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## Integrating Domains: My Work as a Christian Teacher Educator

Thomas D. Buchanan

*George Fox University*, [tbuchanan@georgefox.edu](mailto:tbuchanan@georgefox.edu)

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### Abstract

This essay on one teacher educator's integration of faith, learning, and scholarship articulates the author's exploration into what it means to be a Christian teacher educator who seeks to integrate the cognitive and the spiritual domains at a small private Christian university. Drawing from both educational and spiritual literature, the essay examines both the ideals and applications of one who seeks to be a teacher educator who is informed by the life and teachings of Jesus.

## **Integrating Domains: My Work as a Christian Teacher Educator**

Thomas D. Buchanan, George Fox University

### **Abstract**

This essay on one teacher educator's integration of faith, learning, and scholarship articulates the author's exploration into what it means to be a Christian teacher educator who seeks to integrate the cognitive and the spiritual domains at a small private Christian university. Drawing from both educational and spiritual literature, the essay examines both the ideals and applications of one who seeks to be a teacher educator who is informed by the life and teachings of Jesus.

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph. 2:8-9, NIV)*

As a teacher educator, I have spent a good deal of my life learning about learning. This seems to be part of the good work that God prepared in advance for me to do. While we are each engaged in learning on a regular basis, often effortlessly, the topic of how people learn seems to be endlessly complex. Revelations about the functions of the brain, for example, seem to reveal more about learning every day, though there are often more questions than answers (see Terry Doyle's blog at <http://learnercenteredteaching.wordpress.com>). I thrive when exploring and sharing about the complexity of learning; it is an indication that God made me for this purpose.

Learning theories abound, each with their own implications-- and I have my favorites. I believe, for example, that content is socially constructed and that we learn best in community by making connections between previous learning and new concepts, thus creating new constructs. For several years now, my favorite belief about learning has been that the learner, in order to understand and retain new content, needs

to interact with that content in meaningful ways—and, furthermore, effective teachers know how to facilitate those interactions (Marzano, 2007).

Another favorite learning theory is that social environments are essential to learning. One of the themes in my scholarship is of how families can contribute to the healthy development of learners at school. There is strong evidence that family, a central social setting, can play a powerful role in the success of learners (Epstein, 2011; Miller, Lines, Sullivan, & Hermanutz, 2013).

I champion the idea that cognitive development is inseparable from these other domains of development, and that the most effective teachers and learners give attention to the whole person. Let's consider, for a moment, the implications of this idea that cognitive development, or learning something new, is inseparably linked to other domains of development, such as the physical, the emotional, the social, or the spiritual domains. For some of these domains, the link is unmistakable. Most of us, for example, have had an experience where we had a hard time thinking because we were emotionally hijacked by some event in our lives. Many of us have also learned that we can stick with an academic project longer if we get up and take a walk once in a while, or if we keep our blood sugar from dropping too low. The cognitive and the physical domains are clearly connected.

What about the spiritual domain? How do the spiritual domain and the cognitive domain interact? Several years ago, in her book *The Soul of Education*, Kessler (2000) noted that teachers and policy makers were beginning to recognize a spiritual deficit in young people as one root of school violence. Kessler insists that it is a problem that must be addressed in schools. She encourages her readers to come to an understanding that the mind and the spirit walk hand-in-hand. The cognitive and the spiritual domains are connected.

I strongly believe that who I am, spiritually, should not, and perhaps cannot, be removed from who I am as a learner. In his book on the vocation of a Christian scholar, Hughes (2005) states,

I am a Christian. That fact places other scholars under no obligation whatsoever, but it places me under a profound obligation. Indeed, the fact must inevitably lend shape and texture to all that I do. It is simply unthinkable that I should practice my teaching and my scholarship in one corner of my life, and practice my Christian faith in the other. (p.97)

I have been committed, for many years, to live my life as an apprentice to Jesus; that is, I strive to live my life the way I believe Jesus would live if he were living my life (Willard, 1997). Thus, I ask the question, what kind of scholar would Jesus be, if he were a teacher educator at George Fox University? What kind of learner would he be, if he were living my life? It seems clear to me that Jesus would not view his work as a scholar as separate from his spiritual walk with the Father. They would be integrated.

Motivation is a key topic in the field of teaching and learning. We often ask, "What motivates people to learn?" The answer often falls in the area of self-interest; that is, I learn something because I want something. Jesus shows us, however, that there is another way.

During a residency at "The Kilns" in Oxford, England, the warden commented to me that C.S. Lewis had an "agape fund," which he used to help meet the needs of others (Lewis pronounced it Ah-ga-peh, with the accent on the "Ah"). I was reminded of a favorite high school youth leader's definition of "agape love" that has stuck with me all these years. The agape kind of love is "doing what is in the best interest of the other person, no matter what the cost to yourself, and whether you feel like it or not." While this principle must be wisely applied to allow for a sustainable life of good work, it is an effectual code for guiding both behavior and attitude.

