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## Talking Straight in Education: Letting our Yes Mean Yes

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# Talking Straight in Education: Letting our Yes Mean Yes

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Ken Badley and Kris Molitor\*

## **Abstract**

*Educators introduce ideals in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the overall purposes of education, often by introducing new phrases or assigning new meanings to familiar language. Attracted to those ideals, other educators begin using this language, sometimes simply because it has grown popular, but without reflecting on it and without altering their educational practice, thus reducing the language and the ideals to slogans. This article offers both strategic and principial reasons for educators, and especially Christian educators, to use educational language carefully. One's colleagues and students notice when we fail to practice what we preach, landing us in an easily-visible irony. Scripture calls all of us to truth-telling and to plain speech. In view of the potential for irony and of God's norms for language use, we need to align our language use with our practice, by adjusting one or both.*

## **Introduction**

Being Christian in the academy implies many things. It has implications for what and how we conduct our work in the core components of education: curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Being Christian scholars—as opposed to simply being scholars—implies purposes and motivations for our research that differ somewhat from those of non-believing members of the academy. Among the many other implications of being Christian in the academy, we believe that it will affect our language usage, notably that we will be careful to say what we mean and to live what we claim.

Educators, like those who work in all fields of human endeavour, have our own technical language. We employ phrases such as *differentiated instruction* and *inquiry learning* as if they are natural

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language, in the same way that cabinet makers use *sacrifice fence*, theologians use *atonement*, and doctors use *presenting symptom*. Indeed, in these respective fields, the phrases we have mentioned actually cease to function as recognizable technical terms and simply work as ordinary language, offering insiders to the respective fields degrees of both precision and economy that expedite their work in those fields.

In what follows, we want to examine some of the language used by educators, focusing our efforts on the professional discipline of education. We recognize that many educators who are not professors of education use this language as well, and so we do not write as if our discussion applies only to professors of education. We are concerned especially that some educational phrases, used initially to express worthy ideals, become slogans and that educators sometimes repeat those slogans without reflection and without actually implementing practices meant to achieve the denoted ideals. We offer this small list of phrases that have achieved a sufficient level of popularity among educators in recent years that we consider them slogans. We include in our list phrases used by Christian educators in both K-12 and in higher education. Some of these phrases originated at specific times and in the work of specific individuals whose names we have noted. Others migrated into educational language from the general English lexicon and we have not traced the respective dates of their arrival.

multiple intelligences<sup>1</sup>

brain-based<sup>3</sup>

teaching for critical thinking

learning styles<sup>2</sup>

student engagement

distributed leadership<sup>4</sup>

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1 Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic, 1983), and *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York: Basic, 1999).

2 David Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984).

3 Eric Jensen, *Brain-Based Learning: The New Paradigm of Teaching* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin/SAGE, 2008).

4 James P. Spillane, Richard Halverson, and John Diamond, "Investigating School Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective," *Educational Researcher* 30 (2001): 23–28.

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|--|----------------------------------|
| inclusive classroom  | safe and caring classrooms       |
| collaborative learning   | data-driven <sup>5</sup>         |
| science-based  | reflective practice <sup>6</sup> |
| differentiated instruction <sup>7</sup>                        | inquiry learning <sup>8</sup>    |
| Christ-centred   | faith learning integration       |
| biblical integration   | student-centred                  |
| best practices   | constructive feedback            |
| direct instruction   | mastery learning <sup>9</sup>    |
| growth mindset <sup>10</sup>                                   |                                  |
| assessment for learning / assessment of learning <sup>11</sup> |                                  |
| formative assessment / summative assessment                    |                                  |

Each of the phrases appearing on our list had its origin in a specific educational context. In each case, the first user or users of these phrases envisioned a particular educational ideal. For example, Frank Gaebelein first used *faith learning integration* in 1954 while he was principal of Stony Brook School in New York state.<sup>12</sup> The vision Gaebelein meant to catch in this then-new phrase was that being Christian had everything to do with every part of the educational program of any college or school that operated in Christ's name. Gaebelein was not against chapel services and prayer (for many, the

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5 W. Popham, K. Cruse, S. Rankin, P. Sandifer, and P. Williams, "Measurement-Driven Instruction: It's on the Road," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 66, no. 9 (1985): 628-34.

