FEATURE

Learning to Think at Christian Universities: Philosophical Issues

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ABSTRACT - Critical thinking has not traditionally been a strength of Christian colleges. If we are to address this problem, we must examine the philosophical concerns about whether the goal of critical thinking is truly appropriate for Christian education, and whether it is appropriate to use some of the methods that secular education uses to teach critical thinking. The conclusion is that critical thinking is compatible with Christianity, and increasing student involvement in their education is discussed as a major way of promoting thinking in schools. Benefits of student involvement and problems with implementing it are discussed.

The increased focus on students and critical thinking in secular education in recent years has not necessarily been paralleled in Christian schools. Studies have shown repeatedly that, regardless of the theoretical position one holds, increasing students' activity in the learning process produces more mature, complete, and longer-lasting learning (e.g. Rinaudo & Squillari, 2000). This increased activity can take many forms, but the purpose is that students should have to think, to construct knowledge, to ask questions; to actively participate in the learning process; which will increase the amount of learning which takes place. Learning to think is, of course, one of the primary goals of university education (Perkins, 1994; Brookfield, 1990).

Christian universities have long been criticized for being narrow-minded and not encouraging students to think critically (see LaMascus, 2001). Christian universities, as seen by those on the outside, looking in, have been described as places with "a disproportionate number of mediocre faculty members burdened with heavy teaching loads and students not generally known for their intellectual depth" (Wolfe, 2000, "An 'Intellectual Disaster'" section, ¶ 8).

Many Christian colleges are making a concerted effort to compete intellectually with non-Christian schools, with varying

degrees of success. Wolfe (2000) explains part of the reason for the imbalance: No college is likely to attract a world-class faculty if it peremptorily eliminates members of most of the world's religions. If schools limit the pool of faculty, they will have a hard time competing with schools which choose from all possible scholars. By definition, Christian schools are disadvantaged. To make up for this, many Christian schools now urge critical thinking and higher academic standards: Faculty at Christian universities must engage such thinking with vigorous pedagogies and creative scholarship, recommends LaMascus (2001).

The question is, what should Christians do about this perceived or real intellectual inferiority? Their goals are not the same as those of secular colleges. Their available resources, both human and financial, generally do not compare with those of secular institutions. Few Christians would disagree with teaching students to think, yet as a group, Christian schools fall behind public schools in this aspect, or at least perhaps define thinking in a different way. What are the theological risks involved in teaching/not teaching students to think? What should be the attitude toward student participation, critical thinking, and democratic education? Where does one draw the line between being in the world but not of it, and using common sense to advance God's cause? Is it playing with fire to talk about student-centered education, or is this doing God's will?

Unfortunately, much of what could be very helpful insight into modern education is steeped in secular humanism, which is often accompanied by liberal political ideology, and puts man on the throne and does away with God. This philosophy creates obvious tensions with conservative Christianity, making it not entirely surprising that Christian colleges have traditionally been cautious with modern educational trends. Three reactions to modern theories have been observed: assimilation of the theories to remain up-to-date and scientific, a total rejection of modern society in an attempt to preserve the purity of the system and its doctrines, and of course, a more moderate approach that attempts to incorporate what is good without compromising principles. This article presumes the third approach, and searches for a philosophical approach to guide in making decisions as to what is good about teaching critical thinking, and what is philosophically objectionable.

**Student Participation in Education and Critical Thinking:
A Working Definition of Terms**

The term *critical thinking* is an educational buzzword which nearly everyone uses and probably few understand well. In an attempt at a working definition, Michael Scriven and Richard Paul (n.d.) of *The Critical Thinking Community* say the following:

> Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and　　skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness (p. 1).

