

Christian Faith in the Classroom

Learning from Teachers' Questions



**A Professional Development Resource for Teachers Seeking
to Understand how Faith Informs Teaching
by Ben Taming and Mark Vanderwerf**



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Foreword

In 2016, Trevor Cooling, Beth Green, and their colleagues Andrew Morris and Lynn Revell published the results of their research on how teachers in English church schools wrestled with ways of connecting their Christian faith with their approaches to teaching and learning. The book, titled *Christian Faith in English Church Schools: Research Conversations with Classroom Teachers*, is published by Peter Lang. At its heart, the book is a series of case studies of individual teachers in which we catch a glimpse of their learning process. When teachers in Michigan read these case studies, they immediately recognized parallels to their own conversations with colleagues in North American Christian Schools, and wondered if the material could be shared in a way that would foster learning within school departments.

For those with the time and commitment, I recommend reading the whole book from which these case studies are drawn. What Ben Tameling and Mark Vanderwerf, themselves able classroom teachers, have provided here is a way of using small snapshots from the case studies as a resource to provoke honest discussion among Christian teachers. This resource does not offer correct answers and prescribed solutions. Rather, it will be useful to individuals, school departments, and school leaders who want to move beyond quick slogans and explore together the puzzles, challenges, and joys of finding real connections between faith and teaching. It is intended to be used with others, and to build a community of pedagogical pilgrims seeking the way to wholeness in their teaching practices. You may end up in a place different from those arrived at by the case study teachers, but maybe their experience can help you get there.

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Leader's Guide

Background

The examples you are about to encounter are drawn from research in schools and arise from the real-life experiences of teachers. Their stories are published in more detail in the book *Christian Faith in English Church Schools: Research Conversations with Classroom Teachers* by Trevor Cooling, Beth Green, Andrew Morris, and Lynn Revell (Peter Lang, 2016), and we encourage you to explore them further there.

What if Learning

The teachers you will meet in this resource are using an approach to teaching and learning called “What if Learning.” This approach invites teachers to meaningfully connect Christian faith with the practices of teaching and learning. It seeks to accomplish this goal by focusing on three movements:

(1) Seeing Anew

How could a Christian understanding of God, people, and the world provide a different way of seeing a lesson or unit?

(2) Choosing Engagement

How can students engage with this new way of seeing?

(3) Reshaping Practice

What changes to my practice do I need to make as a teacher?

To learn more about *What if Learning* and to see many more examples, please visit <http://www.whatiflearning.com/>. Further resources related to this approach can also be found at <http://www.teachfastly.com>.

Goal of This Resource

The goal of this resource is to help Christian teachers see their teaching with fresh and imaginative eyes. We believe that some of the best professional growth happens when teachers get to see others teach and when they have robust conversations about teaching and learning with colleagues. These case studies allow teachers to explore brief snapshots of other real life teachers seeking to have their classrooms shaped by their Christian faith. We hope these snapshots can become foils for reflective conversations about classroom teaching and can serve as catalysts for change.

How to Use This Resource

If time and schedule allows, we suggest that the individual case studies in this resource be read over multiple weeks (e.g. one per meeting) in small groups. Each session can be completed in 20-30 minutes, and there is material for up to 8 sessions (including a final wrap up discussion). This could happen in department meetings, teacher team meetings, cross-discipline cohorts, or just among colleagues gathering over coffee for encouragement and mutual input. Repeated and sustained conversations about

connecting teaching and learning to the Christian faith are more likely to lead to real growth than one-off events.

If time or schedule does not allow a series of weekly meetings, an alternative would be to choose one or two case studies to be used during a single professional development event. Divide participants into smaller groups and provide copies of a case study. Allow time for the groups to read and discuss it and move to a whole group discussion of implications for future practice. Consider giving different case studies to smaller groups so that a range of ideas and issues can be fed back into the larger group.

You will notice that each case study is interrupted part-way through by an invitation to stop and reflect before reading on. The hope here is to help readers to begin to think with each case study teacher rather than simply skimming a summary of their challenges. Leaders of small group discussions should make use of this pause, asking participants to stop reading and put their sheets down while they reflect on what has been raised in the first part of the story. After a brief discussion, the story can continue.