6 Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic, 1983).

7 Carol Ann Tomlinson, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2005).

8 Joseph Schwab, *Inquiry, the Science Teacher, and the Educator* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960).

9 Robert A. Slavin, "Mastery Learning Reconsidered," *Review of Educational Research* 57, no. 2 (1987): 175-13.

10 Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine, 2007).

11 Sally Brown, "Assessment for Learning," *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* 1, no. 1 (2004-05): 81-89.

12 Frank Gaebelein, *The Pattern of God's Truth: The Integration of Faith and Learning* (New York: Oxford, 1954).

two paradigmatic indicators that Christian education was underway), but he was for recognizing that the history class, the biology class, and the mathematics class (and every other class) would be transformed in Christian education worthy of the name. Other educators who shared Gaebelein's vision for thoroughly and deeply Christian education began using the phrase. Six decades later it has become a slogan and—for many Christian educators—comfortable ordinary language. All the phrases on our list share that status; over time all of them have become slogans.

Many of our readers would sound an alarm if post-modern, post-structuralist, French philosophers declared that educational language is meaningless because all language is nothing more than the endless play of signifiers and that individual words and phrases bear no real relation to reality. In response to exactly those kinds of claims, alarms have been sounded since the 1980s at least, not about educational language in particular but about all language and what it may amount to. In short, many alarm-sounding people (including us) still want to believe that words can convey meanings. We admit that language has limitations and that readers and listeners rarely can determine exactly what writers and speakers mean. But we believe that all is not lost, that readers and listeners still intend meanings and that communication still remains possible. Our point here is that most professors of education would stand with us if the challenge came from the radical deconstructionists. But what if the effect were the same—if educational language were to become largely empty—not for deep philosophical reasons but simply because educators constantly adopt the latest jargon without actually adopting the practices implied by the jargon?

In the following section, we look at a few educational slogans in some depth, attempting to understand how they work, what people mean by them, why they have become popular, and what drawbacks may accompany their use. In the subsequent section, we will suggest that Scripture offers two different but overlapping guidelines for our talking: truth-telling and plain speech. In that section, we also review briefly some of the scholarly conversation about educational slogans. Before drawing our conclusions, we include several suggestions. Since our purpose is constructive, not condemnatory, we want to

encourage our readers to reflect more carefully on their speech and to adjust their speech and practice as necessary so that their yes can consistently mean yes and their no mean no.

### A Landscape Littered with Slogans

All the phrases in our list deserve scrutiny. We will examine just a few here to illustrate our concern, beginning with the now-popular *differentiated instruction*. At its simplest, differentiating requires that instructors understand the level at which their students are functioning academically (especially in their language development and capacity), and that they then respond to their students' varied needs by offering both multiple approaches to learning and a variety of means for students to demonstrate their understanding. Differentiation thus requires that instructors know their students and their students' needs and that, in response and based on that knowledge, they routinely adjust how they plan and execute instruction. Finding and welcoming alternative ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge is essential to this process.

Extensive research has demonstrated the value of “differentiating instruction,” and the phrase has now achieved the status of an educational slogan.<sup>13</sup> Despite the popularity of the phrase, however, many educators—including some who give lip service to the ideal—still give the same assignments to their whole class and offer no alternative structures or framework by which students can demonstrate their learning. In this scenario, in the three parts of what we called the core cycle of instruction—curriculum, instruction, and assessment—there is no tailoring to suit different students' needs; rather we find a one-size-fits-all mentality. We believe differentiated instruction to be a worthy ideal, one which we both attempt to realize in our

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13 See Amy Dee's doctoral dissertation, *Differentiated Instruction in the Work Sample: A Study of Preservice Teacher Practice* (Newberg, OR: George Fox University, 2009). She offers a very capable review of the literature on differentiated instruction, and draws the conclusion from her research that most pre-service teachers do not know how to implement differentiation. Also see K. Molitor's doctoral dissertation, *The Impact of Instructional Models on Implementation of Effective ELL Practices* (Newberg, OR: George Fox University, 2012). This research confirms that teacher effectiveness to differentiate instruction for ELL students improves with additional coursework centered around such instruction.

practice as teacher educators.<sup>14</sup> To our point here though, differentiated instruction has become a slogan; in some circles giving lip service to differentiated instruction is rewarded with the approbation of one's colleagues and supervisors. Yes, we (personally) know that some educators who use the slogan make no attempt to implement it (or at least have no success). We will not speculate here about the motivations and intentions of such users, but we must be clear at this point that we believe there are more layers to this usage than simple false claims or bad intentions.