Adult life is marked by the ability to think critically; to determine fact from opinion, good from bad, to make decisions based on reason, not just feelings, to see the other person's point of view. A definition of critical thinking must incorporate these elements (see Eayrs, 1999; Brookfield, 1990). Critical thinking includes logic, and perceiving lapses in logic; seeing relationships, understanding that there are differences in interpretation, analysis, and evaluation. In a school setting, critical thinking is included in concepts like active learning, constructing knowledge, student participation in classroom discussions and curriculum decisions, cooperative learning, etc. It includes self-determination, democracy, knowing *why* and not just *what*.

A democracy is based on the presumption of people who can think, and make decisions about the way they should be governed. Democratic education emphasizes activities which allow students a voice and a vote, whether in helping create rules for their classroom, choosing activities for their free time, or even deciding school policies and curriculum (see Brookfield, 1990). Student involvement and student participation are other terms used in this paper to refer to the kind of activities that will encourage students to interact mentally and emotionally with the course content. This may include discussions, small group activities, critical questioning, or many other activities, but these same activities poorly implemented can fail to achieve the mental engagement which leads to critical thinking.

Education is usually focused either on the subject to be taught, or on the student being taught. Student-centered approaches have increased in popularity over the years as society has become more aware of the importance of the student's perspective. Students are,

after all, the clients which education is supposed to serve. The idea is that students should have a larger role in their own education, and that this would increase the quality of thinking that goes on in the classrooms.

Considering the Appropriateness of Critical Thinking in Christian Education

From the Christian viewpoint, it is generally agreed that what college students *are* when they graduate is more important than what they *know*. Knowledge is constantly evolving, changing, multiplying. Character, the ability to think and knowing what to do with information once it is found are much more important than remembering facts (White, 1898). As Christians, a lot can be learned from the secular world about how to educate students, but there are also some limitations as to what should be assimilated. There are things that can be gained from secular educational research which could be detrimental to Christian education, while other findings can be useful if they are integrated with a Christian philosophy and adopted in Christian schools (see De Jong, 1990). Christian educators can neither afford to stick their heads in the sand and ignore secular educational research, nor can they entirely set their course by it.

Christians believe there is such a thing as absolute truth, which belongs to God. Humans have many truths, which are attempts at understanding God. Since no one understands God perfectly, there are many competing interpretations as to what truth is. It is not a question of whether moral standards of right and wrong exist, but rather how to interpret the principles and apply them. In the interpretation of biblical principles, there is great variation. God has not given humans everything already digested. He expects individuals to use their minds effectively, and to figure things out.

Many students who study in non-Christian schools discard their Christian faith because they cannot make it fit with the philosophies they are studying and adopting. Often those who manage to retain their faith, however, are some of the most balanced and sincere Christians in the world. The question is, how can Christian schools provide that same opportunity for students to examine alternative philosophies and develop their own Christian experience and philosophy in the safer environment of a Christian school?

Student involvement in their own education could be a first step in answering the question of how to help students grow and test their own belief systems, but first there is the need to establish that giving

students more of a free hand is not shirking a God-given responsibility to teach them and to lead them to salvation. Amoral relativism is rampant in secular schools. From a Christian perspective, it is acknowledged that God wants people to be thinking participants in the world, not sealed off from society and unthinkingly accepting what is handed down to them (see Bentancour, 1999). Right and wrong, however, cannot be accepted as merely personal preferences. Somewhere between these extremes of complete relativism and complete reliance on authority to the extent of failing to think for oneself, there is important middle ground for the Christian.

Concepts like teaching critical thinking, which, rightly understood do not run entirely counter to Christian beliefs, have often been viewed with suspicion as liberal trends which may lead to other questionable practices and away from the more conservative positions. Often it seems that Christian educators are far from implementing cutting edge ideas (e.g. Neuman, n.d.), especially when they might be humanistic, or might require rethinking comfortable traditions. Conservative Christians tend to shrink from extremes or fads in dress, lifestyle and diet, as well as in philosophical ideologies. While on the whole, this conservatism can be a healthy part of the Christian subculture, sometimes reticence to try new things may put individuals behind educationally, socially, etc.

