and expressed interest in making Christian history and theology a part of his or her professional ministry. As a group, the three men and one woman were slightly younger than the average GFES seminarian. Three of them had been or would be teaching assistants who hoped someday to become teachers themselves; the fourth team member was engaged in full-time pastoral ministry. Sorenson (1999) emphasizes that the best student consultants for assisting with faculty development are themselves attuned to teaching-learning practices. My student team fit that qualification, although if I went through this process again I would include a second-career student and also seek consciously to incorporate a wider array of learning styles.

This creative team met in three daylong sessions over the summer. In June, we met for one day to lay out the goals for the project, to build a sense of community, and to give specific assignments to each consultant (with job descriptions). Over a two-month period, each student was to research his or her topic, involving a total of 35-40 hours of work, and then to prepare a presentation for a final session in August. Over the two months, I checked in regularly with students via email and made myself available for one-on-one conversations. During the two-day session in August, the team heard and responded to presentations by each consultant and discussed thoroughly practical implications for the CHT sequence. It then fell to me, with the help of a student Webmaster and teaching assistants, to implement changes. To the best of my ability I wanted to empower these students; therefore, while I retained ultimate responsibility for teaching, the intention was to take student research and make concrete modifications in the structure and content of CHT 511 and 512.

The Rationale

A number of convictions motivated this project. First, I wanted students to have significant input into the structure and content of CHT. Students, in ways that normal course evaluations do not usually detect, have profound insights into how they best learn and what is relevant for their own life journey and their preparation for ministry. The lecture-discussion format I normally employed may not serve the postmodern student or address the breadth of learning styles in any given class. New smart classroom technology increased the possibilities of what could happen in the classroom. My hope – and I expressed it carefully to the team – was to incorporate both teacher-directed and learner-centered characteristics into the course (Kerka 2002).

Second, it was my hope that this process would help in my development as a teacher. Cox and Sorenson point out that in the movement from an instruction paradigm, where knowledge is transferred from expert to student, to a learning paradigm, where knowledge is jointly constructed, students can be important resources for faculty growth and development. This kind
of partnership with students is often overlooked in faculty development processes, but when used effectively it helps to value the voice of students, enhance learning for future students, and increase teacher approachability (Cox and Sorenson 2000).

Lastly, I hoped the project would serve the participants vocationally. The majority of those chosen for this undertaking were pre-Ph.D. students, hoping to become teachers themselves. In these types of consultative processes not only do teachers learn from students, but students also garner valuable insights about life as a professor and about how teachers perceive the teaching-learning process (Cox and Sorenson 2000; Morral and Tonyan 1995).

**Key Learnings from Student Research**

Each student took on one particular topic for research: postmodern learning and knowing, the historical and theological "needs" of pastoral leaders, key themes for CHT 511 (early church to the Reformation), and key themes for CHT 512 (the Reformation through the twentieth century). During our two-day session in August, students made presentations to the whole team and led discussions on the implications of their work for the CHT sequence.

*Learning in a Postmodern Context*

Loren Kerns, the first student to present, called his research "Pedagogy in a Postmodern 'Multiverse.'" Loren ended his presentation with philosophical and practical deliberations on a postmodern pedagogy that embraces democracy and diversity in the classroom, creates "space" for the "other," encourages students to learn to learn rather than to learn to memorize, transforms a "class" into a "community" where knowledge and meaning can be constructed, and engenders an inclusive, tolerant, and open environment. He talked about the needed transformation from seeing the teacher as "sage on the stage" to one who is a "guide on the side" and from a philosophical epistemology of "positivism" to one of "critical realism."

While this classic description is now almost ubiquitous, for this teacher, amazingly, it was the first time I had heard it, yet another example of how terminal degrees and ongoing research in one's field do not guarantee that one receives even basic pedagogical training. Noteworthy for me as a teacher was the fact that Loren's presentation engendered in-depth discussion and a candid assessment of the learning environment to date in CHT courses. This discussion and assessment represented the most important learning for me personally from this presentation. Hearing from adult learners what they were looking for in a classroom and what they needed from a teacher-facilitator was a philosophical "ah-ha" moment.

*Getting Feedback from the Front Lines*

From the start of this project I wanted someone on the team whose "eyes" were directed to the seminary's mission of preparing pastoral leaders, who would draw attention to how Christian history and theology impact the pastor. To that end, Kelly Cohoe, who himself is in full-time pastoral ministry, accepted the assignment of gathering data from current church and parachurch leaders. He sent surveys to forty pastors from various denominations and received twenty-two replies. He asked four questions, the most important for our purposes being: What do you consider to be the greatest issues facing the church and/or pastors today? Almost half of those
responding wanted help and support ministering and incarnating the gospel in a pluralistic, postmodern culture. The second most common issue mentioned was complacency among Christians, the third struggles with Christian teaching in a postmodern milieu, and the fourth pastoral care.