Another example relates specifically to assessment. In recent years, many K-12 educators and some higher educators have begun to use the distinction between *formative assessment* and *summative assessment*, also expressed as *assessment of learning* and *assessment for learning*. Recognizably, this distinction is important. If assessment's sole purpose is to find out what students have learned (or even simply to provide a grade to the registrar) but does not influence what professors or teachers do the next day or the next year, then it is more like an autopsy than a biopsy. Those who use the summative/formative distinction are aiming at a richer, more careful kind of assessment. In this vision, we assess so that we can revisit those elements of the curriculum that students did not understand and thereby help them understand what they missed. That is important but it is only the first step. In the second step, we recalibrate how to teach this material the next time around. We ask how we could have approached those curriculum contents differently and we plan the necessary adjustments. In this account, assessment as biopsy helps the students we have this semester and, if we do the recalibrating and make the adjustments, it will help the students we teach next semester or next year. Thus, it forms; it is formative. So far, so good.

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14 If we view Paul's lists of the spiritual gifts (in Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12 and 14, and Eph. 4) analogously, we may take more seriously the idea that the students in our classes do not all come to us with the same strengths, an idea quite compatible with the work many have done on learning styles (for example, David Kolb, "Learning Styles and Disciplinary Differences," in A. W. Chickering et al. (eds.), *The Modern American College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985), 232-55), and multiple intelligences, an idea advanced by Howard Gardner in such works as *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic, 1983), and *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* (New York: Basic, 1999).

We expect that almost all our readers will agree substantively with our brief exploration of this distinction. And that wide agreement becomes central to what we want to ask about here. We know that for many educators these phrases have become natural language. Saying *formative assessment* is as natural to us and those in the circles in which we work as saying *enjoy the weekend* is for most people. But, like our readers, we know of people who work with this assessment language while failing to notice that they themselves mainly—or even only—use summative assessment. They neither identify for themselves nor make clear to their students their students’ strengths and weaknesses in a particular area in order to pinpoint areas for focused effort. They do not review with their students to help the stragglers catch up. They do not revise their tests or assignments before giving them again. And they do not revise their curriculum or instruction before the next time around. In short, they use the phrase without reflection and without a set of practices meant to achieve the ideal. For them, it is empty verbiage. Meanwhile, others for whom formative assessment is a key part of their vision for continuous improvement of instruction also use the phrase. They do so because it catches part of their very understanding of education. That different people use the same phrase but have such different practices is, for us, part of what makes slogans so complex and interesting.

This brief discussion of assessment connects to another popular slogan: *data-driven instruction*. We have claimed that effective instruction requires both formative and summative assessments. To put it simply, if educators or a whole college engage in mid- to long-term assessment and they keep accurate records, they will end up with a body of data. Such data can be used to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of individual instructors and of whole institutions, leading to strategies for improvement. Used rightly, assessment facilitates analysis and leads to action. Used rightly, data-driven (or as some put it, *data-informed*) policies and data-driven change can benefit our institutions and ultimately our students. No wonder that the phrase has become a slogan!

However, data are not always used in ways that increase human flourishing. Used wrongly, data-driven policies can have the opposite effect than what is intended. In the United States, K-12 educa-



tors have come to dread what new uses for data policy-makers will mandate next. The *No Child Left Behind* Federal Mandate currently requires the use of data to distribute school improvement grant funds to those schools demonstrating the lowest achievement scores. However, in order to receive such funding, districts must choose one of four options: school closure, restart, transformation, or turnaround, each having severe ramifications for schools and staff members. For example, the turnaround model requires schools to replace the administrator and 50% of the staff.<sup>15</sup> In Britain, funding of public universities has, for a decade already, been based partly on research output as described in the Research Excellence Framework (using a formula involving department-by-department page counts, prestige of publication venues, and citation frequencies).<sup>16</sup> With that system well in place, Britain is proposing a similar Teaching Excellence Framework in its Higher Education White Paper.<sup>17</sup> This data-driven scheme will allow those universities receiving higher ratings of students' university experience to charge higher tuition.