Young people, who tend to have an insatiable thirst for novelty, often find the church boring, rigid, unaccepting of their questioning (Daily, 1993; Peshkin, 1986). There are some Christian educators, however, who are trying to change this. "There should be as much opportunity to doubt and question as to believe," says De Jong (1990), speaking to Christian college professors. "There must also be as much opportunity to believe as there is to doubt and question" (p. 134). As one in-depth study of Adventist and other Christian schools has pointed out, however, Christian teens (and Adventist teens more than other denominations) feel they are discouraged from thinking and asking questions (Dudley & Gillespie, 1992).

Ellen White (1896), an early advocate of reform in Christian education, suggests that students "should . . . become more independent." She warns, "serious troubles are soon to be seen upon the earth, and children should be trained in such a way as to be able to meet them" (p. 6). White reiterates that religion which is merely handed down from the teachers is not enough to keep students from falling into the devil's traps (White, 1897).

Christian educators believe that salvation is one of the main goals of education (Dever, 1995; White, 1952). The question is how best to implement the education so that it will lead to that end. Secular education often cites increasing the ability to think as one of its major aims. David Perkins (1993), a noted specialist in critical thinking, claims that "better thinking is not just one more goal side by side with the dozens of others we hold for education. Better thinking is very much a means of education as well as an end" (p. 40). The question is whether or not these two educational goals are found to be compatible. Can students be taught to think and helped to make a free-will decision for Christ at the same time?

Choice involves understanding the implications (see Nicholls, 1989; Nicholls & Thorkildsen, 1995). Making blind choices about what to do without considering the consequences is not truly choosing. Students need to wrestle with issues, values and ethics. Can students truly choose redemption if they are not taught to think? Can they truly be taught to think in a Christian context without being presented with the raw materials of the plan of salvation and the opportunity to discover its richness for themselves? I propose that they cannot. I suggest that these two goals of salvation and learning to think are not only compatible, but inseparable. Teaching students to think and providing them opportunities to do so, especially in the college classroom, is not only a part of the professional work of teachers, but is also their sacred duty as Christians.

Critical Thinking, Jesus, and the Church

Jesus was "a thinker, not just a reflector. He knew who he was. This is what true Christian education is all about" (Daily, 1993, p. 238). Jesus' purpose in His teaching was to make His hearers think.

> He constantly tried to get the people to employ their own thinking and judgment, assimilating and appropriating for themselves in this manner, the lessons which He taught them... He often refused to answer a question directly, but illustrated the truth in such a way that his hearers could discover the answer for themselves (Marquis, 1917, p. 17).

Jesus thought, and challenged the authorities of His time. Early Adventist leaders in the late 1800s, like founders of other Christian denominations, were frequently young people who challenged accepted truths of their day:

> Our pioneers were independent thinkers who challenged systems and structures. . . The founders of our movement were primarily

young people who left, or were forced to leave, the mainline churches of their day as they studied God's word and listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit. These pioneers were so convinced of the importance of independent thinking that for years they refused to consider the possibility of organization or institutionalization (Daily, 1993, p. 237).

This sort of thinking is not always welcome within Christian churches today, even though writers like Ellen White (1894) clearly state that "we must not for a moment think that there is no more light and truth to be given us" (p. 2). It seems we have changed from a growth phase to a maintenance phase. Daily (1993) explains: "The spirit of Jesus is committed to challenging institutions and changing the status quo. The church, by contrast, is generally about the business of building itself up as an institution and maintaining the status quo" (pp. 32-33).

While the Church's institutions serve some very important purposes, it is important for believers not to be afraid of new ideas or of thinking. Rather, it is the duty of Christians to use the capacity God has given them for His glory. God is not finished with us yet, and while we must be cautious of falsehood and error, we cannot be so closed that we do not accept new light when it is given to us. The danger of becoming an old movement with a long history is that we lose our first love experience, and our fascination with and openness to new truth. Somehow the urge to study, to think, and to act must be maintained, in spite of the familiarity with the message which often brings carelessness, if not contempt, and causes lower commitment to the church.

