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Creative Teaching Methods in Theological Education

by Mark A. Olander

Introduction

As teachers in theological education, we always have room for improvement. No matter how many years we have taught, we have much more to learn as educators. The best teachers I know are those who have a hunger to learn more about how they can improve their effectiveness as facilitators in helping their students learn and grow.

Many years ago I read a very challenging book entitled *Christian Education and the Search for Meaning* by James Wilhoit. Perhaps you have read it yourself. If you haven't, I would highly recommend that you do. In his book, Wilhoit makes the following thought-provoking statement:

Our teaching methods have usually been caught from our own teachers. There is nothing necessarily wrong with such subconscious imitation of other educators, but at the same time Christian teachers should self-consciously examine the way they teach...Christian educators need to ask themselves, "Why do I teach the way I do?"¹

In this article, I would like to encourage you to reflect on the question that Wilhoit raises. To a large extent, our effectiveness as theological educators depends upon the teaching methods we use and the skill with which we use them. I would like to expand your awareness of the multitude of possibilities before us in the educational arena. And I would like to encourage you to break out of your routine and try some creative methods that you may never have used before. Who knows? Perhaps they will breath some new life into your teaching and help your students get a renewed enthusiasm for learning. Now that would be good for us all!

Why Creative Teaching Methods Are Essential

Creative teaching methods are extremely important for several reasons. First of all, methods facilitate student learning and comprehension. Secondly, they bring students and content together. Thirdly, they determine the level of impact the learning experience will have upon the students. Fourthly, they are ways of doing something in a creative and interesting way. Fifthly, methods that are creative increase student motivation and enthusiasm for learning. And lastly, methods have the potential of making educational experiences (inside and outside the classroom) enjoyable!

¹ James, Wilhoit, *Christian Education and the Search for Meaning*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991, p. 61.

Types of Teaching Methods

Educators use different terms when categorizing the various types of teaching methods. For the purposes of our discussion in this article, I will use the terms “impressional methods” and “expressional methods”. These terms refer primarily to the role the students play when these methods are used by their teachers. Both categories have a wide variety of methods that, if used skillfully, can be very effective in the educational setting.

1. Impressional Methods

Impressional methods are those in which the students are primarily in the role of observers in which some type of information is *impressed* upon them. Some of the examples of this approach include the following: lecture, demonstration, object lessons, videos, guest speakers, storytelling, overhead projector presentations, powerpoint presentations, paradigms, and chalkboard or dry-erase board presentations.

The primary advantage of impressional methods is that they enable the teacher to cover a large amount of material in a relatively short period of time. They also are desirable by teachers because it is easier to predict the amount of time needed to present the material to students. The main disadvantage of this approach to teaching and learning is that students tend to be in a passive role and therefore are not as engaged in the educational process. This can result in hindering student motivation and decreasing the quality of the learning experience.

From what I've observed during my years of being involved in theological education in Africa, it seems that as teachers we generally prefer impressional methods because we tend to use them most of the time. Probably one reason for this tendency is that most of us have been taught this way when we were students ourselves. It is natural to teach the way we have been taught. That is the model we have most often seen and experienced in our own educational pilgrimage. Certainly, impressional methods can be very effective in many cases. However, there is another category of methods which opens up other possibilities for us.

2. Expressional Methods

Expressional methods are those in which the students take a more active role because they are encouraged to become personally involved in the learning process. When this type of teaching method is used, students are able in some way to “express” themselves. Some examples of this type of teaching methods include the following: dramas, skits, role plays, student presentations, individual or group research projects, group presentations, reflection papers, reaction papers, creative writing, narrative writing, diad discussions, triad discussions, small group discussions, class discussions, student debates, critical book reviews, forum discussion, panel discussion (e.g. guest panel, student panel, “floating” panel), interview (in class or as

homework), question & answer, letter writing, brainstorming, field trips, lecture with discussion, guided learning experiences, songs, simulation games, case studies, practical assignments (on the job training), art projects, mime, “fish bowl” discussions, problem-solving exercises, and planning and leading workshops or seminars.