Whatever format is chosen, it is important that there is time for free conversation about the case studies and that participants feel free to wrestle with the issues they raise, without feeling pressured to leap to the right answer. The case studies in this resource are not offered as examples of teachers who have solved the challenge of connecting faith and teaching and have everything right. They are meant to provoke reflection and discussion. Connecting faith and teaching is a rich and complex process and should be given room to unfold with honesty and openness. The emphasis in these materials is not on enforcing the right answer, but on making space for exploring questions that teachers have about faith and teaching.

Does There Have to Be a “Christian” Version of Everything?

P.E. Teacher - James (Cooling et al. p. 56-59)

THE STORY:

The cultural popularity of athletics can lead high school students to adopt a hyper-competitive attitude toward opponents, a win-at-all-costs mentality. This kind of mindset leads us to idolize or demonize those athletes who are capable of gaining the celebrity status associated with their elite success.

James is a physical education teacher who wanted to combat this kind of mentality and cultural influence with his own teaching strategy. In particular, he wanted to challenge his students to adopt and practice the kinds of values that Christians should be modeling whenever they compete in athletic contests. Perhaps “winning” is empty, he thought, if one is not practicing things like friendship, respect, equality, perseverance, and grace when participating. And so it was these kinds of character traits that James wanted to incorporate into his curriculum, giving students opportunities to practice playing sports as Christians.

One particular lesson involved teaching students how to execute a proper “push-pass” in the game of field hockey. Can there be a Christian way of executing a push-pass? Is it just saying a prayer that the pass goes well? There is hardly time to discuss Christ with a teammate while passing. Could faith make a difference?

STOP AND REFLECT:

1. *Do you agree with James’ concerns? Should he try to integrate a response into his teaching?*
2. *What happens next? If you were in James’ shoes, what would you do?*

THE REST OF THE STORY:

Here is what James tried. First, he demonstrated the proper passing technique. Next, students took turns being “player” and “coach,” with the coaches providing feedback based on the player’s pass. Finally, they ended by discussing (in pairs and then as a whole class) the strategies used to encourage one another. Throughout, the emphasis was on coaching as a form of encouragement. James hoped this would stand in stark contrast to the “winning at all costs” mentality.

James was not changing the surface content of the lesson - a push-pass is still a push-pass! But he gave his class a new framework for practicing this pass: one of encouragement, of building others up instead of obsession with one’s own individual performance. This framework drew from his Christian convictions.

DISCUSS:

1. How did James *see anew* (allow a Christian imagination to affect how he saw his task), *choose engagement* (engage students with his vision), and *reshape his practice* (shape the details of teaching to support his vision)?
2. Additional questions:
 - a. In a follow-up lesson when James' students were playing a full game of field hockey, students actually put their hands up to indicate when they had committed a foul. Jim insists that this is common practice in his PE class, based on the character he's been enabling his students to inhabit and practice. The teachers in his department also sought to practice the same ethic in their own sporting activities. Is this realistic to expect in our schools? What about in actual athletic games? Is this even a good idea? Why/why not?
 - b. What positive or negative examples of athlete or spectator behavior in athletic contests have you witnessed recently? How should Christian faith help shape the sports experiences of our students?
 - c. How might James' story relate to teaching in other subject areas? Are there practices in or outside the classroom that should be questioned in light of Christian faith?

FOLLOW-UP:

1. Think of your own classroom setting. Where can you challenge students to begin *practicing* an alternative way of engaging your subject matter as part of Christian character-building, one that specifically involves "looking for the good of others"? Try to implement one lesson that has students practice this art of encouragement, without necessarily changing the course content you teach!

To Preach or to Teach?

Religion Teacher - Ann (Cooling et al. p. 59-64)

THE STORY:

Even in Christian schools, students come from a wide range of religious backgrounds and come with varying levels of personal faith commitment. Teachers in these schools often find themselves balancing two desires: to be open about personal faith on the one hand, and on the other to create a safe and welcoming learning environment for all students regardless of their faith perspective. Ann is a religion teacher who shares these two desires.

Ann struggled to discern what was an appropriate way of teaching the Christian faith without forcing it upon her students. She felt that the roles of church and school were separate: her job as a teacher was to teach about the Christian faith, not to indoctrinate students in the faith. She struggled with how explicit she should be about her Christian faith and the school's Christian commitments in her daily lessons so that all students, regardless of religious persuasion, felt welcomed and safe.

