

A Philosophy of Teaching

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John Milton (1608-1674), English poet and statesman.

Following the English Puritan poet and civil servant John Milton (1608-1674), we propose that education is the pursuit of the knowledge of God through special and general revelation, divinely given so that we might know our Creator and thus know ourselves and others. Such knowledge directs our inquiries and clarifies our cosmic, terrestrial, and

metaphysical experiences. Teach expresses this philosophy of education through a dialogical method, relational “I and Thou” means, and a “golden,” i.e., “beatific” goal.¹

“The end then of Learning is to repair the ruines of our first Parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true vertue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection. — John Milton, *Of Education*, 1644²

Thus, I lay an anchor in my quest for teaching in the Triune God revealed in the Holy Scriptures. It is only from this position that I can journey farther, understand clearer, and, thus, share the wonders of knowledge and wisdom with those who study with me. I unfurl this flag as I sail: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7).

One Sacred Moment

Education is a sacred moment in which a method, means, and goal captures and, in some way, transforms both student and teacher. While concerned with the subject material, subject to quantitative measurement, the event is highly relational, personal, and dialogical. The successful teaching and learning event unlocks and unleashes the heart and mind for the glory of God, the blessing of humanity, and the healing of creation. The process and dynamic of educating a person include much more than a mere act of transfer of information. Education is a nexus in which the spirit of the educator moves past the boundaries of self-protection and self-interest to bring about an expansion of the student’s humanity. Therefore, I believe that the classroom is a sanctuary where this holy activity occurs, whether it is educating for science, the arts, the professions, or theology.

As one trained for pastoral ministry, I have often approached the classroom with a philosophy of education centered on the lecture. This reflected a theology of the centrality of preaching. However, over the years of teaching, I’ve come to recognize that *the*

¹ Martin Buber and Ronald Gregor Smith. *I And Thou* Bloomsbury revelations ed. London: Bloomsbury Academic an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018. See, also, Hans Boersma. *Seeing God : The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018.

² Thomas Festa, John Milton. “Of Education,” *The End of Learning: Milton and Education*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2013, 23.

proclamation of the sermon is in an entirely different category from the educator in the classroom. The difference between the two lies in the method, the means, and the goals. This paper focuses on a framework that informs, shapes, and constrains a teaching philosophy.

A Dialogical Method

The method of instruction for a sermon is, unapologetically, a monologue. The medium of instruction for education is a Socratic dialogue.³ Indeed, the Socratic method is one that I hold to be the superior form of teaching to which I aspire. The Socratic method is not merely asking questions of the student but rather carefully, astutely, respectfully listening, and guiding the student to a place of self-discovery. This dialogue is a necessary component that must not be construed or limited to a verbal exchange within the proximity of space set aside for learning, i.e., the classroom. The dialogue happens formally and informally, in person or through technology, but always intentionally.



"The Woman at the Well." Annibale Carracci (1560-1609), Italian.

³ William T. Iverson. *Jesus and the Ways of Socrates: Human-Shaped Education for the Twenty-First Century*. Bloomington: Cross Books Publishing, 2012.

Jesus of Nazareth is the Great Teacher.⁴ Our Lord engaged the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:39–42), the rich young ruler (Mt 19:16–30; Mk 10:17–31; Lk 18:18–30), and the rabbi of Israel by building a *framework for human flourishing*. Jesus' pedagogical frame is constructed of the glory of the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit actively bringing about creation, redemption in Himself, and consummation), the image of God in humanity (the *imago Dei* in four states, from which Augustine stated the spiritual state of mankind: possible to sin, not possible not to sin, possible not to sin, and not possible to sin), and the presence of the fall (anthropological and cosmological). Sin (the devil, the flesh, and the fallen world propagating the deadly spiritual virus) is an intrusive alien *pathogen* that defies God, defaces the nobility of humanity, diminishes the dignity of personhood, and mars the beauty of creation. Jesus' dialogical framework revealed the presence of symptoms and the viral infection while compassionately guiding the respective person to enjoy relief in God and His plan of salvation. As with Peter (John 21:15–17), Jesus' dialogical frame required the person (the “student,” if you prefer) to grapple with the meaning of self with God. Only when the true self, created by God, is redeemed from the toxic and corrosive comparisons with self-manufactured ideals, pan-religious works for merit, and the character of others can isolated man find healing. Often, the last word in the teaching moment of Jesus was a question. The student was left with applying Jesus' teaching. Or not.

