

2008

# "How Do We Meet Students Where They Are, While Challenging Them Further?" : Teaching Developmentally.

Mary E. Hess

Luther Seminary, mhess@luthersem.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty\\_articles](http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles)

 Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Practical Theology Commons](#), and the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Hess, Mary E., ""How Do We Meet Students Where They Are, While Challenging Them Further?" : Teaching Developmentally." (2008). *Faculty Publications*. 235.

[http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty\\_articles/235](http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/235)

## Published Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty & Staff Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. For more information, please contact [tracy.iwaskow@gmail.com](mailto:tracy.iwaskow@gmail.com), [mteske@luthersem.edu](mailto:mteske@luthersem.edu).

## CHAPTER 4

# “How Do We Meet Students Where They Are, While Challenging Them Further?” Teaching Developmentally

Mary E. Hess

Every year in my introduction to Christian education, I do an exercise in which I ask groups of students to read a children’s book together. These books raise questions and provoke curiosity about themes that have Christian connections. They demonstrate a great way to invite students into a practice that more and more families are sharing (the reading of bedtime stories) in a way that highlights that practice’s potential for faith formation and that invites adults to ask questions they might otherwise not voice.

One of the books I frequently use is *Becoming Me*, a picture book about creation written by Martin Boroson and Christopher Gilvan-Cartwright, that is told from the point of view of God. It’s a brief story, accompanied by vivid, modernist images, that most of my students encounter for the first time with delight. Yet one year I was startled to discover, when the students returned to the plenary gathering of the class, that some of the students in the small group reading that book had interpreted it as both heretical and blasphemous, too dangerous to give to adults let alone share with young children. The emotions of these students were pitched so high that two of them had flushed faces, and the body language of several other students suggested that the small group discussion had been heated.

I was not prepared for such a response and uncertain how

to handle it. Inwardly I was immediately defensive. How could they interpret the book that way? Why were they so hostile? Outwardly I tried to make my expression look calm, and I encouraged the group to share their experience with the book. The two students who had had the strongest reaction began to speak rapidly, with loud voices, almost belligerently, about the theological implications of the book. The rest of their small group, and increasingly the rest of the room, shrank back into silence and looked increasingly uncomfortable.

Usually I trust a class to respond well to small group feedback, but this group's response clearly demanded something more. I found myself moving forward toward them, talking across their complaints, and voicing my surprise at their reaction. Internally I was angry at what felt to me like their petty refusal to take the book seriously enough and confused about what could be the "right" thing for me to do in response.

It is moments like this that come back to me when I think about surprise in the classroom. Rarely have the surprises felt good—at least initially—and rarely have I had any idea how to respond to them at the moment they occur. In this case so much was at stake: my own authority and credibility as the teacher in the room and my students' sense of trust that I could structure and sustain an atmosphere of open and respectful inquiry. The emotional intensity of the two argumentative students suggested that they, too, had something at stake. What to do?

I don't know what the "right" answer is in these cases, and that evening I stumbled through my own internal chaos barely well enough to shape the rest of the evening's class. But I do know that the moment brought vividly to mind for me a biblical passage that I often ponder. Paul writes, in the first letter to the Corinthians:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demon-

stration of spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (I Cor 2:1–5)

What does it mean to “know nothing except Jesus Christ, and him crucified”? And what possible connection does this passage have with teaching? As professors we spend long years toiling away at study that aims to prepare us for sharing “sublimity of words and wisdom”—not its opposite. Certainly walking into a classroom full of students demands a kind of authority and credibility that seems at odds with “weakness and fear and trembling.” Yet I return to this passage again and again, because it holds a resonance that strikes a deep chord within me.

Moving into a classroom surprise such as the one detailed above is an experience of deep clarity. These are the moments when I realize that no matter what I do, what is learned isn’t up to me. The energy and the passion of curiosity, the fears and the threat of “not knowing,” any catalyst for learning that emerges in a classroom—these are gifts of a power greater than I, and any learning that emerges from them is also a gift of that Teacher. This experience is perhaps the closest I have come in my own life to knowing something of what is meant by the Greek term *kenosis* (Phillipians 2:7), a term that has shifted meaning depending on the context in which it is engaged, but for me, is a mark of the self-emptying that is possible in deeply relational, respectful interaction.<sup>1</sup>

Given that reality, what does it mean to teach in a way that comes bearing Christ? For me the answers to this question have come most directly out of the educational literatures. They have emerged from descriptions of teaching and learning that privilege collaboration and openness, that conceive of teaching and learning in deeply relational ways. These descriptions evoke, almost inevitably, theological themes.

## I. MODELS FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

Consider for a moment Parker Palmer’s images for various processes of teaching and learning shown in Figures 4.1 and 4.2.