As she grappled with how explicit to be about faith, she prepared to teach a lesson on people's diverse beliefs about life after death. How could she create a lesson that was faithful to her and her school's Christian commitments while at the same time creating space for students to express their own diverse religious beliefs?

STOP AND REFLECT:

1. *Are Ann's concerns legitimate?*
2. *How important is it to allow students to express their own religious beliefs about a given topic?*
3. *If you were in Ann's shoes, what would you do?*

THE REST OF THE STORY:

Though the lesson's explicit topic was "life after death," Ann decided to emphasize the Christian virtue of respect (treating others as having worth) throughout the lesson. She had students read and respond to nine written descriptions of unfamiliar beliefs about the afterlife and emphasized that these were the sincerely held beliefs of real people. After students had a chance to respond in writing to these beliefs, Ann led a discussion on the topic of respect and highlighted it as a focus for that day's lesson.

After the class discussion on respect, groups of students were each given a picture of a real person along with a written case study which emphasized the experiences of the person whose beliefs they were studying. Ann hoped that this would make abstract beliefs about the afterlife more personal, fostering respectful dialogue. She invited her students to see the humanity of

people who hold diverse religious beliefs by connecting those beliefs with real human faces and real life experiences.

When asked about the lesson, students remarked: “It did feel kind of different Because, well ... normally when we like read about other stuff it’s not like them saying about their life But when we read the words that came with the pictures, it was them talking about their own lives and not us telling what they mean to us.”

Looking back, Ann still has questions. She still wonders whether the new lesson was effective in fostering respectful religious dialogue. She still wonders how obvious explicitly Christian instruction must be made for students. Her questions are not yet resolved.

DISCUSS:

1. How did Ann *see anew* (allow a Christian imagination to affect how she saw her task), *choose engagement* (engage students with her vision), and *reshape her practice* (shape the details of teaching to support her vision)?
2. How explicit should teachers be about teaching a Christian perspective in a given class or on a specific topic? Should teachers and schools be concerned about the risk of forcing faith upon students?
3. Have you ever taught a lesson and felt afterwards that it was too “preachy?” What do you think made it feel “preachy?” What, if anything, could have been changed?
4. Was Ann explicit enough in framing what students should take away from this learning sequence?
5. How does a concern for virtues connect to the specific moves we make in class? In this case, how was the choice of pictures related to the goal of fostering specific virtues?

FOLLOW-UP:

1. Regardless of your subject area, what virtues or character traits could be modeled – explicitly or implicitly – through the design of your current lessons?
2. Are there ways to make one of your lessons more personal or humane like Ann did by incorporating real life stories via videos, case studies, pictures, testimonies, etc.?

Overcoming Tokenism?

Physics Teacher - Paul (Cooling et al. p. 64-68)

THE STORY:

Our society often pits “faith” and “science” against each other as mutually exclusive options. In Paul’s class, one of his driving passions is for his students to not see science and faith as needing to conflict with each other, but rather as mutually enriching one another. He firmly believes as a Christian that it is important to examine the scientific evidence as exhaustively as possible and to question where it leads as a way to better understand the universe that God has gifted us with.

Paul’s initial struggle, though, was how to create opportunities for students to experience this way of reconciling faith and science on a regular basis in his classroom. How could he make his lessons “genuinely spiritual” rather than just including occasional “tokenistic” nods to “appreciating the Creator’s design”? How could he craft a learning environment that seamlessly wove faith and science together rather than just attaching “God” onto the beginning or end of a unit?

STOP AND REFLECT:

1. *Have you experienced this tension? How? Journal silently for a few minutes, then share with a partner, then with the whole group.*
2. *What suggestions do you have for Paul based on your own experience or ideas?*

THE REST OF THE STORY:

Paul’s first foray involved revamping an existing lesson sequence on electricity. In the past, he would have students compare and contrast differing ways of generating electricity and then pitch their favored idea to a group of investors.

In his new plan, however, Paul wanted to include a focus on seeking the good of others and how our choices might impact future generations. He decided to have the panel not be investors but grandparents concerned for their grandchildren’s future. In this way, the focus shifted away from economic criteria to sustainability, from a purely business interest to inclusion of concern for our grandchildren’s well-being in the face of an uncertain future regarding natural resources.

