

Education Beyond the Classroom

What comes to mind when you think of education? School buildings? Libraries? Textbooks? Curricula? Teachers? Most of us probably associate education with at least one of these things, and surely many more could be added. But does education take place outside of such formal settings? Can curricula be found beyond that of the normal course of study? And can teachers be found who are teaching outside of the classroom?

If we simply consider the amount of time students spend outside of class the answer to these questions would surely be a resounding “Yes!” And if we add the strong probability that many of the hours spent outside the class are consumed by various media, for example, we can see another strong reason to answer in the affirmative. Students are virtually suffocated with ideas when they leave the confines of the school building. For many their education has just begun when the last bell rings each day. In fact, many students use whatever mental energy they have to learn only those things that interest them outside of school.

Educational Sources: Parents

What are some of the sources from which students learn? Let’s begin with parents. After years of ministry among youth I am convinced that students want to learn from their parents. In fact, some are desperate for their parents’ wisdom. Thankfully, I have seen the wonderful effects of respect between parents and children. The children are taught the most important truths of life in the home and those truths are accepted because there is a large measure of respect for the parents. Such an atmosphere is patiently developed through the parents’ concentrated, time-consuming dedication to their

children. And I hasten to add that I have observed this in single parent as well as blended families. The result is that children who are raised in such a home will usually compare what they are taught outside the home with what they are taught in the home. And the lessons they learn from parents outweigh other lessons.

Unfortunately, though, this situation is much too rare. Many students, including those raised in Christian homes, are left alone to discover what they can without the guidance of parents. When we realize that "true, meaningful communication between parent and child ... occupies only about two minutes each day"(1) there should be reason for concern. That amounts to slightly more than 12 hours per year. If that is compared to the amount of time spent in school, for example, what the parents teach in that brief time can be overwhelmed with contrary ideas. Students spend much more time learning at school per week than they do with parents per year! This situation should be seriously considered by Christians when evaluating the current educational climate. If Christian parents are not willing to educate their children there may not be much room for complaining about what is learned outside the home. Children have always needed parental guidance and they always will.

One of the most important directives for the ancient Jews applies to parental responsibility for the education of their children. Deuteronomy 6:4-7, the revered Shema, states that "(5) You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (6) And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; (7) and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up." This strategic passage was reemphasized by the Lord Jesus (Mark 12:28-30). What a student learns outside of class should begin at home.

Educational Sources: What is Heard, Read, and Seen

Where and by whom is a student educated outside the school and home? Actually the question should use both past and present tenses. Since we are concentrating on education outside the classroom, it's important to realize that students are constantly being educated, whether they are aware of it or not. Education does not just apply to some type of formal education; it is very much a part of daily life. The Christian student who is attempting to think God's thoughts after Him is profoundly aware of this. He lives in a world of ideas, and ideas have consequences. Those ideas are so much a part of life that it's as if they're a portion of the air we breathe. Students should be conscious of this, but the same is true for all of us. All of us are students.

So where do we find the teachers? There are at least three other sources: what is heard, what is read, and what is seen.

First, what is heard? One morning as I went to the front yard to get the newspaper I heard a loud, repetitive noise that sounded as if it were a woodpecker hammering on metal. When I located the source I realized to my amazement that indeed it was a woodpecker pecking on a metal light covering near our house. My curiosity was aroused so I pursued an answer to my crazy woodpecker question. It turns out that the bird could have heard his prey inside the covering, but couldn't distinguish for the moment the difference between wood and metal.

The point of this illustration is that the wondrous nature of nature had provided a teachable moment. God's creation abounds with such opportunities to observe the variety He has given us. And such moments are part of our daily lives.

But most students hear from more obvious sources: peers, radio, television, movies, music, etc. These sources provide a

profusion of ideas. They are teachers. And just as in the formal classroom, the student should be listening carefully to see if the lessons should be considered, discarded, or believed.

The second source focuses on what is read. Some studies indicate that people are not reading any longer. This is curious in light of the growth of enormous bookstores filled with many obscure and weighty titles. Be that as it may, the printed word still has an impact. Most students give some attention to reading. Words still have meaning, in spite of the efforts of those who would use words to say that words are meaningless. This is especially true for the Christian student. If he doesn't revere the Bible to the point of reading and understanding it as the foundation of his education, he is like a ship without a rudder. The ship is afloat but it's at the mercy of the sea and its currents.