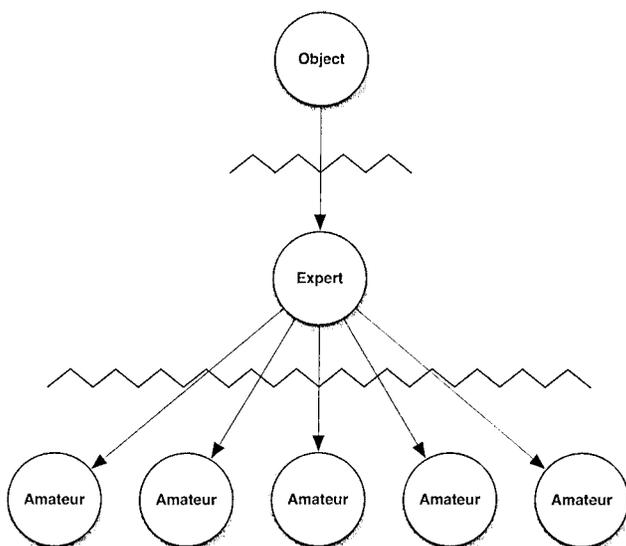


Figure 4.1 "The objectivist myth of knowing"

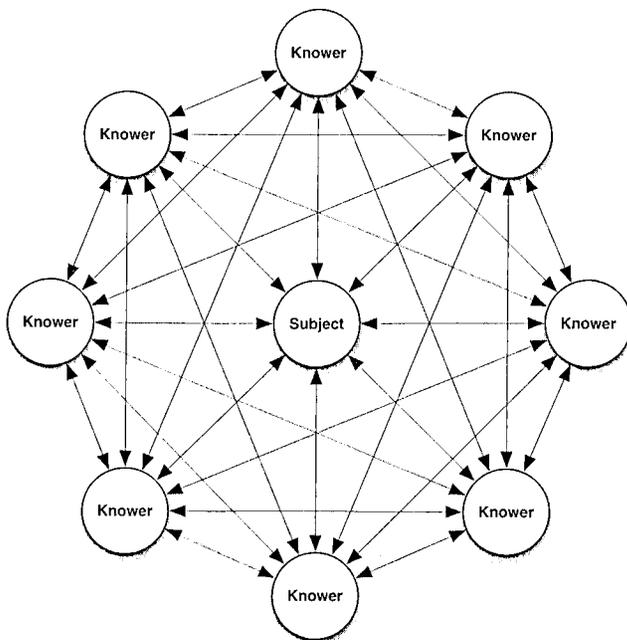


Figure 4.2 "The community of truth"

His first image depicts a process in which the responsibility for learning is clear—the expert transfers information to amateurs who passively receive it. This is an image of teaching and learning that promotes what Paulo Freire once termed “banking education,” in which learning is “deposited” into the previously blank minds of passive recipients.<sup>3</sup> The benefits to such a process are obvious: teacher and student roles are clearly delineated, the nature of authority is directly linked to the expert’s connection to the topic, it is relatively easy to measure the effectiveness of the teacher (did the information indeed get transferred?), the one-way nature of the process avoids the potential dilemma of situational or contextual factors contradicting the teacher, and so on. This is not a process, however, that permits much by way of “relationality”—particularly if relationality demands two-way communication.

Parker Palmer’s second image, on the other hand, something he has labeled “the community of truth,” provides a rich and complex model for the process of learning that evokes multiple paths of interrelationship. It is critical to understand that Palmer’s notion here is not of relativism but rather of relationality:

... by Christian understanding we must go one step further—and it is a critical step. Not only do I invest my own personhood in truth and the quest for truth, but truth invests itself personally in me and the quest for me. “Truth in person” means not only that the knower’s person becomes part of the equation, but that the personhood of the known enters the relation as well.<sup>4</sup>

You can see this understanding at work in the ways in which Jesus taught. Over and over again he drew on notions of relationship to carry meaning—siblings, parents, communities, and so on. He is most often depicted as teaching in the midst of communities, relationally, not in didactic, transmissive patterns of practice.

Trinitarian theology suggests many other themes that do not map easily onto the transfer of information process, while they do map more directly onto a “community of truth” paradigm. God created the world, and in doing so created it *whole*,

and thus organically in connection, one to another. Palmer's image of the community of truth makes those connections visible and points to a reliance upon connectivity that makes learning possible. As Malcolm Warford writes, "teaching is often viewed as a solitary venture of self and subject, but on another level we know that both teaching and learning are a matter of relationships significantly shaped by the community in which they occur."<sup>5</sup>

God gave God's only Son that "all might have life and life eternal"—a self-giving that is the very definition of *kenosis*—of "pouring oneself out"—a form of teaching that points *not* to the expertise of the teacher, but rather to the truth of the "great thing" around which we gather (to use another of Palmer's terms).<sup>6</sup> While in Palmer's first image it is easy to point to the role of the teacher—the expert—and to make specific claims about the authority of such a teacher, it is also easy to miss the way in which the learners have no direct connection to the thing about which they desire to learn. They have no relationship with the subject except as mediated through the teacher. While it is clearly appropriate to understand that Jesus is our mediator, that conviction does not make the theological educator the only mediator "through which" one encounters truth.

Indeed, the kenotic nature of the salvific event of Christ's entry into our lives is fruitfully kept at the heart of our learning and teaching as educators in Christian communities. As Paul writes, "I came resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." Palmer's second image provides a map for doing so if one puts that saving event at the heart of the map as the "great thing" around which we gather as we seek to know and to learn. There is no obvious role for a teacher in this map but that does not mean that teachers are not present. It simply points to the reality in Palmer's vision that *all* are teachers in some way, just as *all* are learners—we *all* "know as we are known." Indeed, the fundamental task of a teacher in this kind of process is to get out of the way sufficiently to allow learners to engage the central topic; to create an environment in which direct relationship and direct engagement with the subject is possible. It is fundamentally a kenotic pos-

ture for a teacher, rather than an “expert” role. As Paul writes, “I came resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified”—a knowing that freed Paul to engage widely diverse cultures as contexts in which to share and learn the Good News.