The use of expressional methods can definitely enhance student motivation because students are quite actively involved. Research has shown that we tend to learn more when we are actively participating in the educational process. As the old proverb says, *“I hear, I forget. I see, I remember. I do, I understand.”* I have often noticed that my students enjoy interactive methods more than impressional methods because they are much more engaged. One of the few disadvantages of using expressional methods is that teachers are not able to cover as much material because it takes more time when students actively participate in raising questions and discussing what they are learning. One can never know for sure how much time some interactive methods will require to be effective. To use expressional methods, a teacher needs to exercise quite a bit of creativity. He or she needs to “think outside the box” and encourage the students to do the same.

How To Choose Which Method to Use

With all these possibilities, how does a teacher know which method(s) to use? There are at least five factors to consider. First, we need to consider our learning objectives. What exactly is the main purpose of the lesson? Second, we need to consider our students. How old are they? What kind of learning experiences have they been exposed to in the past? What is the academic level of the students? How many are there in the class? Next, we should consider how much time we have to work with. Do we have a fifty minute class period or a two-and-a-half hour class session? Fourth, we need to consider the educational setting. Are we going to be in a classroom or outside? Can the chairs be moved? And finally, we need to consider what equipment is available for us to use. Is there a chalk board? If so, is there any chalk around? Is there electricity in the building? Are there projectors that we can use? If so, are the projectors in working condition? Are there any appropriate DVD’s or video tapes that we can use?

Guidelines for Using Teaching Methods

There are certain basic guidelines we should keep in mind as we use these various teaching methods: (1) a teaching method is a means to an end, not an end in itself; (2) when our methodology is predictable, the potential for boredom is greatly increased; (3) the “worst” teaching method is the one we use all the time!; (4) using a variety of methods enhances student interest and makes learning more enjoyable; (5) the skill of the teacher has a direct bearing on the effectiveness of a method; (6) we should be willing to experiment and

try different methods; (7) we need to recognize the fact that every teaching method has inherent strengths and weaknesses – there is no such thing as a perfect method which works effectively at all times, with all students, and in all settings; and (8) our primary concern should be which methods will be most helpful to our students rather than which methods are we the most comfortable using.

Building Relationships with Students is Essential

Those of us who live and work in Africa recognize how important relationships are to the African people. We can use all the best teaching and learning methods possible, but if we don't have a good relationship with our students, we will ultimately be ineffective as teachers. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that we be very intentional about establishing good healthy relationships with our students. They really don't care how much or what we know, unless they know that we genuinely care for them and respect them as individuals who are valuable in God's sight and ours. Judith and Sherwood Lingenfelter speak clearly to this issue when they make the following observation:

Christian teachers must build relationships with students before they can teach effectively. Among a great many tribes in Africa, a wealth-in-people concept rather than a wealth-in-information concept predominates. The teacher is seen as someone who comes alongside students to help in their struggle to learn, which involves cooperative, not individual, effort. If one does not build personal relationships with students, they [the students] cannot learn well.²

Conclusion

Learning should be enjoyable and we as teachers have a major role to play in making that possible. We should strive to make our time with students a pleasant experience for them and ourselves. As we noted earlier, we can all improve in our use of teaching methods. As teachers in theological schools, we should always be looking for new ways of helping our students understand new truths, develop their Christian character, and refine their ministry skills.

I personally am greatly challenged by Proverbs 15:2 which says, "A wise teacher makes learning a joy; a rebellious teacher spouts foolishness." (The Living Bible) I'm sure that you, like me, desire to be a wise teacher that God can use to make learning a joy for our students. After all, who says that being a student has to be boring and unpleasant? The truth is that both we as teachers and our students can actually enjoy the experience of learning together! It will require some hard work and creativity on our part as we use a variety of teaching methods, but it will most definitely be worth the effort. Both our students and we will benefit as a result.

² Judith E. and Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Teaching Cross-Culturally*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003, p. 42.

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