Paul made a decision to have students address the context in which science operates as Christians rather than approach science as decontextualized, abstract ideas - what we might call “the cold hard facts.”

DISCUSS:

1. How did Paul *see anew* (allow a Christian imagination to affect how he saw his task), *choose engagement* (engage students with his vision), and *reshape his practice* (shape the details of teaching to support his vision)?
2. Evaluate Paul's solution - what strengths does his revamped unit exhibit? Are there weaknesses? What other options could he have tried?
3. Does teaching science always have a moral implication? Compare Paul's experience with your own.

FOLLOW-UP:

1. Whether you are a science teacher or not, think of an upcoming lesson or project on the horizon for your own students. How and where can you challenge them to envision the ethical implications of what you are studying, approaching the topic as image-bearers of God given the responsibility to act in the world in a Christ-like way?

Academic Rigor or Christian Conviction?

Technology Teacher - John (Cooling et al. p. 69-72)

THE STORY:

John is a second-career teacher. Before becoming a technology teacher John was a pastor of a church, so it is not surprising that he has a passion for passing on the Christian faith to his students and training them in a life of discipleship to Jesus Christ. But as a technology teacher, his primary task is to ensure that his students are meeting the academic standards of the discipline.

Are his two loves in conflict? He felt a sense of tension between them. How could he encourage his students to grow in and practice their faith while focusing firmly on teaching his students the national requirements for technology?

John's upcoming lesson for his class of thirteen-year-olds was meant to teach them how to use a computer program to create a short promotional video. The educational standards that he was expected to teach included technology skills as well as communication techniques such as the use of color to captivate an audience. In the past, when John taught the lesson he had students create an advertisement for a business. He became concerned he might be promoting a culture of greed by focusing his teaching examples mainly on advertising for consumer products. How could he marry academic rigor and Christian conviction?

STOP AND REFLECT:

1. *How have you felt the tension between providing academic rigor and following Christian conviction in your classrooms?*
2. *What are some ways that John could resolve his sense of tension?*

THE REST OF THE STORY:

John decided to take a different approach. Instead of having students create an advertisement for a business, John had his students create a promotional video for a charity with the goal of creating empathy in the viewer for the charity's cause. In order to have students learn the required curricular communication techniques, as well as to extend the focus on empathy, he used clips from *Schindler's List* to demonstrate how the use of color and imagery can evoke emotions.

John was pleased with the results of the lesson but wondered whether he was doing his students a disservice by not preparing them as well for the business world. But in the end, he hoped that the things the students picked up in the lesson might influence what they produced later in life.

DISCUSS:

1. How did John *see anew* (allow a Christian imagination to affect how he saw his task), *choose engagement* (engage students with his vision), and *reshape his practice* (shape the details of teaching to support his vision)?
2. In what ways do you like the way that John tried to integrate academic rigor and his Christian conviction? In what ways do you dislike his attempt?
3. Is avoiding business topics Christian? Might shifting the focus from business to charity reinforce a sense of business as only connected with greed rather than an avenue for faithful service and societal contribution? How might John integrate his new example into a balanced curriculum that also explored the place of virtue in the business setting?
4. What are some topics or ideas that you wish you could teach in your class but feel that you can't because of a sense of pressure to cover the required curricular standards?

FOLLOW-UP:

1. John used technology to try to get his students to be critical of what he saw as an overly greedy culture. How can your specific discipline be used to cultivate Christian engagement with the wider culture? Choose a unit or lesson and experiment with ways to do this. Redesign a specific activity to share with colleagues next time you discuss this.

What if Non-Christians Do This Too?

Geography - Charlotte (Cooling et al. p. 72-77)

THE STORY:

Charlotte is a high school geography teacher who initially defined her subject as she taught it thus: “Geography is about looking at the world and tolerating different views.” But as Charlotte wrestled with what it meant to teach geography from an authentically Christian ethos she increasingly wondered: “is my definition of geography concerned with promoting *Christian* values or more general *human* values?” For instance, shouldn’t we all be concerned with human rights, with understanding and appreciating diversity, and with relieving suffering wherever we see it, regardless of faith identity? What makes studying geography in a Christian school different?