It should go without saying, but nevertheless needs to be noted, that *kenosis* flows from a fundamental self giving, and that one must first “have a self” to “give a self.” In other words, this description is not a recipe for teachers simply to tell students whatever they want to hear or for people with varying amounts of ignorance to share that ignorance with each other, but rather, for teachers to create learning environments in which differing knowledges can be tested, brought into relationship, and affirmed or discarded.<sup>7</sup> In this kind of process teachers must be so deeply attentive to the subject they are teaching that they are able to be at once clearly loyal to a specific interpretation and yet demonstrably open to new insights. As Victor Klimoski points out:

Being attentive is important in all aspects of a person’s growth and development. First and foremost, it means being attentive to the movement of God in one’s life, through the Word, and in the tradition one bears. When we are advised to listen for God’s voice, it means we need to be still. We need *the ability to let go of our conclusions* long enough to grasp the sort of questions that should dog our steps.<sup>8</sup>

## II. DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES: SELFHOOD AND LEARNING

Yet this stance, this fundamental ability to let go of conclusions is not an easy one. What does it mean to “have a self” in order to “give a self” in the context of teaching? Robert Kegan identifies some of the dilemmas in this kind of teaching as stemming from the developmental challenge of moving from third-order to fourth-order knowing.<sup>9</sup> Kegan defines a key distinction between people making meaning in third order frameworks, and

those doing so in fourth order frames, as the ability to differentiate oneself from the surround in which one is embedded.

I frequently have students, for instance, who feel personally challenged on some fundamental level of their identity if you disagree with them. Perhaps the furthest they will go is to suggest that everyone has a belief about a question, and so be it. In other words, you can believe that, and I will believe this, and there's no way to finally arbitrate between the two positions. Alternatively, students will argue that there is only one way of viewing a question—the authority of scripture, for instance—and any other way is and must be seen as demonstrably false. In both of these cases students feel personally threatened by acknowledging that there are multiple and valid lenses through which to consider a particular question and come to a decision. In the first case a student might recognize the multiplicity of beliefs but see them as carrying equal weight. In the second case, a student might recognize the multiplicity, but solves the dilemma it poses by claiming a personal stance as the only authoritative position. In the example I described at the beginning of this chapter, I believe the students who were so visibly upset felt challenged to the core of their identity—both by a professor using a children's book to invite broader meaning-making and by colleagues who refused to confirm their interpretation of the book. They had no place in which to embed themselves, no group with which to align, and thus experienced a deep and personal threat.

This way of constructing meaning makes it virtually impossible to welcome such students into the kind of critical discourse at the heart of much theological study, where differing nuances of interpretation are understood as legitimate and valid and where one's interpretive stance defines one's position, but not necessarily the whole of the field. In the context of seminary education, our students face the particular challenge of desiring and even needing to proclaim the authoritative nature of Christian truth claims, but also needing to find ways to do so that are deeply contextualized, deeply situated, founded on and funded by a specific space within a specific community. As Palmer's second image makes so strikingly visible, truth lies at the heart

of the community, and each of us has singular knowledge of it—but each of us also only holds parts of the puzzle.

In explaining how to support this kind of learning, Palmer writes:

We invite *diversity* into our community not because it is politically correct but because diverse viewpoints are demanded by the manifold mysteries of great things.

We embrace *ambiguity* not because we are confused or indecisive but because we understand the inadequacy of our concepts to embrace the vastness of great things.

We welcome *creative conflict* not because we are angry or hostile but because conflict is required to correct our biases and prejudices about the nature of great things.

We practice *honesty* not only because we owe it to one another but because to lie about what we have seen would be to betray the truth of great things.

We experience *humility* not because we have fought and lost but because humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen—and once we have seen them, humility is the only posture possible.

We become *free men and women* through education not because we have privileged information but because tyranny in any form can only be overcome by invoking the grace of great things.<sup>10</sup>

Developmentally, however, this attention to “the grace of great things” is not an easy position to inhabit, nor is it a simple one into which to grow. The challenges are difficult enough in the context of typical higher education where students often displace the “threats” onto cognitive dissonance and remain unengaged.<sup>11</sup> In theological contexts, with the high emphasis placed on normativity, and in the seminary context, where students are studying to lead communities, these challenges can become identity threatening and fundamentally undermine the “great things” we all seek to engage.

This intersection is the point at which Kegan's work becomes so interesting in a seminary context, because it provides a concrete—and surprisingly friendly to Christian faith—process for walking with students through these developmental shifts.<sup>12</sup> At the heart of the strategy he and Lisa Lahey have developed is the metaphor of “mental machinery.”<sup>13</sup> While on the one hand such a metaphor might seem like a capitulation to the instrumentality I objected to earlier, it is in fact a bridge metaphor—a way of seeing that prompts the development of certain practices of language, of certain habits of reflection—and in doing so it opens up the relationality of knowing described in Palmer's images.