Thus, data can be used for good or ill. But as we note in our discussion of the logic of slogans in the next section, slogans have the power to limit or even shut down reflection. Data-driven may function that way. Who can argue against a plan or policy that is driven by data? It sounds so scientific. On the other hand, we need data about our students' progress and, implicitly, about our teaching. Funding agencies or tenure-promotion committees need data to make

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15 *Federal Funding and the Four Turnaround Models — The School Turnaround Field Guide*; online: <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/federal-funding-school-turnaround-field-guide.aspx> (Date accessed Dec. 15, 2016).

16 Department for Employment and Learning, Government of the UK (London, 2014); online: <http://www.ref.ac.uk/> (Date accessed Dec. 15, 2016).

17 Department for Business Innovation and Skills, *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (London: Government of the UK, 2016); online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-white-paper>. Commentary on this initiative is available in British newspapers. A May 16, 2016 article, "Higher Education White Paper: Success as a Knowledge Economy," from the *Times Higher Education Supplement* is a good starting point; available online: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/higher-education-white-paper-success-knowledge-economy> (Date accessed Dec. 15, 2016).

important decisions about the work of professors. The stakes are high.

We end this section with a brief exploration of the slogan *best practices*. We have tried to imagine a faculty meeting, dean's report, or college brochure that used the phrase *second-best practices*. Perhaps the next line could be along the lines of "... where good enough is good enough." Our point is that the language offers no handy phrase expressing an alternative ideal; of course we want to follow best practices. The difficulty we see with this phrase is that some educators who simply do not teach well use the phrase in ways that indicate a lack of reflection on their own practice. To be charitable, perhaps their practices are the best practices they know of and they use the phrase innocently, albeit somewhat misleadingly. This charge could be laid against users of many of the items on the list with which we began this article. For that reason, we will now make a brief but important excursus into the logic of slogans.

Without opening up any more examples for inspection, we will conclude this section, first by summarizing and then by pointing to three possible ironies. First, we summarize. These phrases catch important ideals but once they become slogans, they gain the power to hide things from their own users (and possibly from others). Educators, and we include ourselves here, may sometimes be guilty of careless language use, or talking someone else's walk. In our view, the key lies in implementation. If educators are going to use a phrase, their practice should match. If educators say they are doing something, this something should be evident to students, to colleagues, and to supervisors.

Second, we note two ironies in which such educators may trap themselves. The first of these ironies is that among all professors, professors of education tend to be the dominant users of most of the phrases on our list and especially of those we examined in detail. That is not itself problematic. It is problematic—and highly ironic—if education professors do not themselves practice what they teach in their courses. On some college and university campuses, education professors take some pride in being the ones who understand teaching better; after all, so their thinking goes, they study good teaching professionally and they know its characteristics. They

draw from a broad repertoire of methods rather than simply transferring the contents of their hard drive onto students' hard drives by the most inefficient means possible: lecturing. They assume that the campus teaching-learning committee or the teaching development centre should take their advice seriously. Ignoring those assumptions for the moment, we (the authors) see this irony driven home regularly at education conferences where, in session after session, presenters—mostly education professors—use direct instruction, ignoring the broad repertoire they apparently have at their disposal and presumably tell their education students they need to use in their classrooms.<sup>18</sup>

The second, and perhaps more painful irony is this: education students see their professors using direct instruction despite regularly advocating the use of alternative methods. But given the asymmetrical power relationship between our students and ourselves, they do not say anything (perhaps pointing up another irony, if the class where they hear about but do not see formative assessment is also a class where they hear about *distributed authority*). In a classroom where authority and leadership are truly shared among professor and students, students should be able to register their concern about professorial overuse of direct instruction.

With all these ironies in the fire, one might suspect that as education professors we would want to bring our performance up to our advertised standard, to walk our own talk. However, rather than to seem to dish out guilt, we want to frame this usage in the scholarly discussion of slogans as well as view it in light of two related biblical principles.