STOP AND REFLECT:

1. *How would you respond to Charlotte’s question? Is it a good question?*
2. *Brainstorm an example with your group of teaching a particular geography lesson from a Christian ethos.*

THE REST OF THE STORY:

Charlotte addressed this tension in her classroom by attempting to lead her students into an experience of gratitude. She began by showing a series of pictures of life in the Dharavi slum in Mumbai, India, asking students to imagine what life might be like in this place based on the photos. Overall, Charlotte’s students’ responses were that life in such a place must be overwhelmingly negative, judging by the physical conditions that people there had to live with.

Following this activity, however, Charlotte showed her students a video centered on life in the Dharavi slum, entitled “Slumming It.” The video documented the presenter’s visit and experience living with the community there for a few days. This switch from the photograph activity to the guided video clip lesson gave students a deeper immersion in the life experience of the slum dwellers. This challenged the students’ first responses to the photographs, because amid a difficult life situation there was also evidence of gratitude. Charlotte’s students were challenged to shift from viewing life in the slum with pity to seeing how the slum dwellers could also experience gratitude even in the midst of much that needed to change.

Gratitude is an essential mark of a Christian life lived in thanksgiving to the God who poured out his love for us in Christ. But despite the success of this lesson in shifting student perceptions, Charlotte still struggled. She wondered if she should point out to her students that her lesson was informed by a conscious choice to reshape her practice to reflect a deeper, Christian engagement with geography and gratitude ... or if students should be able to realize on their own, without being told, that this focus was what drove the lesson?

DISCUSS:

1. How did Charlotte see *anew* (allow a Christian imagination to affect how she saw her task), *choose engagement* (engage students with her vision), and *reshape her practice* (shape the details of teaching to support her vision)?
2. What do you think about Charlotte's lingering question after her revised lesson? Should a Christian approach to teaching involve explicitly Christian statements and "directive teaching, which tells students what to think" (76)?
3. Charlotte wanted to teach about gratitude. What risks are there in her plan, in terms of what students might learn about poverty? Is a focus on gratitude the only Christian response here? How might indignation, lament, or justice-seeking fit into a broader Christian response? How could she sustain a critical engagement with the problems of poverty within a Christian frame?

FOLLOW-UP:

Whether in Geography or in your own subject area, how might Charlotte's activity shape your own efforts to encourage Christian virtue in your students? What specific activities that you use might contribute to this goal? How might your use of pictures or video connect with the virtue(s) you want to foster? Choose a teaching activity to reexamine and perhaps reshape this week.

Is My Teaching Actually Teaching What I Want to Be Teaching?

Religion Teacher - Angela (Cooling et al. p. 77-80)

THE STORY:

Angela loved teaching her religion courses because they allowed her to share her faith openly as well as preparing her students with skills and knowledge for living in an increasingly multicultural and diverse world.

She was a relational teacher who valued the caring atmosphere of the school and her classroom. She ensured that her classroom was a safe place for students from all backgrounds and religious perspectives. She made her students feel valued and at home as she warmly welcomed the students at the beginning of each lesson and crouched down to talk with them at their level at their tables.

She prided herself on her caring and compassionate classroom. That's why she was caught off guard one day when she saw one of her lessons in a new light. Angela was preparing a lesson for her class of fifteen-year-olds on the topic of assisted dying. She had taught the lesson before and thought that it had gone very well and got the students engaged. In the lesson, she had students research reasons for and against supporting the right to die and then held a mini-debate in class. She had loved the back-and-forth banter and the level of critical thinking demonstrated by the students. But something upset her this time around; something wasn't quite right with the lesson. A lesson she was once proud of now felt that it was lacking. "I decided it wasn't good enough," Angela said, "I could do such a better job if I did it in a different way."

STOP AND REFLECT:

1. *What do you think bothered Angela so much about her otherwise successful and engaging lesson?*
2. *What are some other ways Angela might have taught about assisted dying?*
3. *Share about a lesson you grew frustrated with and changed. What values prompted the change?*

THE REST OF THE STORY:

Angela asked herself:

"What would I really want to say as a Christian to these topics ... a Christian wouldn't necessarily sit there and go "fors and against." We'd actually look at what the Bible would say and the actual meaning and how we talk to people and how we discuss issues with people, looking at it from that angle, rather than the clinical "fors and against." So that's where I wanted to focus my planning on."