Learning to think is important, and could be part of the solution to the problem of being closed to new ideas. Over a hundred years ago, one Adventist educational reformer cautioned that "education in book knowledge alone prepares the way for superficial, shallow thoughts" (White, 1898, p. 2). Some things have not changed much in the last hundred years! Education must provide not only facts, but also understanding, and the ability to apply what has been learned in practical situations.

Allowing, even requiring students to think is important not just in intellectual situations. As Roger Dudley (1978) explains, "the more rigid and autocratic a manner in which authority is applied, the more likely it is that there will be feelings of rebellion and alienation" (p. 45). Teaching critical thinking and personal responsibility may be a more effective way of socializing adolescents. The message of the

gospel should free people to think and act, not limit them to preprogrammed responses.

Issues in Student-centered Learning

What is the student's role in the educational process? How can the teacher work with students to assist them, but not to help too much? What responsibilities fall to the student in the learning process? How useful and reliable is student input, and what do students gain by being included in the educational process? What are the risks involved? Is student input reliable enough to use as a basis for curriculum decisions? That is, is there sufficient consensus among students about what they feel they should learn that it can actually guide practice?

This last question has been at least partially answered by a recent study of language learners (Vyhmeister, 1997), which shows that while felt needs vary slightly over time, there is a lot of consensus among students, their concerns are considered valid, and their requests reasonable. They claim to know what they need. They may not always want to do what should be done, but they do know what is good for them. These findings are compatible with other research which has previously discussed the gap between the theory of what students should do and their actual practices as students (see Nunan, 1995).

Students and teachers should be involved in thinking about the purposes of their actions, and, whenever possible, in choosing what those actions will be (see Kohn, 1993). Nunan & Lamb (1996) maintain that there is a continuum between learner autonomy and the total lack of it, and suggests that no one place on that continuum is perfect: "There are occasions in which curricular goals are best met by high-structured tasks; in other contexts, low-structured tasks are called for" (p. 4).

The goal has to be balance. Some freedom, some guidance. Some study, some thinking. Learning about God and about the surrounding world. Some truth is given clearly, in a "thus saith the Lord" kind of way. Other truths must be derived through study, prayer, and, yes, critical thinking. Students must neither be forced to accept truths without understanding and questioning, nor to allowed to disrespectfully say that everything is questionable, simply to escape responsibility.

Too often, Christian colleges have "pursued faith at the expense of learning" or have "pursued learning at the expense of faith" (De

Jong, 1990, p. 87). It is, however, the integration of faith and learning which gives Christian higher education such an important role in supporting and sustaining the church and its members: "Intellectual knowledge and skills *must* be given a moral context" (p. 89). Faith and learning must be brought together, and neither part neglected. There is a long history of Christian colleges where this ceased to happen, which today are secular schools.

God gave us minds and expects us to develop them and to make informed choices. "Every man must do his own thinking and planning in order . . . to meet the approval of God" (White, 1894, p. 5). Minds are best developed by use, and using the mind means thinking, not parroting. Students learn more when they are involved in thinking and making decisions about what they are learning.

> If there is one thing that has been shown again and again by contemporary cognitive science, it is this: Substantive learning is a consequence of thinking–thinking about and with what you are learning. Unfortunately, most instruction proceeds in neglect of this principle (Perkins, 1993, p. 40).

This message has great implications for the college classroom. Learning happens best when students are thinking, and thinking is not contrary to God's will.

The humanistic philosophy at the root of student-centered education is not entirely foreign to the Christian perspective. The danger of mixing Christianity and secular humanism is in coming up with something which has the weaknesses of both, and the approval of neither. While Christianity must not be watered down with secular philosophy in reality, there are some close parallels. Every individual is very important in both cases. Christians acknowledge that Christ would have died for just one sinner (White, 1940). The difference is that Christians recognize their need of a Savior. We cannot simply look inside ourselves and find all the answers. This does not, however, mean that there is nothing good in humans. Being created in the image of God, humans still dimly reflect God's goodness. But of course, this goodness can never save someone, and that's where the comparison ends. Fulfillment, for a Christian, comes in doing God's will, not their own (see also De Jong, 1990). Understanding this clearly, there is then no need to be afraid to take what is good from modern philosophy and to use it to advance the cause of God.