At the center of the mental machinery are seven languages, seven ways of describing and entering into reality that build a habit of mind and practice that moves from third-order knowing (embedded in a surround where identity is held by the culture) to fourth-order knowing (where the surround is now held, rather than holding, empowering a person to self-differentiate sufficiently). Kegan and Lahey describe four personal, or internal, languages and three social languages. Working together, the seven languages create an agile and adept stance for learning—particularly the kind of learning that theological educators desire so strongly to support.

These seven languages also map a pragmatic stance for teachers, giving us concrete strategies for living from within our identity as faithful Christians outward to supporting our students in their own rooted, yet open, identities. The first four, which Kegan and Lahey term “personal” languages, map specific moves from what might be indentified as third-order knowing, to a stance that allows for fourth-order frames. They are

- Moving from complaint to commitment;
- Moving from the language of blame to that of personal responsibility;
- Moving from the language of New Year's resolutions to competing commitments; and,
- Moving from big assumptions that hold us to assumptions that we hold.<sup>14</sup>

### A. From Complaint to Commitment

Consider how these languages help us in our classrooms. Take the first one—moving from the language of complaint to the language of commitment. Kegan and Lahey’s assertion is that deep within our complaints lie corresponding commitments that give rise to the complaint. Seeking to understand the commitment brings a different and more constructive energy to the situation. When students complain to me about the amount of required reading I’ve assigned, I explore with them where that complaint arises from. Is it a commitment to another course that is taking priority over their commitment to this one? Is it a desire to read deeply and integrate and the corresponding fear that with this much reading they won’t be able to do so? Is it that they don’t yet know how to read in different ways (skim for crucial points, read deeply with their questions, and so on) and so can’t imagine spending the time they think it will require? The answers to those questions shape my responses and suggest differing ways of moving forward.

Over the years I have moved several books from “required” to “recommended” on my syllabi due to sustained exploration with my students of their complaints. In the process, I’ve discovered that my entirely reasonable fears of not covering the ground sufficiently are more than outweighed by the positive and even transformative learning that comes from the deep engagement which is possible when students’ strong commitments are respected.

The language of complaint is pointed at my learning as a teacher, as well. Many of the complaints I find myself voicing have at their heart a deeper commitment. Forcing myself to state the issue as a positive commitment, rather than a negative whine, both affirms such a commitment and frames it in a way that empowers me.<sup>15</sup> When I complain that my colleagues refuse to talk about their teaching, for instance, I need to recognize that what I am committed to is finding ways to open up dialogical space for reflecting on teaching, particularly my own. Looked at it in this way, I am forced to acknowledge that my complaint might hold the seeds of its own resolution. This lan-

guage leads naturally to Kegan and Lahey's second language, that of moving from a language of blame to one of personal responsibility.

### B. From Blame to Personal Responsibility

One way in which Kegan and Lahey speak of this language is to suggest asking this question: "What are you doing, or not doing, that is keeping your commitment from being more fully realized?" In the contexts in which I teach, one frequent complaint that is often heard has to do with the ways in which students dismiss classical theological disciplines as not being relevant to contemporary ministry. Why can't our students trust us that learning hermeneutics matters? Or, why can't they see that systematic theology holds important keys to providing coherence and congruence? Most of the time these complaints are framed as problems from the students' standpoint. The students, that is, just don't "get it."

I begin with my own underlying assumption that study of classical disciplines is crucial to engagement in contemporary ministry. When I ask myself what I am doing, or not doing, to keep this commitment from being realized, I begin to consider my complaint from a different angle. Why don't my students understand that their epistemological commitments shape how they lead learning? Perhaps because I haven't helped that understanding come alive for them. Given the cultural contexts we inhabit, a postmodern turn of mind rarely accepts assertions—particularly from institutional authorities—as *a priori* correct. Just because I've told my students that an underlying epistemology matters doesn't mean they understand that is the case, or why, even if they understand the terminology—and many of them don't. So how can I help them "sympathetically identify" with such an understanding? How can I engage them, provide enough routes into the material and enough immediate connecting points, that they begin to see, in their own imagination, in their own experiences, how what one believes about knowing shapes how one teaches? Is it possible that my own teaching has

not been effective? Do I even know how to go about inviting them effectively into the material I wish to share? And if I don't, does that mean I am unqualified for my current post?

Such doubts emerge all too often in the work of teaching, and all too often there are few places to voice, let alone explore, such self doubt.

Part of the response to such dilemmas, I've found, is to recognize that it's not enough to work with these challenges on only the cognitive level because the affective and the psychomotor levels carry at least as much power in shaping student understanding. That is, it's not enough to simply work with intellectual concepts: I have to engage student feelings and shape experiences in which they can practice, or embody, what we're learning together. The very way in which I approach their concerns teaches something about whether or not their concerns matter, which in turn teaches them something about the integrity of the classroom.<sup>16</sup> The same is true about my own doubts. Do I simply push them down, ignore them, all too often take that internal energy and blame the student for her problem? Or do I ask myself the questions that bring me beyond my own limited nature and break open room for the Spirit to move?