From this self-reflection, she realized that her previous lesson had stripped one of the most pastorally difficult topics of any sense of compassion for human suffering and had turned it into an exercise of abstract and yet heated debate. Though she was asking her students to think critically, she was also asking them to act in a way that she believed was lacking in basic Christian virtues of compassion and love.

Fueled by these new convictions, Angela redesigned her lesson by abandoning the in-class debate and creating a case study about the story of Tony Nicklinson, a famous British advocate for the “right to die” who suffered a massive stroke at the age of fifty and was left paralyzed with locked-in syndrome. Angela framed the new lesson around the question of “What makes life worth living?” In the first part of the lesson, the class was introduced to Nicklinson before his stroke through YouTube clips and students were asked to discuss his quality of life. They were then told the story of his stroke and shown another YouTube clip of him explaining his post-stroke situation. The class then worked in groups to develop five questions they would like to ask arising from the videos and class discussion. The homework was to take those questions home and ask a family member or another wise adult. Finally Angela discussed the biblical emphasis on compassion and asked students to write down what this might mean in relation to the case study. As a summary to the lesson, she had the students suggest compassionate responses to Nicklinson’s situation with this writing prompt:

“As a Christian I believe Jesus calls us in the Bible to show love to one another and to show compassion. This situation isn’t easy but still requires our love and compassion. Jot down what we as human beings could do to help Tony after his stroke.”

DISCUSS:

1. How did Angela see *anew* (allow a Christian imagination to affect how he saw his task), *choose engagement* (engage students with his vision), and *reshape his practice* (shape the details of teaching to support his vision)?
2. How did the revised lesson plan change the nature and goal of the lesson?
3. What do you like about Angela’s new approach to her lesson? Does she sacrifice anything in redesigning her lesson in this way? Does she gain anything in her newly designed lesson?
4. How did her previous way of teaching Christian ethics sit in tension with her core belief about creating a caring and safe classroom environment?

FOLLOW-UP:

1. Share with a colleague a lesson that you currently teach or an assignment that you currently assign. If the timing works, invite your colleague to visit your class and observe the activity. In conversation with your colleague, discuss how well the actual student activities of the lesson or assignment align with the intended goal(s). Are there any places where your practices do not express your values?

Is Value Formation Really *My* Job?

Math Teacher - Julie (Cooling et al. p. 81-84)

THE STORY:

Does our Christian teaching practice involve “fitting in” elements of the Christian faith amid regular course content and adding lessons on Christian topics into our curriculum? Or might it involve more organically reshaping what we’re already teaching in light of a Christian ethos? Is it only the job of the Bible teachers to help instill values in students, or is this the job of every teacher in every subject area?

One teacher who wrestles with these questions is high school mathematics teacher Julie. In one unit, Julie’s students apply the skill of calculating averages in order to determine and compare the prices at four different supermarkets. This is obviously a mathematical skill worth mastering and putting into practice for simple financial reasons!

Julie didn’t see the need to create an entirely new lesson that somehow forced Christian content into an otherwise ordinary textbook math problem. How, instead, could she enable her students to experience solving math problems as a means to a Christian end?

STOP AND REFLECT:

1. *Where in your own teaching and curriculum have you experienced Julie’s tension?*
2. *How often is your content/pedagogy indistinguishable from what a non-Christian teacher might teach? Is this a good or a bad thing?*

THE REST OF THE STORY:

As a Christian educator, Julie was concerned that her students should not just learn to calculate averages as only a way to secure the cheapest deal. Wrestling with this concern, Julie saw an opportunity to impress upon her students the importance of *truthfulness* as a Christian virtue as we evaluate advertising messages. She wanted her students to practice calculating averages not simply to spend less money at the store, but also to appreciate the value of telling the truth in the marketplace.

Julie sought to help her students to make a conscious shift from assuming that math of all kinds primarily services narrowly economic goals to realizing that mathematics is connected to seeking truthfulness. She challenged her students to think deeply about how averages could be manipulated by companies in advertising practice. This reflected her decision to not just teach math but to focus on the moral context in which mathematical skills would be used.