This idea of student-centered teaching does not mean that if Johnny does not want to study math, he can play on the computer. It means that Johnny needs to understand math, to understand why it is important; to perhaps create math, or think up his own reasons why he

needs to know math, or situations where he might use it. It means there is dialogue in the classroom, and the teacher listens and knows where Johnny is coming from and why he does not like math. It does not mean he gets out of doing it, but it might help the teacher direct Johnny towards some satisfactory answers to his frustrations. In the end, Johnny has to think quite a bit about math, and learns more about it than he would have otherwise; not only about how to do it, but also about why he has to.

There are many benefits to be gained by allowing students a certain amount of self-determination in the classroom. Kohn (1993) describes the following five results:

General well-being. It is desirable for people to experience a sense of control over their lives.

Effects on behavior and values. If the intention is for students to *take* responsibility for their own behavior, they must first be *given* responsibility, and plenty of it. The way a student learns how to make decisions is by making decisions, not by following directions.

Effects on academic achievement. Depriving students of self-determination is likely to deprive them of motivation.

Effects on teachers. "I would have been burned out long ago but for the fact that I involve my students in designing the curriculum. . . . They always come up with good proposals, they're motivated because I'm using their ideas, and I never do the unit in the same way twice."

Intrinsic value. Allowing people to make decisions about what happens to them is inherently preferable to controlling them (Adapted from Kohn, 1993, pp. 10-12).

Other studies (e.g., Nicholls, 1989) cite an increase in motivation, and decrease in discipline problems and absenteeism as results of moving toward a more student-centered curriculum. Rightly implemented, none of these concepts go against conservative Christian beliefs. Carefully managed, there is much to gain from loosening the control a little, and letting students mature a little more on their own.

The inevitability of Student participation in Curriculum Design

One of the reasons for the writer's own interest in student involvement in the curriculum process is the realization that there really is not a choice about it. If curriculum is "meaning experienced

by the student" (Schubert, 1986, p. 30), it follows that students are by definition designers of their own curriculum. They choose to pay attention in class or to goof off; or to skip class altogether. They choose what to study, and whether to study. True, some of their decisions are based on their expectations of what will be on the test, but that is not the only criterion. They make their decisions based on their personal philosophy of what is important to know and experience.   Returning to the study of English students by Vyhmeister:

> It was clear from listening to the students that including them in curriculum decisions is not really an option at all. Given the proportion of their lives that they spend outside of the English classroom, students de facto control a large part of their English curriculum. . . Based on their personal philosophy, students emphasize what they value most by paying more attention to it, or spending more time on it. In other words, students function as designers of their . . . curriculum, whether they realize it or not (1997, pp. 355, 358).

It seems that, given the amount of time spent outside the classroom, students actually control much more of what they learn than we have traditionally admitted to. Helping them learn to make good decisions for themselves seems particularly appropriate, given that it is their choice what to internalize and apply in their lives in the future.

Allwright (1984) agrees that student input is a given in classrooms, since students can control or subvert much of what happens in class by their behavior. He suggests that outright unsolicited negotiation may be rare for students, but that *navigation*, where students request clarification, further information, or create a distraction, is very common. He proposes that planning student input and acknowledging it is better than simply pretending it does not happen. Nunan (1995) further explains how this works:

> I am not suggesting that student views should be acceded to in all cases.   However, I would argue that at the very least, teachers should find out what their students think and feel about what and how they want to learn (p. 140).

