

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

THE ROLE OF TEACHING

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO
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DSMN 601 MINISTRY OF TEACHING

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JUNE 1, 2012

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I. Introduction

In the 21st century, students learn in many different ways. Much of their learning comes from their peers, their smart-phone, or through social networking, not from a learned instructor who is gifted and highly trained in the subject at hand. This makes the role of a teacher that much more vital. How this role is fulfilled, how the teacher motivates their students, and what structural methods are used or of the utmost importance for the training and maturity of students today, whether they are middle school age, or adults picking up the Bible for the first time. This paper will attempt to examine the role of the teacher, how they can effectively motivate their students through various known structures, and ultimately suggest how the teacher can transform a student's learning into knowledge, and knowledge into wisdom.

II. Role of a Teacher and my Fulfillment

When trying to define a term as broad as “teacher,” one could almost determine what definition they intend the word to mean, and then qualify the terminology to fit their intended definition. Outside of many who probably think teaching is self-evident, such a pluralistic approach to understanding the role of a teacher cannot benefit the student, so defining the specifics is important. James makes the most declarative statement about the importance of the role of teachers when he says, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”¹ This and many other statements in Scripture make evident the strong consequences involved for those who choose, or are gifted, to teach others (*cf.* Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2 among just a few).

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture references will come from the ESV Bible translation. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Jas 3:1–3.

A teacher's role then can be a complex one, one that must include many different specific skill sets such as speaking, listening, discipline, planning, and organization. Beyond an excellent scholarly knowledge of the material to be taught, the teacher must create "a stable classroom climate where students experience a triad of clarity, warmth, and productivity."² This means there is more to the role of a teacher than a good understanding of the materials. The teacher must continue to set a tone in the classroom, which is emotionally sound, "warm, caring, and friendly," to provide the students with a better likelihood of freedom to participate, and ask pertinent questions.³ The teacher can accomplish this through their enthusiasm for their students and the material being taught, and by being flexible in their approach. Flexibility can be one of the greatest assets of a good teacher, and is also a method Jesus used during his ministry on earth. When looking at differences between how "the scribes and the Pharisees taught (Matthew 23:2)," and the flexibility Jesus used when he taught, clearly Jesus felt flexibility was an important method over an exacting strictness, which others used to teach.⁴

Personally filling these responsibilities is not a task to take lightly. Before I can develop as a teacher I must have a firm scholarly understanding of the material. It should be well to note that there is no particular end to scholarly learning as a teacher. As a teacher I must be prepared to learn just as much from my own students as I do from my own formal studies, but those studies must continue beyond the point of "graduating" from one level or another. This must be an ongoing circular process of learning, teaching, and learning. Within this process the teacher must learn how to become a good student in order to become a good teacher, and that includes studying how to teach, not just studying the teaching materials. Beyond this, for me to fulfill my

² William R. Yount, *Created to Learn: A Christian Teacher's Introduction to Educational Psychology*, 2nd Edition (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 454.

³ *Ibid.*, 455.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 456-457.

role as a teacher, I must develop the proper skills, be able to honestly self-evaluate my progress, and learn how to incorporate the structures known for becoming an effective teacher.

III. Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivational Learning

An important factor in motivational learning comes from understanding if the student is “for whatever reason, intrinsically motivated,” or do they need to be extrinsically motivated.⁵ Students who are intrinsically motivated are those students who are self-motivated, and eager to learn. They seek their fulfillment in learning from within, whether the motivation comes from a specific interest in the subject, a career decision that requires the specific knowledge set, or something as simple as personal satisfaction in learning.⁶ Regardless, these students get, at least some of their motivational desire, their “will to learn,” from an internal factor beyond the control of the teacher. On the other hand, those students who have no self-motivation to learn, and have determined for one reason or another that they do not want to participate in the learning process, need to be extrinsically motivated by the teacher. This type of motivation comes from “outside the student,” and requires some prompting or guidance to learn direct from the teacher.⁷

IV. Significance of Group Dynamics

Another important factor in motivating students is how well the teacher can utilize group dynamics within the learning process. Group dynamics is a process where the class, or small group, bonds together, sometimes also referred to as the “chemistry” of the group. This interaction is specifically referring to “relationships and atmosphere within a group as the group interacts and grows together.”⁸ Group dynamics are important for many different reasons, but above all, Christ taught that it was important. In the New Testament we see Christ developing

⁵ Lawrence O. Richards and Gary J. Bredfeldt, *Creative Bible Teaching*, Revised and Expanded (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1998), 230-231.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Richards, 233-235.

this group dynamic strategy, what is generally referred to today as fellowship, starting with his very own group of twelve disciples. This relationship went far beyond casual friendships; this process was used to live life together.

Of all the processes involved in motivating people to learn, this could be one of the most significant, and the most ever increasingly difficult to implement.⁹ For decades, at least in the United States, society has become more and more individualist in nature, caring more about the “me and I,” rather than the “us and we.”¹⁰ Through the “process of modernization, western societies became ever more individualistic,” and in the process devalued the importance of building small group relationships, especially when it comes to motivational learning.¹¹ It takes a lot of time to develop trusted relationships with other people, and this must be done through the willingness of each person within the group, not just select members. The importance of group dynamics goes beyond motivation. As Paul in Ephesians points out, group dynamics are “required for maximum spiritual growth,” requiring participation from all members, including the teacher (Ephesians 4:16).¹²

V. Structural Factors That Motivate Learning

The final element involving effective teaching addressed here, comes from structural factors. Structural factors are those ideas, which motivate the learning process. These factors generally deal with the way the material is organized, and the various methods the “material is

⁹ There is a well-documented pattern in the past several decades, within western culture, which has moved more and more towards individual importance rather than that of collective living (groups). This is a continuing movement that has been accelerated by the Internet in many ways, and its various components, all of which is beyond the scope of this paper. For more information see Barry Taylor, *Entertainment Theology: New-Edge Spirituality in a Digital Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), and Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith After the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

¹⁰ Ruut Veenhoven, "Quality-Of-Life in Individualistic Society: A comparison of 43 nations in the early 1990's," *Social Indicators Research* 48 (1999): 157-186.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Richards, 235-268.

presented” to the student.¹³ Many studies have shown teaching through “an organized logical manner” of some kind inhibits the learning and motivation process, while using a random, free flowing, or haphazard structure tends to confuse students.¹⁴ Educators have determined some of the best structural methods for motivating the students include: patterned learning that progresses towards a given goal, a pattern that contains a logical sequence, learning that is encouraged by the teacher, learning that is stimulated by a proper environment, teaching that is relevant to the student’s experience, and learning that has some tangible application involved.¹⁵

VI. Conclusion and Suggestions for Motivating Students

Motivating students can be one of the greater challenges a teacher might face when entering any classroom environment. This paper has attempted to look at the overall motivating factors of students, and what structures are most effective for teaching. Giving advice to a novice teacher on how to motivate their students could be the equivalent of trying to motivate a student who does not have the “will to learn,” and wants no part of the learning process. The first piece of advice that might be offered to a new teacher on motivating students is for the teacher to become teachable, the same as they desire of their students. Teachers must always be willing to be flexible and ready to learn themselves. It may be that each student requires a different method of motivation and a different structure to effectively learn, therefore, the teacher must be willing to adjust to their students abilities. Doing so will help create an environment of trust among the students and it will give students a greater desire to learn from the teacher.

¹³ Richards, 235-239

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

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