## **Framing Unreflective Usage**

### *Slogans*

Slogans present a conundrum to anyone who, in the name of Christ, would call for plain speech. The noun, *slogan* often explicitly

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<sup>18</sup> We know many education professors who are outstanding teachers, but we call on our education colleagues to recognize that outstanding teaching can occur in any corner of the campus. Members of The Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (whose purpose is to examine and improve instruction in higher education, <https://www.stlhe.ca/>), for example, represent all academic fields.

or implicitly takes the adjective *empty*; that is, its connotations tend toward the negative. The word took on its negative connotations over time, in part because of ubiquitous advertising. We know that the internet package the other company offers will not be *blazing fast*. We know that the airline ticket advertised on the side of our Facebook screen will not really be *80% off*. And we know that the click-bait headlines at the bottom of a news screen are called click-bait for a reason; number 17 will not really *blow you away* (regardless of the number of exclamation points). In a world—and especially a digital world—where we assume that truth is in short supply, what do we do when we see that key technical terms from our field have become slogans? We actually need these terms because they offer us precision and economy for our specialized work. If they become slogans do they become empty? Do they lose their meaning and become useless to us for our work?

From the 1960s through the 1980s many philosophers of education focused on educational language, using the tools of linguistic analysis to clarify the meanings of educational terms.<sup>19</sup> For our purposes here, the fruit of this effort includes two landmark discussions of educational slogans.<sup>20</sup> The essence of those discussions is somewhat liberating for educators who have seen important technical concepts become slogans. But those discussions are also cautionary.

On the accounts of the philosophers of education, slogans still convey meaning despite their status as slogans. They achieve their status in the first place because wide numbers of people are attracted to a particular vision. After all, who could be against formative assessment, faith and learning integration, or 80% savings on airline

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19 Linguistic philosophy of education rooted itself in analytic philosophy generally, following on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, especially the *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953). R. S. Peters and P. H. Hirst were major British figures of this movement and Paul B. Komisar (whose work we use here) the best-known American.

20 B. P. Komisar and J. E. McClellan, “The Logic of Slogans,” in *Language and Concepts in Education*, ed. B. O. Smith and R. H. Ennis (Chicago: Rand-McNally, 1961), 195-214; I. Scheffler, “Educational Slogans,” in *Philosophical Essays on Teaching*, ed. B. Bandman and R. S. Guttchen (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1969), 107-16. More recent works on slogans continue to appear but these two truly are the landmarks in this field.

tickets? Our brief retelling of Gaebelein's use of *faith-learning integration* illustrates this point well. In the decade following World War II, with American evangelicals wanting to realize a wider cultural vision, one educator expressed the view that Christian education should imply much more than chapel services and prayer at the start of classes; it should transform curriculum and instruction. Other educators who agreed with Gaebelein latched onto the phrase. At the time of our writing, it is a slogan, used both by people who still share what Gaebelein envisioned and by people who have no wider vision for a cultural embrace and are quite content to glue a Bible verse onto any lesson and call it integration. Arguably, those with no broad or deep integrative vision could be said not only to use the phrase but to misuse it. To them, we could argue that it is nothing but a slogan, an empty slogan. But such use or misuse does not imply that the phrase has lost its meaning for those with a thorough and deep Christian vision for education. Despite its status as a slogan, the phrase still conveys meaning. This adds complexity to the question of using in-house, technical language that has reached slogan status. As we will note when we make suggestions for speech and practice, the ways slogans function in actual speech may require us to query their users as to their implied meanings and their practices. Still, with that caution in place, we want to defend phrases that have become slogans for the very reason that so many people have embraced the vision of the person or persons who used the phrases in the first place.

However, the good news on slogans comes with bad news. A slogan (*Christ-centred education*, for example) can shut down thinking or foreclose on certain lines of thinking if, on hearing or reading it, hearers or readers assume they know what the speaker or writer means. When seminary professors read *pastoral formation* or when education professors hear *best practices*, they give a kind of internal nod of approval, perhaps unconsciously and unreflectively. Perhaps they even give an external nod. But we want to ask how often seminary or education professors stop to (re)examine, (re)define, or (re)agree on the respective key phrases. This is our key concern with the phrases we listed in our introduction: people tend to use this language without sufficient reflection or care.