Teachers often feel strongly that it is their role to make decisions for their students, and to teach them what is most important; not to leave any room for young minds to get confused. Those who recommend greater student involvement in education would argue that the teacher's role is still critical, but it is the student, finally, who chooses to learn. The teacher can only present, counsel, cajole, and test the results; the student learns. And if the student is not convinced

of the value of the learning, the day after the test, he is likely to clear his memory and move on to other "more important" things. The truth is, sometimes students choose to fail a class, or to get a much lower grade, simply because they do not see the value of the material being presented. Teachers cannot choose whether or not students will play a role in the curriculum design in their classes: they can only choose whether to make that role overt and visible, or to let them keep it a secret.

The Complications of Student Participation

If teachers know what works, and if they are philosophically comfortable with allowing students freedom of choice, why are they so reticent to put it into practice? Looking around at the experiences of others (e.g. Perkins, 1993; Schubert, 1997), it is seems that a lot of people are asking the same question. The issues are complex, however, and involve teaching in ways that teachers were probably not taught, and doing things their colleagues may not be doing. Student behavior and growth patterns provide further understanding of the difficulties which can encountered. These issues are discussed below.

Negative Student Responses to Classroom Participation

Some students see the teachers as shirking their responsibility for trying to include student input; they prefer to leave that role to the experts. Brookfield (1986) suggests, for example, that students may feel their teachers are not being professional--not doing their job, if they do not take a directive role in the classroom: "Often added to this confusion is resentment at what is seen as educators' abdications of their leadership roles" (p. 68). As Baxter Magolda & Buckley (1997) explain:

> We are told by educational reformers that our traditional style of teaching –giving students information–does not yield that outcome. Yet, when many of us genuinely try to engage students differently, we become the source of their dissatisfaction (p. 6).

Brookfield (1990) does not suggest that student involvement is undesirable, but that it may be more complicated than simply having teachers loosen their grip. Students may not at first see the value of getting involved. When students discover that "what was thought to be fixed, true, and permanent is found to be relative, shifting, and culturally specific" (p. 46), it is not always pleasant and freeing. Democratic culture expecting students to participate in classroom

decisions and activities "is, by definition, vibrant and dynamic, discomforting and unpredictable. It gives rise to apprehension; freedom is not always calming" (Rose, 1989, p. 238). Sometimes it is uncomfortable. Brookfield (1990) goes on to say that "students will often resent the teacher who has jerked them rudely out of a golden era of certainty" (p. 47). Smith (1982) adds that often, "even after having made a voluntary decision to engage in learning, we resist remaking ourselves" (p. 45).

Part of the problem is that students vacillate between longing for independence and needing the security provided by their teacher's experience, in what Brookfield (1990) has called a sort of 'educational mambo.' They need information they don't have. They need to learn how to think; they need practice thinking. But when they get too many new things in their life, they wish to return to familiar territory. Students will always need teachers. Even in this day of easy access to information, the teacher's job is secure. But rather than being the source of knowledge, the teacher has to become the source of wisdom and experience, which in turn needs to be imparted to the students. This process includes traditional teaching like memorization and textbook learning. You can't think without tools and facts. But if it is complete, the process does not stop there. And the best way to learn content is not always the traditional method (see Mager, 1997).

Protecting or Stifling? Teacher's Concerns about Student Participation

It is not easy to let students make decisions when teachers consider they could do so much better themselves, but it is a necessary part of the growth process. Dudley (1978) asks rather forcefully how schools could possibly:

> Make all the rules and impose them on the student until graduation and think we are training him [sic] for self-government? You can't learn self-government by having somebody else govern you any more than you can learn swimming by watching somebody else swim. You have to practice it. Of course, you practice either skill under a trained instructor (p. 97).

Allwright (1984) sums up the teacher attitude problem by saying that:

> Very many teachers seem to find it difficult to accept their learners as people with a positive contribution to make to

the instructional process. Many teachers, in my experience, are very happy to avoid asking learners to articulate their learning needs, on the grounds that learners never know what they want anyway (p. 167).