Recognizing that I bear some personal responsibility in the situation is not, of course, to assume that I carry all of it and the student bears none. As I noted earlier in this essay, a kenotic teaching posture demands an engagement with the truth at the heart of the circle of knowing, it demands that there be a *there* around which we gather. I bear responsibility, the student bears responsibility, and together we meet in a specific context and around a specific topic that carries its own substance and context.

### C. From New Year's Resolutions to Competing Commitments

Recognizing the larger context in which we are embedded moves us to Kegan and Lahey's third language, that of moving from New Year's resolutions to competing commitments. Most

of us are familiar with New Year's resolutions—those bright and cheery resolutions to begin the New Year afresh—to lose 10 pounds, to grade papers within one week of submission, to write regularly, and so on and on and on. Kegan and Lahey point out that one of the problems with such resolutions is that they don't take into account the reality that many commitments coexist and often conflict with each other. The language of resolutions also tends to put a negative spin on the task at hand, given all of the times I am not successful in keeping them.

I may be committed to grading papers within one week of receiving them, for instance, but I am also committed to preparing well for each of my classes. If I can't get papers back in time, then surely it's a failure on my part. Yet in a world of twenty-four-hour days, there may not be time to do both well. Facing the challenge of recognizing one's own limitations requires the ability to get outside of oneself enough to consider these competing commitments, along with the specific underlying assumptions that may be preventing us from effectively meeting them.

I know that, for myself, far too often I bring papers home and grade them late into the night, rather than admitting that I can't do all that is on my plate within the reasonable framework of a work week. Other of my colleagues skimp on their paper comments or pull out lectures they've given over and over again, all by way of managing the time pressures. But how often, if at all, do we sit down with each other and acknowledge that the pressure has become too much? Given the very real financial stresses that beset seminary education, it can feel downright dangerous and somehow disloyal to ask whether we are pushing too hard. Yet very similar pressures face our students once they enter their ministries. While our explicit curriculum may intend that they learn how to delegate effectively and share the burden of ministry, our implicit curriculum very often teaches them that individuals need to soldier on, finding ways to manage the stresses individually.

That implicit curriculum—and beneath it, the unvoiced null curriculum of “it's always been done this way, and if we don't continue to do it this way the whole church will fall

apart”—holds powerful sway. Like the images shared early in this chapter drawn from Palmer’s work, the “great things” at the heart of our engagement can demand more of us than we recognize and shape more of our teaching and learning than we are ready to admit that they do. Finding ways to name our conflicting and competing commitments often leads directly to recognizing the key assumptions at the heart of our practices. It is at this point that the final language of Kegan and Lahey’s four personal languages, the foundation of their mental machinery model, becomes so important.

#### **D. From Big Assumptions That Hold Us to Assumptions We Hold**

Kegan and Lahey assert that we need to move from the language of big assumptions that hold us to the language of assumptions that we hold. This is a clear marking point in moving from one order of consciousness to another. In Kegan’s terms what was once “subject”—what once held us to the point that we could not see it—becomes “object”—or something that we can now hold at arm’s length and consider. One of the biggest such assumptions to pervade theological education is that of teaching authority, that of the difference between the objectivist myth of teaching and learning described in Palmer’s first image, and the more relational, connected process of his second.

The objectivist, instrumental image of teaching assumes that the acknowledged authority or expert best mediates interaction with the topic under consideration. Indeed, it posits that such interaction is essentially unidirectional, proceeding at the invitation of the teacher and in the direction the teacher outlines. As long as we are held by this assumption, it is impossible to question it, to even begin to build a relationship to it, rather than being held by it. Perhaps it is true, but how can we know unless we consider other alternatives? How can we know unless we can imagine our way into a space in which it is not the case?

I am convinced that part of the challenge I face in my own teaching context at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, comes from this unexamined assumption. So much flows outward from it! Not the least is an MDiv degree program structured so rigidly that in their first year our students have only one half-credit elective choice, in the second year only one full-credit elective choice, and it is only in their fourth year (our students spend their third year on internship) that they are allowed three electives. Such tight structuring assumes that the institution, and the faculty as its primary arbiters, knows what's best for students. Yet our students are an increasingly diverse group, coming from a variety of contexts, a vast array of different experiences, with a wide spectrum of abilities. Our curriculum assumes a "just in case" kind of focus—you need this learning just in case you come across this particular situation, rather than a "just in time" focus—here's the information you need at the point in time that you are ready to use it. We need to remember that as Paul writes to the Corinthians, "I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." This core conviction can be a key from which all else flows.

What does it mean to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified? Surely not that we all should simply show up and wait passively for information to be showered upon us. But what kind of learning environment creates an active space of listening for such a revelation? What kind of design can structure the space to allow for the best opportunity for such engagement? This is the fulcrum of Kegan and Lahey's work as well, for the four languages just described build a foundation personally, an internal set of mechanisms, but they must be embedded in the three social languages that Kegan and Lahey delineate.

### **E. From Prizes and Praising to Ongoing Regard**

The first of these social languages is the movement from the language of prizes and praising to that of ongoing regard.

One way to think about this shift is deeply theological: it is moving away from a space in which one's actions earn merit, to one in which one is gifted simply by being a child of God. In other words, it is the difference between a world of earned merit and one of overflowing, unmerited, and unearned but freely available *grace*.