A second problem with slogans, one that we have already hinted at, is that people with no vision for what a given slogan implies use it falsely. Perhaps they simply want to recruit (“we offer Christ-centred education”), or get a grant (“data-driven research”), or even persuade themselves that they are on track (“my classes are all about critical thinking”), but their practice does not align with their language. We will not assume bad intentions here, for such usage actually illustrates the power of slogans (and one of the problems with slogans): they seduce language users into using them.

To conclude this brief discussion of the logic of slogans, we note their complexity, their tendency to attract users, and the possible range of density of meaning (from empty to rich). For one simple reason, we will not call for educators to stop using slogans: it would be useless to do so as long as people keep articulating new and attractive visions for education. But we do call for caution, and we will make several suggestions for practice after we explore strains of biblical teaching about language use. At the same time that we call for caution we also want to recognize that when whole segments of our culture have been seduced into using a particular slogan, we should not have to carry the guilt—as Christians, as professors, or as education professors—of thinking that we are bad people.

### *Biblical Perspectives*

As are our readers, we are well aware of one principle that arguably runs throughout the Christian Scriptures: that we should tell the truth. To put things at their simplest, we could argue here that thoughtlessly using language is the equivalent of lying, that lying is condemned in Scripture, and we therefore ought to refrain from such usage.<sup>21</sup> However, this approach, while it would yield a shorter (one-page) article, would fail on two fronts. First, usage of these slogans is more complex than that approach allows; we already noted that we

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21 There is no shortage of treatments of lying. D. Goleman’s *Vital Lies. Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* bears directly on our topic (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985). Worthwhile recent titles include M. C. McEntyre’s *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009); Paul Griffiths’ *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010); and David Nyberg’s *The Varnished Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

consider this usage quite complex. Slogan use is not a form of lying. Second, that approach fails to attend to the nuances of Scripture.

We distinguish two themes, obviously overlapping, in the Scriptures: telling the truth and plain speech. We begin with truth-telling, aware that most of our readers will not require much review of this principle. The topic of truth and lying appears early in Scripture, with the temptation story in Genesis. Here, the serpent lies to Eve, claiming that God lied about the consequences of eating the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:4). The ninth commandment (Ex. 2:16; Deut. 5:20) prohibits bearing false witness. Several other Old Testament passages repeat or generalize the commandment (such as Lev. 19:11 and Zeph. 3:13). Lying and the virtue of truth-telling appear at several points in the book of Proverbs as well (for example, Prov. 12:22; 13:5; 14:5; 17:7).

The New Testament affirms the Old Testament on this question. If anything, in fact, Jesus raises the standard (in the “you have heard that it was said ...” sayings in the Sermon on the Mount) by making specific reference to the ninth commandment and then demanding that those who would follow him not make oaths at all but simply let their words be their oath (Mt. 5:37, repeated in Jas. 5:12). At other points, New Testament writers associate lying with the devil (Jn. 8:44; Acts 5:3), with non-Christian character (Col. 3:9), with hypocrisy (1 Tim. 4:2), and with sorcery, fornication, and murder (Rev. 22:15). In short, the biblical writers had some strong things to say about lying.

We shall employ Jesus’s nuancing of the Old Testament standard as our segue to viewing Scriptural teaching about language use as advocacy of forthright and uplifting speech, rather than simply as condemnation of lying. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote, “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear” (Eph. 4:29). Note the dual emphasis here: a prohibition followed by an exhortation. We believe that Paul’s exhortation applies to the matter of educational slogans. With no interest in condemning anyone for using the slogans that seem to be in the very air we breathe, we are still in want of a way to use educational language carefully and reflectively. Could we use Paul’s criterion

here as a standard? Could we measure our language against the idea that it should always build up and give grace? For us, part of building up implies our not using slogans that might lead others to misjudge the quality of our teaching program. We should avoid unreflective language use that implicitly or explicitly overstates the quality of our own teaching program.

Plain language has a second benefit. As we have already noted, the technical language in any field facilitates communication by allowing insiders to speak with precision and economy. But that same language acts as a barrier to those from outside the respective field. From time to time, especially when non-specialists are present, our use of plain language might act more like a door or a window to those outside our fields, this becoming invitational instead of putting out an unwelcome mat.

### **Taking Steps: Suggestions for Usage**

First, we need to reflect on our language use and be more careful about what words we choose, especially when those words imply commitment to educational ideals that we may not actually be committed to or ideals that will never be realized with our current classroom practices. This is not a stand-alone suggestion but goes with our next suggestion.