But it is even more complex than that. When the system does not encourage participation or critical thinking on the part of the student, it is even harder for individual teachers to accomplish such in their classrooms. Widdowson (1984) suggests that "one cannot expect that learners will very readily adopt a pattern of behavior in the English class which is at variance with the roles they are required to play in their other lessons" (p. 24). The same would hold true for any other class where the teacher chooses to go against accepted norms.

There is also a risk that allowing students a greater role in their education may be seen as somehow watering down the curriculum. Passe explains this risk:

> Because student decision-making may be associated with freedom and   empowerment, students may get the false signal that standards are being lowered and that "anything goes." Teachers must take care to disabuse them of that notion. Freedom and empowerment require more, not less, responsibility on the students' part (1996, p. 48).

Critics of student involvement in curriculum suggest that it is *laissez-faire* liberalism, and that giving students too much freedom will result in less learning (Nicholls,1989; Kohn, 1993). But those who push for student involvement and choice never suggest that students should control everything; that would defeat the purpose. There are also moral issues here; we must not allow our values to be compromised by modern relativism. The students interviewed by Vyhmeister (1997) agreed with this. They wanted to discuss and give their opinions, but did not want to dictate what happened in their classes. They felt their teachers should listen. Maybe students have some wrong ideas, but the teacher should hear them, and explain to the students so that they understand why certain things are important.

The purpose of student involvement is not to make the students happy. In fact, it may do just the opposite (Nicholls & Thorkildsen, 1995; Brookfield, 1986). It is not the appeasement of bored or antagonistic students by letting them choose activities. As a matter of fact, choice is not the point at all. Thinking about hard questions is not always fun. No one ever suggested that the best teachers are those who win popularity contests. It is important that we not try to equate

good teaching with doing exactly what the students want (Brookfield, 1987).

The Implications of Student Involvement in the Learning Process

The results of meaningful student participation in the classroom have major implications for Christian adherents in moral areas, as well the obvious academic implications. What students are required to do on campus is one thing, but what do they choose as their personal standards when they leave campus? This may depend very much on the way they are treated while they are in school. As one study (Peck & Havighurst, 1960) explains,

> It is often personally inconvenient to allow children time to debate   alternatives, and it may be personally frustrating if their choice contradicts ones own preferences. If there is any selfish, sensitive 'pride' at stake, it is very hard for most adults to refrain from controlling children in an autocratic manner. Then, too, like any dictatorship, it looks 'more efficient;' to the dictator, at least. However, the effect on character is to arrest the development of rational judgment and to create such resentments as prevent the growth of genuinely altruistic impulses (p. 191).

These are the dangers of simply dictating, whether the content is behavior, philosophy, or physics, to students. Some things simply must be developed for oneself. Critical thinking, like salvation, is personal: there is no shortcut whereby one can use the merits of someone else. Just as with Christian witness, however, those who claim to have more 'light' or experience should not stand idly by, but do the things that will help students to grow.

Sometimes this growth requires action on the part of teachers, sometimes restraint. Heidegger (1968) explains:

> Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn. . . . The teacher is ahead of his apprentices in this alone, that he has still far more to learn than they–he has to learn to let them learn (p. 15).

The novelist Robertson Davies (1985) explains why this kind of teaching is so hard:

> To instruct calls for energy, and to remain almost silent, but watchful and   helpful, while students instruct themselves, calls for even greater energy. To see someone fall (which will teach him not to fall again) when a word from you would keep him on his feet but ignorant of an important danger, is one of the

tasks of the teacher that calls for special energy, because holding in is more demanding than crying out (as cited in Buchmann, 1989, p. 51).

Years ago, Ellen White (1923) was concerned about adults making room for students to participate in what happens in the classroom. "There is a danger of both parents and teachers commanding and dictating too much," she wrote (p. 18). The Valuegenesis study (Dudley & Gillespie, 1992) found that over half the students in Seventh-day Adventist institutions felt that they did not have much of a voice in what went on in their schools. Ironically, this same study found that student participation was a predictor of both denominational loyalty and faith maturity.