Do our students entering our classrooms understand themselves as fully capable learners, gifted with unique gifts that must be shared to enable learning for everyone—the multiple focal points of Palmer's second, connected image—or do they instead enter our classrooms seeking to discover, in the shortest time possible, what the teacher wants and how to deliver it? Are our practices of evaluation—particularly within degree program structures where incentives defined as grades are still in place—focused on attributing certain traits to students and thus forming them, or are they focused on recognizing and noting our experience, either positive or negative, leaving the other informed (but not formed) by our words? For example, “Martin, your writing demonstrates your brilliance,” versus, “Martin, I appreciate the way in which your writing caused me to think in new ways about what epistemology means.” The first statement attributes a trait to the student; the second describes how the student had an impact on my own learning. The first awards a “prize” to the student on a particular assignment; the second suggests that the student has the ability to teach.

Kegan and Lahey note several characteristics of this kind of language use, among them that it:

Distributes precious information that one's actions have significance; infuses energy *into* the system; Communicates appreciation or admiration directly to the person; Communicates *specific* information to the person about the speaker's personal experience of appreciation or admiration; *Non-attributive*, characterizes the speaker's experience, and not the person being appreciated; Sincere and authentic, more halting and freshly made; Transformational potential for both the speaker and the person being regarded . . .<sup>17</sup>

Providing a menu of assignments in a class that allows an individual student to contribute her best gifts to the classroom communicates something very differently from a single assignment that all students must complete. Providing opportunities for students to take the risk of trying something they're *not* good at, with deliberate incentives for trying something new and difficult rather than steep penalties for failing, contributes to an environment of ongoing regard.<sup>18</sup> Using critical incident reports, described elsewhere in this book, pointedly communicates that student experience of the learning event matters.<sup>19</sup>

As these are clearly social languages, their implementation must stretch beyond any individual classroom. Set within the often competing commitments of higher education, creating an environment of ongoing regard can be difficult. Yet there are ways of doing so, not the least being using the core theological categories at the heart of the curriculum as central organizing principles, rather than defaulting to those of higher ed.<sup>20</sup> Rather than organizing theological education in terms of prizes going to those most recognized by specific guilds or other organizations, it is possible to organize theological education in terms of matching people's God-given gifts to specific tasks and roles.

In my context it is clear that certain people are gifted as teachers, others as writers, still others as administrators. Providing room for each set of gifts to be identified and given room to flourish contributes to an overall atmosphere quite different from that in which higher education usually exists. It also inevitably creates constructive synergy that spreads energy, as opposed to stress-filled busyness that simply saps energy.

### **F. From Rules and Policies to Public Agreement**

Deliberately moving in these directions, which tends to be moving against the grain of much of higher education, requires the next language that Kegan and Lahey have identified: that of public agreement (as distinguished from that kind of institutional language which resides in "rules" and "policies").

Most of us are quite familiar with what is meant by “rules and policies”—these are elements of institutions that exist within a complex web of governance (city, state, and federal laws, for instance, require most institutions to specify their rules and policies for dealing with specific issues). Rules and policies are almost universally developed from the top down of an organization and rarely provide constructive ground for engagement. You may first encounter a rule in the event of breaking it and encountering the resulting punishment. The language of rules and policies is observed most often in the specific, intermittent nature of its application to infraction than in ongoing, constructive modes for shaping engagement. You know you are not “supposed to do that,” but you may not be as clear about what you *are* supposed to do. Students know, for instance, that they should not use exclusively male pronouns to refer to human beings in their papers, but they can often not articulate *why* that is the case, let alone suggest creative alternatives for referring to human beings.

The language of public agreement, by way of contrast, is a “vehicle for responsible people to collectively imagine a public life they simultaneously know they would prefer and know they will, at times, fall short of.”<sup>21</sup> This is the language of *covenant* rather than contract. It is a language of relationship, of commitment to each other. It is the language that teachers often ask small groups to develop at the beginning of a collaborative process. “What will be our agreement about collaboration? How will we know if we are indeed living into it?” Such an agreement allows individual members of a group space in which to call the group into accountability. It is a language that demands as well as facilitates participation. Much of what we have described as the process of using CIQ forms seeks to embody this kind of group space. Similarly, the very ground rules we established for the teaching/learning reflection group out of which this book grew were a covenant for our participation.

I would go so far as to argue that Paul’s rhetoric in the letters to the scattered churches of the first century was an attempt to articulate such a language, to provide a constructive and public agreement about what these communities were to be

about. He argued that he came not with “sublimity of words and wisdom” but with a deep connection to a living God, one who had been broken on a cross that we might live into God’s creating Word. Paul’s witness was to scattered communities and attempted to build amongst them a shared openness and hospitality to engagement with “others.” Can there be a better way to frame our own learning communities?

At the beginning of each course I teach, we spend some time exploring this notion of a language of public agreement. One obvious example involves walking with my students through the syllabus for the course. I try to design all of my courses with room for improvisation, and helping each other understand what that can mean begins in the first session of the class. I have found Stephen Brookfield’s “course caveat” a good catalyst for this conversation because it names the limits of the negotiation, but also provides room for discussion.