The last of our sources concerns what we see. Since a large percentage of students spend an enormous amount of time viewing television, movies, magazines, and other media, this is a major educational element. Images abound in their lives. This challenges the Christian student to be especially alert to the multitude of ideas that come through her eyes and into her mind.

Educators beyond the classroom are continually vying for the minds of students. Let's do what we can to lead our students through this maze of ideas.

The Curriculum

One of the major elements of a formal education is the curriculum. This curriculum is usually set for students in the primary grades, it contains some flexibility in middle school, more flexibility in high school, and significant flexibility in college. Regardless of the educational level a student attains, his formal education includes variety. The same is

true outside the classroom. The education he receives there includes a varied curriculum. And that curriculum can be found in varied places, from conversations with those with whom he works, to his magazine subscriptions, to the movies he rents. Let's consider several ideas that generally are found in the educational curriculum outside the classroom.

Man is the Measure of All Things

First, man is the measure of all things. That is, man is the focus of what is taught. This course is called naturalism. God either doesn't exist, or He may as well not exist because He has nothing to say to us that has meaning. Thus man is left alone to create meaning, value, morality, religion, government, education, and all other aspects of life. This is probably the most influential way of thinking in this country.

Think, for example, of the television programs you may have seen lately. Now consider whether or not those programs included the presence and guidance of a deity, whether the God of the Bible or not. With rare exceptions, the education one receives through such sources doesn't include any concept of God. Instead, man deals with all problems in his own way, through his own ingenuity. Of course the student usually isn't able to see the long term results of such decisions. As wonderful as the resolution may appear at the end of a program, the ultimate consequences may be disastrous.

Pleasure is the Highest Good

The second portion of the curriculum is based upon the idea that pleasure is the highest good. This course is called hedonism. Perhaps one of the more obvious places to find this is in your local grocery store. The "textbooks" that are found in the magazine rack near the checkout island contain this message in abundance. The articles, advertisements, and pictures emphasize the supremacy of pleasure above virtues such as self-control and sacrifice. Take a moment sometime just to scan the articles and emphases that are highlighted on

the front covers of these magazines. For example, the contents of a recent teen-oriented publication for girls include: "Look Hot Tonight," "Stud Shopping Tips," "Love Stories: Secrets of Girls Who Snagged Their Crush," "Hunky Holidays: Meet the 50 Most Beautiful Guys in the World," and "The Ultimate Party Guide." All these titles revolve around the idea that pleasure is the highest good.

True Spirituality Has Many Sources

Third, true spirituality has many sources. This course is called syncretism. Current spiritual emphases have led many students to believe that it doesn't matter what path you take as long as you are on a path. A trip to a large book store will demonstrate this. For example, you can find many books that contain many ideas about angels, but most of them have nothing to do with biblical doctrine. Or you can find a section dedicated to an assortment of metaphysical teachings, none of which align with biblical teaching. When confronted with such variety the student can be tempted to believe that true spirituality can be found in many places. The Christian student must realize this isn't possible if his allegiance is to Christ as Lord of all.

What Works is Good

The fourth idea is that what works is good. This course is called pragmatism. This is a particularly attractive part of the curriculum for Americans. And this certainly includes the American Christian student. But it's a deceptively attractive course. It may lead to results, but at what cost?

I think of a revealing scene in the disturbing Academy Award-winning movie *A Clockwork Orange*. A young British hoodlum in a futuristic England is programmed to abhor the violence that he continually practiced with his gang. This abhorrence is brought about by forcing him to watch scenes of horrible violence while his eyes are forced open. When he is brought before an audience to demonstrate the change, his programmer

tempts him with several opportunities to do violence while the audience watches. He resists the temptations. After the demonstration a clergyman protests by saying that the “boy has no moral choice.” He was manipulated. The programmer scoffs at this claim and states that the result of the experiment is good because “the point is that it works.” “It has relieved the ghastly congestion in our prisons.”