In a study of the intellectual development of college students over their years in college, Marcia Baxter Magolda (1994) deals with student thinking and how it changes through four years of college and two years after graduating from college. She summarizes her findings as a way of viewing knowledge, and says that all students go through the following stages, though not necessarily at the same time. Some never arrive at the higher levels.

1. *Absolute knowing*   Knowledge is certain; it is gotten from authorities.
2. *Transitional knowing*   Some knowledge is uncertain; individuals have to think for themselves.
3. *Independent knowing*   Knowledge is quite uncertain, individual.
4. *Contextual knowing*   Contexts may determine knowledge; people should be sought who have expertise in that context, and their ideas used to inform one's own (adapted from Baxter Magolda, 1994).

Certainly, teachers need to realize that it will be hard for students to move up this scale of knowing if they have not done so themselves as professionals, and if we do not provide them opportunities for experiencing the richness and variety of knowledge that exists in the world.

Brookfield (1990) urges college teachers to teach more responsively, but also reports that his own students "could not reflect critically upon a set of ideas or body of knowledge until they had had

some relatively uncritical immersion in that content" (p. 25). Baxter Magolda (1994), in her longitudinal study of college students, also notes that "some exposure to relevant knowledge bases is necessary before constructing one's own educated perspective" (p. 42). She urges, however, that especially for upper-division classes, teachers incorporate critical thinking, student responsibility, and real-life situations, with a goal of "helping students formulate their own educated perspectives" (p. 42).

While it is true that all students can participate more fully when they know more content, this does not preclude their participation in appropriate activities for their level. Certainly students should take advantage of the expertise of the teacher. There is no need for them to re-invent the wheel, so to speak. But if students who are more involved with their education learn more and remember it longer, then it is worthwhile to explore ways of increasing student input.

Response and Responsibility for Involving Students

The whole idea of student involvement in curriculum is one of process, not merely of decision-making. There are different levels of involvement. Students may simply be allowed to voice their concerns, or may be accorded some degree of choice in their own education. Regardless of whether students desire or are given a voice or a choice, the goal is larger than a surface preference of activities. The purpose is not just to let the students choose what they want to do, it is to let them consider the issues, weigh the evidence, stretch their minds around new concepts, and discuss them with the teacher and with each other. The process is equally as important, or more so, than the product. The purpose is for them to know why they are doing what they are doing; as well as what they ought to be doing and why. Christian teachers, have to be concerned about what will happen to their students, both after they leave school, and eternally. If increasing participation in the classroom increases the long-term impact of what happens in a Christian college, then educators are not only professionally advised, but morally bound to make changes in the way they teach.

This would be asking a lot of the teacher, of course. For one, the idea of providing a safe environment suggests that teachers would not be threatened by assaults on their own value systems. As Brookfield (1990) warns, "living on the horns of irresolvable dilemmas is a fact

of life for teachers" (p. 11). There are no simple answers. Students need to truly *test* ideas, which includes opportunities for making mistakes and learning from them.   It also involves making fundamental changes, not necessarily in goals for students, but in what happens inside the university classroom.

    Christian teachers have the responsibility to be leaders, to be flexible and innovative in their classrooms; to focus teaching on their students (see De Jong, 1990, p. 135), to teach Christian young people to think critically, to make hard decisions, to meet the world on its own turf. But in order to do this, educators must know what their philosophy is, and how it relates to their personal lives. Given the advantage Christians have of a clear mission, and of a basic philosophy of life, it should be easier to choose the good, and to develop critically aware students who know what they believe and why. The point is, they have a great deal of choice about what they learn, and certainly about what they choose to apply in their lives. Sooner or later students will have to answer questions about philosophy, humanism, and Christianity, and how much better would it be to have them practice responding in a safe environment! Christian teachers have a mission to educate for eternity. Why would they not want to use the most effective methods possible?

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