Jesus exhibited this kind of selfless, unconditional love, and I believe that his motivation as a scholar would be equally unselfish. From his perspective, the key to the success of the learning or scholarship is the question, "Does this bring glory to God?" C.S. Lewis, in a 1939

message to Oxford students, asserted that "our merely natural activities will be accepted, if they are offered to God, even the humblest: and all of them, even the noblest, will be sinful if they are not" (Lewis, 1988, p. 373). I align with Lewis in taking seriously Paul's admonition, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (I Corinthians 10:31, NIV). For example, learning and scholarship that is inseparable from the Christian faith should be consistent with a love for God and a love for my neighbor. I should be asking myself if the fruits of the spirit are evident, not only in the product, but also in the process of learning and research.

To a great extent, this seems to me to be a matter of motives. Learning the same content can be about making money so that I can buy more stuff, or it can be about serving my neighbor. While others may choose to assign one motive or the other to my work, the true motive is between God and I. Judging the motives behind the learning of others is probably best left to God and that individual, as it is so easy to misjudge. True motives, however, should result in observable concrete outcomes. I should be facilitating a classroom environment where kindness, care, and respect for others are evident. Patience and gentleness in how we deal with each other should be the norm. Our words and activities should be consistent with high aspirations for the common good. Inevitable anxiety is skillfully addressed and managed, leading to an atmosphere of both joy and peace. Manifested unselfishness is encouraged in that participants demonstrate not only concern for their own success, but also for the success of others. These are goals worthy of attention and effort, and I seek to grow as a skilled instructor who enables these results.

I do not believe that my development into a Christ-like learner and scholar will occur simply because I will it. My own ability to develop dispositions that are consistent with the Kingdom of God is quite limited. To truly make enduring progress requires that I allow myself to be shaped by divine power. The plan for growth, then, is to continue to place myself in circumstances where I am open to being molded and shaped by God. Foster (1998) and others refer to such actions as "spiritual disciplines." Participation in spiritual disciplines can be planned for in clear and measurable ways. I like to look at it as placing myself on the potter's wheel, so that the Master Potter can shape and mold me to his

will. Placing myself on the wheel can be done by intentionally including spiritual disciplines into my daily life. Diligence in spending time reading scripture and other significant meaningful literature, making prayer a consistent habit, and finding time for silence are all examples. Others include worship and serving with my church community and with my home fellowship. I believe that God shapes me when I have conversations about things that are worthy of respect and praise. I believe I am spiritually formed when I find opportunities to anonymously give and serve others. I will do all these things with the expressed intent of allowing God to gradually grow me into the kind of teacher, learner, and scholar that Jesus would be (Willard, 1997).

Consistent times of worship, engagement, and service with my Church community and my home fellowship continue to be a strong area for me. I will continue to regularly find times for quiet and solitude. I find opportunities for generosity, but I want to continue to see further growth in my practice of giving anonymously. I am diligent in the practice of daily reading of deep and meaningful literature. My wife and I walk daily, and our conversations are rich. I want to continue to be intentional about visiting topics that are worthy of praise.

It is important to note that this approach to developing a Christ-like disposition of learning through spiritual disciplines is something that might be presented to students who are seeking ways to shape their own dispositions. Finding windows of appropriate opportunity to share about spiritual formation is an idea I want to continue to pursue in conversations with my GFU colleagues.

### **The Integration of Faith and Scholarship**

C.S. Lewis (1945) once contended that a way to defend the Christian faith in the academy is for Christian scholars to do good work in their field. It is my desire that, through my commitment to growing as a model of quality, integrity, and passion in my teaching, learning, and scholarship at a small Christian university, I am also growing as a witness to the truth and love of God. I also seek to be exemplary in how I integrate my faith with scholarship. It is my desire to be consistent with the principles being taught by Jesus as I engage in research. I want to be the kind of scholar that Jesus would be. For example, my scholarship will include a selfless commitment to improving the lot of those

who have been traditionally underserved, or who are unempowered. Motivation for my research will be out of a sincere concern for others, and not out of selfish ambition. Here, my integration of faith and scholarship becomes much like my integration with faith and teaching, or with faith and service. As my own ability and power to develop dispositions that are consistent with the Kingdom of God is limited, I will allow myself to be shaped by divine power.

I will to continue to place myself in circumstances where I am open to being molded and shaped by God. As I “Teach who I am” (Palmer, 1998), I am modeling for the learners in my classroom. They may begin to understand what it means to fully integrate the various domains of the self, including the spiritual domain. Through my example, learners may come to experience the kind of joy and meaning in learning that is possible as a disciple of Christ. By God’s grace, he is preparing me to do good work as a scholar and a teacher that he has prepared in advance for me to do.

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