The dialogical method occurs through the traditional classroom, reflection, and critical thinking over assigned readings. The method is expansive as the student begins to “follow the footnote trail.”⁵ Discovery and subsequent dialogue create a kinetic dialectic within the class. Students and teachers are immersed in pedagogical nuclear fission that unleashes the promise of new ideas. Nor does this dialogue happen hurriedly. The interchange that leads to self-discovery happens across a plain of time. Fruitful dialogue that leads to learning cannot be restricted to a classroom. Such teaching methodology requires a growing relationship between teacher and student—wherever that relationship is cultivated (e.g., online teaching and learning, distance education by other means, as in Paul's letters to Timothy, or in a physical classroom).

A relational method of teaching requires that the teacher gives respect to the student. As in adult learning models, so in all types of learning communities: the educator comes to the

⁴ Roy Pitcher. *Jesus - A Master Teacher: Translating Jesus' Generic Teaching Strategies and Methods from the 1st to the 21st Centuries*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2013.

⁵ Milton, Michael A. “Following the Footnote Trail: The Deeper Learning Model in Theological Higher Education.” Faith for Living (blog), January 14, 2019. <https://michaelmilton.org/2019/01/14/following-the-footnote-trail-the-deeper-learning-model-in-theological-higher-education/>.

task of teaching, recognizing (admitting) that the student undoubtedly has a reservoir of higher learning, valuable life experiences, informed personal beliefs, and cultivated cultural insights that have shaped the student and can become a gift to others in a learning community. Therefore, the nexus of education is a spatial field with remarkable height, breadth, and length. Each student comes to this sacred place with different degrees and kinds of deposits in their reservoir. Likewise, the educator comes with biases, life experiences, and beliefs. The educator seeks to harness and repurpose the reservoir of knowledge of self and student to the end of deep learning.

I firmly believe in disclosed standards of education available to the student. I hold that there should be a rubric that is clear and measurable. Codified expectations are necessary for the educator's authentic respect for the student and the sacred art and science of teaching. The syllabus is both a canon for the class and a narrative about the subject of study.

The Incarnate Means

The teacher is neither an irreplaceable seer nor an inconsequential docent. The method of instruction for this educational philosophy begins and ends with the most essential material: a dedicated, inspiring professor of knowledge who desires to lead students to not only acquire knowledge but, in some way, know and apply that knowledge themselves. It is only when the teacher becomes a full participant in the learning community—humbly and eager to acknowledge the class reservoir of knowledge and insight exceeds his own—that deep learning (from knowledge to personal acceptance and application) can occur. Thus, Dr. Parker Palmer in *Courage to Teach*: "Good teachers are authentically present in the classroom and can weave a complex web of connections between themselves, their subjects, and their students, helping their students weave a world for themselves."⁶

There is a carefully crafted dynamic at work in a class. The educator begins the semester as a necessary professor and a subject-matter expert. The "scaffolding" approach to teaching and learning management combined with the Socratic strategy to teaching and learning method is a powerful model for both student and teacher. The "scaffold" is erected with a necessary emphasis on the professor as a dispenser of knowledge (although I would argue this is done through intentionally encouraging the student in self-discovery). This attitude in the teaching and learning trajectory assumes a "scaffold" to build a sturdy student grasp of

⁶ Palmer, Parker J. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. John Wiley & Sons, 2017, Chapter 1, page 1, the Kindle version.

the subject. As the student builds her own subject model, the educator assumes the role of mentor, i.e., the “scaffolding” (educator support) can be removed. The professor then assumes the role of mentor, helping the student to apply the newly constructed model of proficiency (expressing, connecting, creating). Such an understanding of means requires a commitment to an essential relationship between teacher and student. Considering this vital relationship leads to *the goal* of teaching philosophy.