Kelly was struck by what an untapped resource church history is for approaching critical contemporary issues. He made one specific recommendation: that there be a "pastoral track" in the church history sequence, which could take place primarily online and would involve discussion of the week's topic and its relevance to pastors. To facilitate putting his fresh idea into practice, Kelly pulled together a weighty list of possible ministry-track, online discussion questions, trying to make practical application of such issues as heresy, persecution, monastic retreat from the world, the catechetical process, holiness in life, ritual and worship, and so forth.

This kind of input was invaluable in reflecting on teaching of Christian history and theology. Clive Beck points out that one implication of postmodernism is that teaching will need to become more democratic and dialogical. Students will increasingly need "significant input" in what and how they learn. The teacher will maintain roles of facilitator, motivator, and (at times) expert, but "students (and teachers) should have a major say in how their learning is structured and what content is made available to them" (Beck 1993, 9). The data received from the "front lines" of ministry, although anecdotal, provided "significant input" on issues that students who themselves are preparing for ministry need to see addressed. As a result of this information some adaptations were made in order to strengthen the pastoral thread in CHT, mostly in terms of case studies and specific online, asynchronous discussions.

A Praxis Approach to CHT

In getting ready for the 2000-01 school year I knew that the new three-hour block schedule would present both challenges and opportunities. I realized that in essence we had, over the course of two semesters, twenty-eight three-hour sessions (not counting finals). The two remaining students on the team, David Corbet and Kelly H. Jackson, were to be general "content" consultants, one specializing in CHT 511 (early church to Reformation) and the other in CHT 512 (the Reformation to the present outside English-speaking North America). Each was given the task of researching and determining fifteen to twenty of the most significant historical, theological, and/or pastoral issues with which the Church wrestled during his or her period. On each subject they were to write a one-page review that incorporated a description, its significance for the contemporary church, and a condensed bibliography (including, if possible, potential readings from primary sources). From these thirty to forty topics, our team was to discern which twenty-eight we would use, each of which would seek to integrate a historical-theological theme with pastoral or spiritual implications.

The work of these two students exceeded my expectations, both in terms of quality and in their ability to think outside the box of what they had experienced in the courses I had taught. Not only did they uncover "holes" in my presentation of Christian history and theology, but they opened the door for even further reflection. In actual fact, their work was so detailed and thorough that we were not able to come to consensus on twenty-eight topics in the time frame allotted. Since both Kelly and David were teaching assistants in the new school year we were able to work together to reconstruct and refine both courses, and then to evaluate those changes. With only four weeks to pull together changes for CHT 511, in hindsight I would recommend leaving at least a semester to implement significant alterations.
Because of David and Kelly’s work numerous changes were made. First, I began to change my thinking about how I was organizing both courses. In the past I had essentially prepared an outline of Christian history and theology, and we had lecture-discussed our way through the course. Now each topic took on a kind of life of its own, rooted usually in a lecture-discussion around a particular historical-theological issue, but also connected carefully to an area of practical application to the contemporary church. Instead of lengthier lectures on Celtic Christianity, Luther, or Wesley, I honed down those presentations and focused discussion around a narrower issue: "Celtic Christianity and Modern Deconstructionism," "Luther's Theologia Crisi: Suffering and Success," and "Wesley and the Method of Community." Utilizing ramp up and/or ramp down assignments gave added impetus to a particular topic and its application.

This topical approach to Christian history has helped address the issue of integrating Christian history with contemporary needs. Tim Stafford, in a popular article aimed at pointing out the difficulties that Christian historians have teaching "Christian" history, highlights that these historians live between two communities. Professionally these scholars must address the academy, which necessitates speaking with a painstakingly "secular" voice; at the same time, however, they are part of the church community where they worship, a community that speaks "a different language" (Stafford 2001). My goal in CHT is to create a bilingual environment in which students feel challenged both to learn history academically and rigorously and to teach history to church communities where they speak "a different language."

Reflections and Observations

To conclude I will make observations about the project in four general areas, incorporating insights and reflections from all four students who participated in the original project, now five years removed. It is my hope to show the value – in terms of pedagogy, content, and relationships – of a consultative, evaluation process with students.

First, one of the motivating factors for this project was that "smart classrooms" would be available in the new school year, allowing a greater use of technology. The practical end of the study on postmodern pedagogy was to be specific innovative methodologies, especially ones utilizing technology. And indeed, because of the consultation process with students and their specific suggestions, numerous changes were implemented. A student Webmaster and I created a class website using course management software. All coursework was coordinated through the website, including online discussions, primary reading and response papers (with links to online sources), a three-step guide for writing research papers, and even exams. To address needs of visual learners, PowerPoint support slides for the classroom were beefed up considerably.