DISCUSS:

1. How did Julie *see anew* (allow a Christian imagination to affect how she saw her task), *choose engagement* (engage students with her vision), and *reshape her practice* (shape the details of teaching to support her vision)?
2. Where in your subject area could you challenge your students to master the skills and critical reflection needed to speak truth more effectively?
3. Where in your subject area is it sometimes difficult to envision a way for your students to engage the material in an authentically Christian way? Is it helpful to think about the implied goals and values that are expressed in the examples used, rather than looking for spaces to insert faith examples?

FOLLOW-UP:

1. Do you think your students associate the activities that take place in your class with larger questions of integrity? Choose an upcoming lesson plan during the next week and ask yourself (and your students!) where there might be an opportunity to focus on valuing truth and see this as connected to everyday learning activities.

Some Key Challenges

(Chapter 5, Cooling et al.)

RECAP: THREE CHALLENGES

As we have heard the stories of various teachers struggling to connect faith with their teaching, three broad challenges have emerged:

1. “This is Weird!”

Some teachers made an initial assumption that the Christian element of teaching needed to involve “fitting into” already existing material a series of faith references, or reworking existing lessons to “accommodate” a chunk of explicitly Christian content. Then the uneasy question was raised: is doing this a violation of professional integrity or academic quality? Is it a case of “strong-arming” Christianity into different subjects whether it really fits or not? The result was sometimes that forcing Christian content into class felt “weird.”

STOP AND REFLECT:

1. *Let’s acknowledge that strong-arming explicit religious language unnaturally into contexts where it fits poorly can be, in fact, “weird.” When have your students actually noticed this or expressed dissatisfaction with it?*
2. *Is the sense of “weirdness” because the faith references really don’t fit, or because of the way the lesson is designed, or because the way students’ and teachers’ mental habits have been formed make them seem irrelevant?*
3. *In what ways have teachers in the previous examples sought to integrate Christian practices and a Christian focus more naturally into their lessons? How have you attempted to do this?*

2. “Christian Enough?”

As almost the flip-side to the first challenge that emerged, there was also a concern that students don’t always recognize a given lesson as “distinctively Christian enough.” This, in turn, raised the question: what makes a lesson “distinctively Christian” anyway? Is it the content, informed by a Christian perspective or worldview? Is it the pedagogy, shaped by Christian practices? Is it both? In short, what makes studying a given subject in a Christian setting any different than a non-Christian one?

STOP AND REFLECT:

- 1) *Have your students ever wondered aloud what makes studying your subject in a Christian school any different than in a non-Christian setting? Have you?*
- 2) *How would you answer the question: what makes a lesson “distinctively Christian”?*

3. “A Problem with Practices”

As an outgrowth of the second challenge, the final challenge that many teachers shared was moving from an initial concern only for what students were *thinking* as a result of content delivery to awareness of what they were *experiencing* as a result of effective pedagogy. Education’s appropriate focus on developing critical thinking skills can encourage a focus on thinking alone. As Christian worship services often center on the act of preaching, we might likewise assume that teaching subjects in a Christian school must always involve presenting Christian ideas. Might we lose an emphasis on virtues when we focus too exclusively on communicating ideas as a Christian focus in our schools?

STOP AND REFLECT:

- 1) *What sorts of people do we hope our students will become? (Note: this is a different question than “what will our students think”.)*
- 2) *If the Christian element of teaching is not simply preaching, why is it so tempting to revert to lecture mode when attempting to integrate faith and learning?*

DISCUSS:

1. Which of the above three challenges have you struggled with most in your own classroom? Why?

FOLLOW-UP:

1. Choose one of the challenges described above and focus on it for a month as you plan your classes. As you reflect, see if you can identify specific changes you want to make in your teaching. Share them with at least one colleague and discuss what they imply about how faith relates to teaching.
2. Visit <http://www.whatiflearning.com/> and/or <http://www.teachfastly.com> and explore some more examples of ways in which other teachers have sought to connect faith and learning thoughtfully and responsibly in the classroom. Find an example that you can try out in your own classroom, and seek opportunities to discuss with colleagues why you chose it and how it went.

For further resources related to the connection between faith and teaching, see www.pedagogy.net.