These first four parts of the curriculum are naively optimistic. They describe either present or future existence positively because of supreme confidence in man and his abilities. Other portions of the curriculum are not so optimistic. In fact, they can be frighteningly pessimistic at times.

There is No Meaning

A fifth aspect of the curriculum denies meaning. This course is called existentialism, and sometimes nihilism. The “big” questions of life are asked, but no answers are found. Then the response is either total denial of hope, which should logically lead to suicide, or living by simply acting in the face of absurdity. These perspectives can be found, for example, in some contemporary music and movies. The songs of Nine Inch Nails, the moniker for a musician named Trent Reznor, sometimes contain ideas that are indicative of this. The movies of Woody Allen often contain characters and scenes that depict a search for meaning with no conclusions other than individual acts.

There is No Truth

The last portion of the curriculum is closely connected to what we have just discussed. This course can be called postmodernism. We are living in a culture that increasingly denies an encompassing paradigm for truth. This can be demonstrated by considering what Francis Schaeffer meant by the phrase “true truth.” That is, there is no “big picture” to be seen and understood. We only have individuals and

communities who have their own “little truths.” And nothing connects those truths to something bigger than themselves and more lasting than what might work at the moment. This can be heard, seen, and read incessantly. There are too few teachers in the culture’s curriculum who are sharing ideas that are connected to or guided by “true truth.” The ultimate outcome of such thinking can be devastating. Chaos can reign. Then a sense of desperation can prompt us to accept the “truth” of whoever may claim to be able to lead us out of the confusion. Germany experienced this under the reign of Hitler. We should not be so smug as to think it could not happen to us.

Responding to the Curriculum

Man is the measure of all things! Pleasure is the highest good! True spirituality has many sources! What works is good! There is no meaning! There is no truth! These are the ideas that permeate the education a student receives outside the classroom. How can a Christian deal with such a curriculum? Some suggestions are in order.

First, the student should be encouraged to understand that God is the measure of all things, not man. God is an eternal being who is the guide for our lives, both temporal and eternal. Thus we don’t first ask what man thinks, we ask what God thinks. So this means that the student must decide on his primary textbook. Is it the Bible, or some other text?

Second, the student should be led to realize that God’s will is the highest good, not pleasure. This is very important for the contemporary Christian to understand in light of the sensuous nature of our culture. A student easily can get the idea that God is a “kill joy” because it may seem that everyone is having a good time, but he can’t because of God’s restrictions. If he can understand that God’s ideas lead to true freedom and joy, the student can more readily deal with this part of the curriculum.

Third, the student should be challenged to realize that true spirituality is found only through a relationship with the risen Jesus. Jesus lives in us through the indwelling of His Spirit. And this indwelling is only true for the reborn Christian. Yes, there are many spiritual concepts alive in this culture. Many people are searching for something that will give meaning beyond man's ideas. There is a spiritual hunger. But if we try to relieve that hunger through ideas that come from man's perceptions of spirituality, we are back where we started: man is the measure of all things.

Fourth, the student should be taught that what works is not always good. Satan can make evil work for a time, but he is the father of lies, and lies lead to spiritual and moral decay.

Fifth, the student should be led to believe that life has meaning. The Christian can see the world around him with the eye of hope because God is in control. As chaotic as things may appear, there is a purpose, there is a plan. People have meaning, past events have meaning, present events have meaning, and future events will have meaning. Christ has died to give us salvation, and He has risen from the dead to give us hope for the present and the future. A student whose mind is infused with meaning will be able to handle the despair around him, and he can share his secure hope in the midst of such despair.

Sixth, the student should be guided to think in terms of the big picture. Imagine a puzzle with thousands of pieces. Now think of attempting to assemble the puzzle without having seen the picture on the box top. That would surely be a frustrating experience. You would have individual pieces but no guide to fit the pieces together. Many attempt to live this way. But the Christian student has the box top. He can begin to put the puzzle of life together with God's picture in mind.

So, does education take place beyond the classroom? Certainly!

May God guide us to help students learn the proper lessons.

Notes

1. J. Kerby Anderson, *Signs of Warning, Signs of Hope* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), p. 136.

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