Through trial and error, we jumped into online discussions through the course management system. When used well, online, asynchronous discussions engage a greater proportion of students than in the classroom and help build a sense of community. In reflecting on what he learned from his involvement in this project, Loren highlighted the centrality of "interaction" for postmodern learning, especially as modeled in asynchronous threaded discussions, where "each participant takes a 'leading' role and the subject becomes the 'center.'" However, we did not use the tool effectively. In particular, we failed initially to work intentionally at integrating each online discussion with a face-to-face follow-up in the classroom (Sands 2002). Our experience was that it was difficult to schedule online discussions ahead of time; they worked best when they arose out of the "flow" of classroom discussion and when
students were divided into smaller groups of four to five. Loren comments, "Creating spaces for genuine interaction is not an easy task, but when it happens (and it usually happens spontaneously), student interest in the subject and student motivation to learn increase."

In hindsight, our team needed someone focused exclusively on postmodern methodology, learning styles, and on how the smart classroom could best be utilized. Technology, in and of itself, is no panacea for improved teaching. In fact, smart classrooms can encourage the perfecting of pedagogical methods that may themselves need to be reevaluated.

My second overall observation has to do with the topical, praxis-oriented approach to CHT. The tactic of using three-hour blocks to deal with issues from Christian history and theology that have relationship to the preparation of pastors has both strengths and weaknesses. In my opinion this approach engendered greater participation in both class and online discussions. Students were able to bring their own unique experiences and expertise to bear. At times those with clearer classic academic proclivities seemed more engaged with discussion; at other times students with experience in pastoral ministry could address issues seemingly more authoritatively.

On the downside, a topical approach can be so obsessed with relevance that it misses the breadth and sweep of Christian history and theology. I became more consciously dependent on textbooks to provide the historical and theological overviews so essential to an introductory course. However, with a solid survey in the hands of students, I feel free to continue to refine the topical approach. Every year more attention is dedicated to pastoral applications that arise in the study of Christian history and theology. Kelly Cohoe remembers positively his impact on this part of the deliberations:

> It is my conviction that at the root of much of the shallowness and irrelevance of Christianity today is the lack of any historical perspective of the faith. Through this roundtable experience I was able to bring this passion for historical perspective to bear upon the course, especially in how the course attempts to make the learning of history relevant and applicable to pastors and lay persons alike.

Third, I found the process of working with students highly rewarding. The bottom line of our project was that the CHT courses were undeniably improved. The students proved courteous critics of my teaching. Their own experiences in the courses had impacted them in largely beneficial ways; still, they were not tentative to make suggestions either to my teaching or to the structure of the course where they felt the learning enterprise could be enhanced. Since two of the participants served as teaching assistants in the new school year, they had responsibility for preparing and teaching a three-hour block of their own. Teaching feedback then became mutual.

The student participants affirm the benefits they received from the experience. Kelly Cohoe appreciated "the mutual collaboration, gracious critique and support for one another," and added, "I grew as I interacted with my peers who were quite different from me in perspective and interests." David called his involvement one "of the most rewarding experiences of my seminary days." In specific he mentions, "I had to defend my thoughts and ideas before a rather critical crowd. I loved that… To be involved in the revamping, rethinking process for a whole sequence of classes gives me encouragement that students are being given the best that the field of study
has to offer." Kelly Jackson reflected that as a future teacher herself she learned "the importance of self-reflection and peer evaluation as an educator." She perceived that the project itself had "postmodern" overtones: "Participating with other students in evaluating subject matter to make it their own, as we were doing with the Church history curriculum, is a perfect example of how postmodern thinkers and learners are able to grapple with a subject and decide why it is important to their future." The experience forced Kelly "to ponder 'how' and 'why' we teach, and the ways teaching can evolve as society changes.'

My last, and perhaps central, observation is that this process led to changes within me philosophically and vocationally. To see the response of these colleagues to the presentation of "sage on the stage" versus "guide on the side" caused an internal reevaluation. It began a process of letting go of my need to plow through content and of a desire to watch for learning moments in the classroom and online. The value of building a sense of community in the classroom and online took on a much higher priority; not coincidentally, I believe, refreshments (for the whole class) began to appear in the new school year during the three-hour blocks. This improved spirit in the course led not only to more engaged and open learners, but also resulted in better course evaluations.

In closing, I want to reiterate how valuable I believe it can be to take time out to evaluate our courses in consultation with motivated student-colleagues. Pedagogy, content, and the whole teaching-learning experience can be improved when we as teachers open ourselves to involving students in the evaluation and redesign of courses. Kelly Cohoe concluded, "In our effort to strive for excellence in education, I am convinced that [this] approach...is one way to increase the effectiveness and quality of education at any level."

References


Morral, F. and Tonyan, H. 1995. Guidelines For Student Observers in Working with Faculty. Northfield, Minn.: Carleton College Learning and Teaching Center.