The Golden Goal

The golden goal of my philosophy of education and teaching is, first, to bring together authentic and fruitful teaching and learning experiences between an incarnational educator and expectant students. In such an environment, the professor is not a distant dispenser of data to a vacuous space. The teacher is uniquely gifted and (in the most formal category of teaching and learning) peer-approved, fully present in a learning community, and influenced and constrained by specific institutional values and educational assumptions (the professor is qualified and desirous to teach students who are prepared to learn and apply knowledge to wisdom). Incarnational teaching requires a simple approach to respecting, e.g., the learning styles of students and, therefore, providing a variety of teaching techniques to reach the respective learners. Teaching can never be an isolated undertaking. It is neither all about the student nor all about the professor. Teaching-learning is a living dynamic in which professors and students are folded into a sacred place where deep learning (from passive recipient to active practitioner; isolated ideas to connected concepts; and from acquiring knowledge to applying lessons) is actuated.

Deep learning is, thus, the second component in the golden goal of such a relational dynamic of teaching and learning. I believe that deep learning happens when the student is awakened to the new pathways for living (thinking, being) available from self-directed research into the given subject. When the experiential model of teaching leads to deeper learning, there is a spark ignited that cannot be extinguished. This is the golden dream of education.

A Thought on Technology as a Servant to the Goal

Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) wrote, “The individual who is the servant of technique must be completely unconscious of himself.”⁷ This prescient insight by Ellul calls us to diligence in using technology in teaching. Technology must always be the servant of the educator as well as a facilitator for the student. Nothing can replace the primary dynamic of the relationship. I’m not advocating a Luddite approach that diminishes or defunds the value of online teaching and learning (or other forms of “distance” education, a term, at first glance, conflicts with experiential relationship teaching and learning). I always recall, with humility, that St. Paul, one of the great teachers of the ages, fulfilled his educational mission through distance learning. Those ancient epistles continue to bring together the soul and heart of the author with the learner. Modern technologies are but a different expression of learning demonstrated in the Bible.

Yet, the means of learning is primarily a relational one that can be enhanced, enabled, and even perfected through modern technologies or through a pen and parchment.

The goal of my teaching is to enter into the inner world of the student so that the student not only receives knowledge but is given the tools, resources, and processes of reflecting, critically thinking, and applying this knowledge (for the common good). In this sense, I hope the student is given a love of learning and a license to learn. The gift is not to learn for advantage in competition but to become more human, transcending the lower, selfish goals that limit learning. Teaching and learning, absent the “I and thou”, can become a commodity. Such things must not be.

A Thought on Standards to Support the Goal

Moreover, the goal is to see that the student has mastered standards. Standards can be cold, detached, and artificial measurements that genuinely fail to appraise the acquisition and unfolding of knowledge in the student. Alternatively, norms can become a compassionate and clear signpost, offering navigation to a common destination for both student and teacher. We embrace standards if they accurately indicate that knowledge has been received, reflected upon, and used for critical thinking.

⁷ Jacques Ellis. *The Technological Society*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1964, 138.

Summary

In summary, I have advocated for a philosophy of education devoted to a deeply spiritual moment in which teacher and student meet at the intersection of common humanity. I believe the means are limited only by the imagination. The teaching methods must transcend technique and embrace mutual respect and a reference for the unfolding of knowledge as a way of expanding our humanity. The goal of instruction is not merely the transmission of data but the shepherding of a protégé into a lifelong love of learning.

I have intentionally avoided a discussion of rubrics, tactile learning, abstract learning, pedagogical theory, and other essential items to be considered in teaching. I've not avoided these matters because I think them unimportant, but instead because these resources deserve their consideration. The resources are critical supporting actors that must serve the master: a dedicated philosophy of incarnational teaching.

Postscript

I am a disciple of Jesus Christ, embracing Him as Lord and Savior according to the inerrant and infallible Holy Scriptures. I believe in the life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, I believe that Jesus is Lord of all, whether one receives Him as such. Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah of the Old Covenant and the Mediator of the New Covenant. Christ is God incarnate. That being the most fundamental reality of my existence, I cannot help but pray that my teaching constantly flows from an authentic center where Jesus of Nazareth teaches me through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit to the glory of the one Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the mystery of the Holy Trinity and humility before the God who created and sustains me, I am bound to be a learner who may be a teacher. I am a learner by necessity to be a teacher by privilege.

Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever (1 Cor. 10:31; Rom. 11:36; Ps. 73:25-28).—Westminster Shorter Catechism (1646-47).

Divine love, a sacred bond between the Father and the Son, and Almighty Spirit, faithful Comforter of the afflicted: penetrate the depths of my heart and fill it with the brightness of Thy light.— Saint Augustine's Prayer Book.