Second, we need to examine our practice and adjust either the practice or the language that we use. We suggest that all teachers and professors engage in a practice that we use as an assignment: identify the most important ten ideals or qualities that you want to characterize your teaching. Next, identify where in the details of your daily work—in curriculum, instruction, and assessment—you have taken specific steps or built in specific practices to realize those ideals. As we become more conscious of the specific reasons we go to work in the morning we may be better positioned to use our language carefully (besides reminding ourselves of our vocations). If teaching for critical thinking, for example, does not appear on the list of ten ideals I produce during active reflection then I may, perhaps, get a slight jolt when I find myself using that phrase as if it were one of the bedrock components of my teaching program. If I have not given effort to learning about and adopting new teaching methods since the



first day I taught, then perhaps when I hear the phrase best practices coming out of my own mouth I'll be led to stop for a moment and reflect, about my language use, yes, but also about my teaching skills and my repertoire of teaching strategies. I may take note of the steps I am taking to change my actual practice. This implies doing one's own self-assessments, noting the actual points in my curriculum, instruction, and assessment where I have changed my practice in view of the new concerns expressed in this or that phrase.

Third, we suggest that when someone uses one of these slogans, and we suspect they may not themselves practice what the phrase implies, we ask, "What do you mean? Can you illustrate?" We suggest this not as a way to trap our conversation partners, although they may be prompted to identify gaps between their language and their practice; rather, we suggest it as a step on the road to clear communication and as a means of learning so that we might improve our own practice. School districts, schools, accrediting associations, colleges, and seminaries sometimes introduce new language as part of their adoption of some new educational ideal or accreditation standard, but some people affected by the adoption, to put it simply, do not understand. In these circumstances, there should be no embarrassment in asking, "What do you mean?"

Fourth, we suggest speaking in plain language despite the important work that technical terms and phrases do. Still, we believe that adopting the discipline of using plain language may force some of us to reflect more carefully on what we believe and do.

Fifth, and very practically, we believe we should give our students opportunities for feedback on specific teaching and learning strategies that they are observing. Can they identify the practices we are using? Are these approaches helpful in their learning? If students report that they find our daily reading of our PowerPoint slides not helpful, will we look for more engaging means of instruction? To recall our example discussion on summative and formative assessment, we ask if we are using our evaluation tools wisely. What if our evaluations included specific language as to the verbiage and strategies that we are presenting? What if our students were to rate the effectiveness of our strategies so that we could be accountable not

only for doing our teaching but for the effectiveness of our teaching? We believe these are some of the areas where slogan use lands in the classroom.

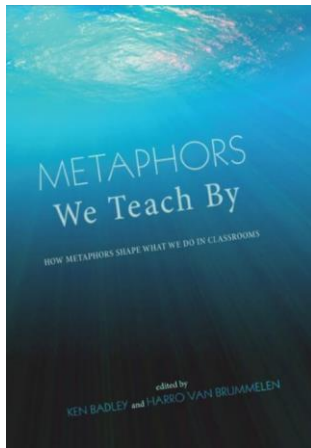
## Conclusion

We began our article by asserting that educators sometimes use language unreflectively, even carelessly. When we use language this way we often affirm popular ideals that our own practices may or may not match. We called for Christians, who we assume have a declared interest in telling the truth, to take this problem seriously. We noted, as well, that education professors need to address this gap between language and practice because their use or misuse of language lands them in a sad irony, one that will likely be obvious to their students.

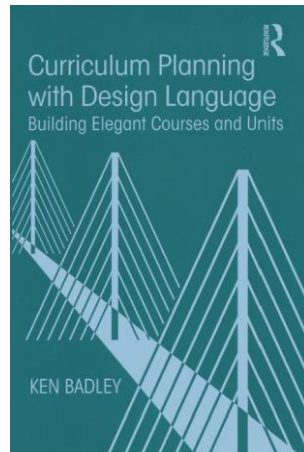
At least two biblical principles bear on the questions we have raised: outright lying and the virtue of plain speech. We place more weight on the second because we do not believe using slogans is a form of lying. Philosophical work on the use and power of slogans also illuminates the pattern of usage we have identified. We included the suggestions in the fourth section because we believe deeply that Christians and education professors who are Christian should use language with integrity.