---

### **What You Need to Know about This Course**

As a student, I very much appreciate the chance to make informed decisions about the courses I take. I want to know who the educator is, what his or her assumptions are, and what he or she stands for before I make a commitment to spend my time, money, and energy attending the class. So let me tell you some things about me and how I work as an educator that will allow you to make an informed decision as to whether or not you wish to be involved in this course.

I have framed this course on the following assumptions:

1. That participating in discussion brings with it the following benefits:
  - It helps students explore a diversity of perspectives.
  - It increases students’ awareness of and tolerance for ambiguity and complexity.
  - It helps students recognize and investigate their assumptions.
  - It encourages attentive, respectful listening.

- It develops new appreciation for continuing differences.
  - It increases intellectual agility.
  - It helps students become connected to a topic.
  - It shows respect for students' voices and experiences.
  - It helps students learn the processes and habits of democratic discourse.
  - It affirms students as cocreators of knowledge.
  - It develops the capacity for the clear communication of ideas and meaning.
  - It develops habits of collaborative learning.
  - It increases breadth and makes students more empathic.
  - It helps students develop skills of synthesis and integration.
  - It leads to transformation.
2. That students attending will have experiences that they can reflect on and analyze in discussion.
  3. That the course will focus on the analysis of students' experiences and ideas as much as on the analysis of academic theories.
  4. That the chief regular class activity will be a small group discussion of experiences and ideas.
  5. That I as teacher have a dual role as a catalyst for your critical conversation and as a model of democratic talk.

So please take note of the following “product warnings”!

If you don't feel comfortable talking with others about yourself and your experiences in small groups, *you should probably drop this course.*

If you don't feel comfortable with small group discussion and think it's a touchy-feely waste of valuable time, *you should probably drop this course.*

If you are not prepared to analyze your own and other people's experiences, *you should probably drop this course.*

From Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 60–61.

---

### G. From Constructive to Deconstructive Criticism

The final language that Kegan and Lahey describe is that which moves from the language of constructive criticism to that of deconstructive criticism. Given how most of us were trained to practice constructive criticism, it can be jarring to recognize the assumptions upon which it rests. For instance, constructive criticism:

assumes the perspective of the feedback giver is right and correct . . . An accompanying assumption is that there is only one right answer . . . As long as we hold our view to be true—we have a vested interest in maintaining the truth. . . . Once we establish our meaning as the standard and norm against which we evaluate other people, we essentially hold them to our personal preferences.<sup>22</sup>

Criticizing constructive criticism is not an argument for the impossibility of normative truth. Rather, Kegan and Lahey point beyond notions of destructive and constructive criticism to what they have instead labelled “deconstructive criticism,” which assumes that offering criticism is an opening for engagement in real dialogue that seeks to foster substantial learning. Such engagement rests on a series of “deconstructive propositions”:

1. There is probable merit to my perspective.
2. My perspective may not be accurate.
3. There is some coherence, if not merit, to the other person's perspective.

4. There may be more than one legitimate interpretation.
5. The other person's view of my viewpoint is important information to my assessing whether I am right or identifying what merit there is to my view.
6. Our conflict may be the result of the separate commitments each of us hold, including commitments we are not always aware we hold.
7. Both of us have something to learn from the conversation.
8. We need to have two-way conversation to learn from each other.
9. If contradictions can be a source of our learning, then we can come to engage not only internal contradictions as a source of learning but interpersonal contradictions (i.e., "conflict") as well.
10. The goal of our conversation is for each of us to learn more about ourselves and the other as meaning makers.<sup>23</sup>

Note how these propositions shift learners and teachers from the mode of being the owners of truth to being seekers of truth. Quite visibly they move us from the instrumental process depicted in Palmer's first image at the beginning of this chapter to his second, more relational image of the "community of truth." In making this move, we rely on our faith that there is, indeed, truth to be discovered—but our very faith shapes the humility of our search for truth.<sup>24</sup>

These propositions are a basis by which to begin a true conversation. They are a clear foundation for the kind of learning involved in discipleship. As Paul notes, "I come not bearing wise words of wisdom, but only Christ, and him crucified." Paul knows something whereof he speaks, in having had his entire life turned upside down, quite literally struck from his previous authoritative stance into blindness, and turned to a new road.

It is important to recognize that:

A language of deconstructive criticism is not a language of discounting one's own negative evaluation. Rather it's about holding two simultaneous realities together. And practicing a language for deconstructive conflict does not leave one in paralysis of analysis, unable to act, merely better understanding the conflict. Finally, language for deconstructive conflict is not practiced first of all for the purpose of making the conflict disappear or even reducing its intensity.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, this kind of language can at times heighten awareness of the differences that exist in a given situation.

This language is an argument for the nuanced and complex notion of truth that Palmer identifies as *troth*, or the truth for which one gives one's life.<sup>26</sup> Such truth is neither easily derived nor simply specified. This is the kind of truth for which Jesus was crucified and on the basis of which we as sinful human beings are redeemed. This is also the truth—through pledging of troth—that most often poses the really painful dilemmas of growth for our students and ourselves. To return to the situation I described at the beginning of this chapter, my students who were so visibly outraged by their reading of a children's book and the differing responses their colleagues made to it, were caught on the horns of a dilemma for which they had no solution. They did not hold the "deconstructive propositions" listed above. And it is doubtful that had I simply listed these at the beginning of the class they would have been able to comprehend them. Almost anything I did at that point in the classroom probably was not going to enter their space and change their perceptions. However, my actions could—and most likely did—have an impact on many of the other students in the room.