Phrases meant to express high ideals become slogans for good reasons. We need ideals, and as educators we need to articulate our ideals and review them regularly. Some of our ideals will be widely shared (*critical thinking*, anyone?) and become slogans. That achievement should not stop us from using the best language to denote a respective ideal. At the same time, we need to be careful not to use language that does not reflect our ideals or our achievements. In all our talk about our work as educators, God help us to let our yes mean yes and our no mean no.

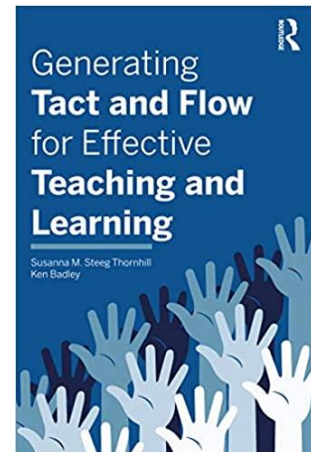
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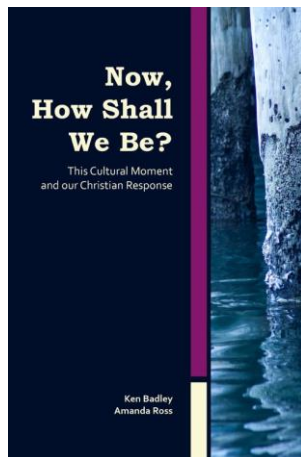
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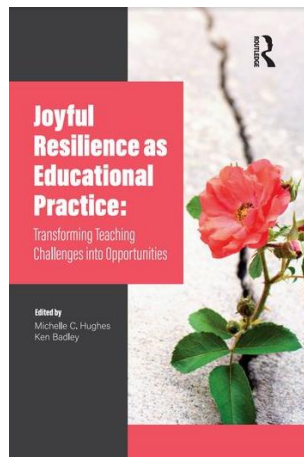
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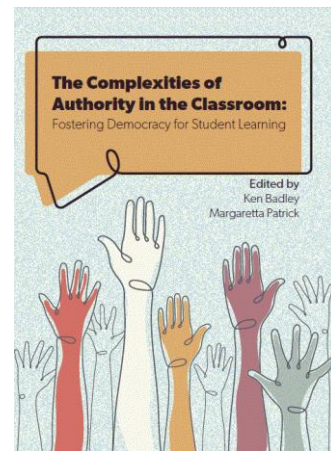
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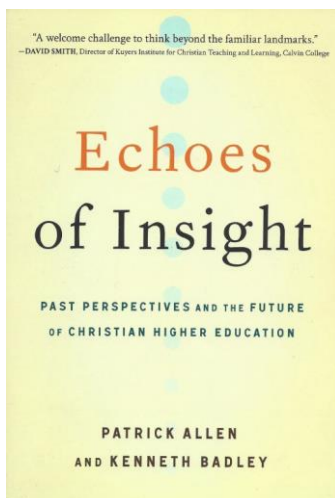


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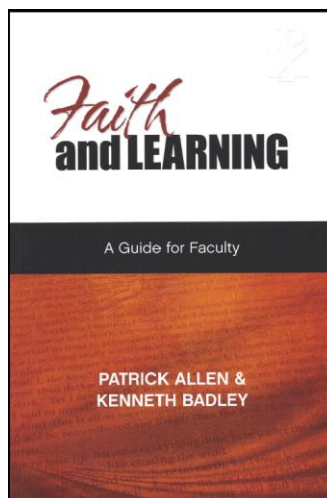


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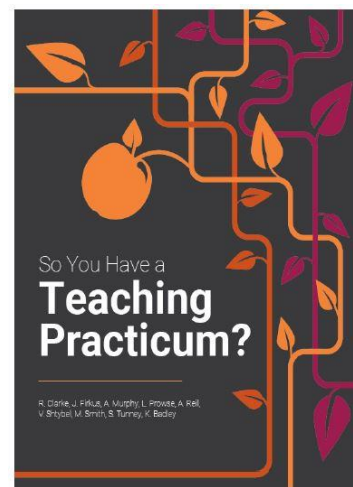


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