From the perspective of hindsight, had I already had a "language of public agreement" in place with them, I could have found more constructive ways to bring them into dialogue. Indeed, many of the exercises that Stephen Brookfield describes in chapter 3 of this volume for learning through dialogue are carefully structured to create precisely that kind of space. For students who are not yet able to make the shift from third to

fourth-order meaning-making, providing such carefully structured environments is critical. They function as a form of container, or “holding environment” in Kegan’s terms, that provides space in which teachers can model and students can experiment with and explore differing perspectives.

Such exercises also begin to invite students into the kinds of practices that live in these other “languages” that Kegan and Lahey have defined and which shape so much of what we are attempting to do in sharing the texts of classical disciplines with them. In doing so we provide room for our students—and ourselves!—to practice the “mental machinery” of growth and development that may indeed allow us to embody Paul’s words:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (I Cor 2:1–5)

## NOTES

1. Sarah Coakley explores a number of ways of thinking about *kenosis* in her chapter “Kenosis: Theological meanings and gender connotations,” in a text edited by John Polkinghorne, *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). One of my MA students at Luther Seminary, Claire Bischoff, also wrote an excellent thesis on this topic, which is available through our library: “Truth-centered Communities: Taking the Trinity Seriously in Religious Education.” MA thesis, Luther Seminary, 2004.
2. These images are drawn from Parker Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*. Copyright 1998, reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1985), 57 ff.
4. Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 58.
5. Malcolm Warford, "Introduction," in *Practical Wisdom: On Theological Teaching and Learning*, ed. by Malcolm Warford (New York: Lang, 2004), xv.
6. See in particular Palmer's "grace of great things" in *The Courage to Teach*, 107–108.
7. See here, in particular, the Stephen Brookfield discussion in chapter 3 of this volume.
8. [Emphasis added.] Victor Klimoski, "Evolving dynamics of formation," *Practical Wisdom: On Theological Teaching and Learning*, ed. by Malcolm Warford (New York: Lang, 2004): 33.
9. Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 37–70. See also his *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
10. Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 107–108.
11. See, for example, the work of P. Kitchener and K. King, *Developing Reflective Judgment: Understanding and Promoting Intellectual Growth and Critical Thinking in Adolescents and Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994) or Kenneth Bruffee, *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence and the Authority of Knowledge* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
12. For specific examples of Kegan's theorizing applied to communities of faith, see Anita Farber-Robertson, *Learning While Leading: Increasing Your Effectiveness in Ministry* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2000), and Walter Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986).
13. See in particular Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, *How The Way We Talk Can Change The Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).
14. *Ibid.*
15. This, of course, is also part of the energy behind the research methodology known as "appreciative inquiry." See David Cooper-

- rider, Frank Barrett, Suresh Srivastva, "Social construction and appreciative inquiry: A journey in organizational theory," *Management and Organization: Relational Alternatives to Individualism*, ed. by Hosking, Dachler and Gergen (New York: Ashgate, 1995). Also, Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herdon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004).
16. Stephen Brookfield and I have tried to make this point forcefully in chapter 1 of the volume you are currently reading, and Stephen explains a number of concrete ways to help students learn this respect through discussion in chapter 3.
  17. Kegan and Lahey, *How the Way We Talk*, 102.
  18. It is worth noting that Sharon Daloz Park's work on leadership education suggests that "it must be underscored that it is the reflection on one's own experiences of leadership failure that is the essential, vital feature of this leadership formation practice." Sharon Daloz Parks, *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2005), 96. Further examples of how this works in teaching students how to participate in discussion can be found in chapter 3 of the volume you are currently reading.
  19. The CIQ process is described at length in chapter 1 of this volume and then explored using particular examples in chapters 3, 5 and 8.
  20. The interesting experiment at the heart of Luther Seminary's current curriculum is described by Donald Juel and Patrick Kiefert in "A rhetorical approach to theological education: Assessing an attempt to re-vision a curriculum." In David S. Cunningham (ed.), *To Teach, To Delight, and To Move: Theological Education in a Post-Christian World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2004).
  21. Kegan and Lahey, *How the Way We Talk*, 114.
  22. Kegan and Lahey, *How the Way We Talk*, 128–129.
  23. Kegan and Lahey, *How the Way We Talk*, 141. A similar set of principles can be found in the "Principles of dialogue" from the Catholic Common Ground Initiative (<http://www.nplc.org/commonground/dialogue.htm>), and in the ELCA's document "Talking together as Christians about tough social issues" (brief excerpt available online at: <http://www.elca.org/youth/resource/riskydiscussions.html>).
  24. Mark Edwards names a series of Christian virtues in relation to

this kind of humility as being quintessential scholarly responses in his essay “Characteristically Lutheran leanings?” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, Vol. 41, #1 (2002).

25. Kegan and Lahey, *How the Way We Talk*, 143–145.
26. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, 43.