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Assessing Christian Learning: Vocation, Practices, and Investment

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Abstract

This paper describes a new initiative co-funded by the Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning at Calvin University and Cardus. The initiative builds upon past Cardus work on assessing Christian school outcomes as well as the Kuyers Institute's work on Christian pedagogical practices. The project has developed a new online assessment tool to help Christian secondary schools assess the Christian formation that they seek to offer their students and review their own educational practices. This tool, the Practicing Faith Survey, will be piloted in an initial cluster of schools in 2020. It asks students to self-report on their investment in faith-informed practices that are integral to the student role and uses their responses both to provide formative individual feedback and to offer schools aggregate data on this form of student investment. Here we will unpack some key ideas that have informed our work, focusing in turn on questions concerning faith, vocation, and practices..

Assessing Christian Learning: Vocation, Practices, and Investment

1. What is faith?

In a suggestive formulation, Abraham Kuyper once aired the worry that all too often in the modern world “particular grace floats in the air” (Bartholomew, 2017, 39). The phrase encapsulates a concern that beliefs pertaining to God, salvation, and personal spiritual transformation easily become separated from the forces determining personal practice and public life. Particular grace comes to signal engagement with religious elements of life in a manner detached from other activity. If particular grace “floats in the air,” it becomes a kind of hot air balloon: decorative, evocative of peace and transcendence, perhaps even majestic, but not something we use to actually travel to the office or bring home the groceries.

This question of how faith relates to life in the world hovers behind the increasingly popular terminology of “faith formation” (Gilhoni, 2011). Literature on “faith formation,” “spiritual formation,” or “Christian formation” commonly draws a contrast with mere information (Glennon et al., 2011; Miller and Beazley, 2018), implying a vocational engagement of the whole self. Yet if the “faith” that is to be formed is a thing that floats in the air, then “faith formation” may still be about building stronger hot air balloons. In practical terms, “faith formation” can end up mainly associated with the religion class, chapel program, or prayer meetings, or with specific focal interventions such as addition of spiritual practices, service projects, or personal mentoring to curricula (Bramer, 2010; Horan, 2017). It then remains disconnected from every-day, cross-curricular questions of pedagogical design (Ramsey, 2012).

This risk of floating in turn haunts attempts to assess faith formation in faith-based schools. Christian schools face a growing need, driven both by internal commitments and external pressures, to generate some form of assessment data concerning their effectiveness,

including their effectiveness relative to their core mission of shaping Christian learners. Assumptions adopted concerning what faith is and how it relates to the design of teaching, learning, and wider school practices will shape what it is we think needs to be assessed. Approaches that focus on whether students are willing to affirm orthodox statements of belief, or whether they report spiritual experience, or whether they engage in religious activity such as personal Bible study or prayer each offer an avenue to gathering data related to faith. Yet each also offers a circumscribed vision of faith—as correct belief, as spiritual experience, or as engagement in a specifically religious domain of activities. Each option risks keeping the hot air balloon afloat, relatively unconnected to pedagogical design decisions across the curriculum. One result is that once we know how many students believe in the resurrection or pray regularly, it may remain unclear how the school, pedagogically, should respond or whether there are implications for the curriculum as a whole.

We also risk missing actual out-workings of faith commitments, a point that we will illustrate through four students' reflections on their own growth in faith (cf. Yonker et al., 2019). Two emerge from a year-long study group convened by the Kuyers Institute as a prelude to the current project on assessment, two are drawn from focus group research during the Kuyers Institute's Technology and Educational Flourishing Project (Smith et al., 2020).

- A student relates that after a year in college he had become uncomfortable with the way in which he was surrounded by people serving him (preparing meals, maintaining buildings and grounds, teaching, etc.) but was giving little back. It seemed an egocentric way to live. He resolved in the coming semester to adopt as a spiritual discipline an intentional practice of getting to know, praying for, and looking for ways to serve those who worked in food services, physical plant, and campus safety.

- A student was asked in a focus group whether any of his school's emphasis on discipleship practices found application in his life outside school. He pointed to creation care as a Christian practice explored in his science classes in school and described how he and his friends had spontaneously decided the previous weekend to spend part of Saturday picking up trash on the local beaches instead of heading for the mall.
- A student describes how when she is using the internet on her school laptop, she imagines God watching what she is doing, and how this serves as a conscious strategy for maintaining a barrier against the temptation to seek out inappropriate websites or otherwise use her online time unwisely. This is connected in her mind to the school's emphasis on asking students to consider how to use technology with Christian discernment.
- A student describes how she has become aware, in part through themes in her devotions, that she could be doing much better at being able to listen well to others, and that this includes listening well to the teacher and to fellow students in class. It is something she intends to work on, and as a first step she has given some thought to where she tends to sit in those classes in which she has a choice. She has decided to choose where to sit based on how it might help her to listen well.

We offer three observations concerning these narratives. First, we suggest that each represents an example of lived Christian faith, yet these instances are not primarily expressed in the form of theological affirmations, spiritual experiences, or specifically religious activities. They are therefore likely to remain invisible on many assessments of faith formation. Second, each is explicitly responsive to a pedagogical setting. These students are responding not only to Christian discourse motifs, but to the specific contours of their schools' teaching and learning

environments. Moreover, their practices are the kinds of things we might want Christian students to be doing, and it seems within the power of Christian teachers to help them learn to do them.

Third, each focuses not only on a future-oriented trajectory of formation, but on a present, immediate way of connecting faith and life practices within the student's role as a student. These three factors (lived faith that does not reduce to "religious" practice, interaction with pedagogy, and grounding in immediate student experience) intersect with a question that helped frame our project: what is the present vocation of a Christian student, and how might a school support that vocation?

2. What is Vocation?

In Christian theology, vocation is typically understood as the combination of two related ideas: our general calling and our particular calling, also known as our spiritual and external calling (Bunge 2011; Hardy 1990; Vos, 2017). Our general calling is a shared identity of discipleship and salvation, as members of the church with certain rights and responsibilities (Schuurman, 2004). Our particular calling is the way in which we live out our general vocation in our particular setting and community (Schuurman, 2004). Luther referred to this as our "station" (Hahnenberg, 2010, p.12).

Over time, the conception of vocation has evolved. Historically, the term was limited to people in religious occupations. After the Reformation, it became more expansive and inclusive, and theologians apply it to every part of a Christian's life. Puritan theologian William Perkins wrote that "Every person, of every degree, state, sex, or condition without exception, must have some personal and particular calling to walk in." (Perkins, 1631/2005, p. 266). This expanded sense of calling extends beyond work (Badcock, 1998), so that "...every significant social relation constitutes a calling, including paid work, but also being a friend, aunt, uncle, child,

parent, student, and more” (Cahalan & Schuurman, 2016, p. xii). All work is holy and commanded by God (Hardy, 1990; Vos, 2017).

So, what of students and their vocation? When it turns to students, much of the current literature focuses on the future over the present, suggesting that students are educated in order to prepare for their vocations. Some sources focus slightly more on the present by arguing that students have a vocation yet define it as the task of preparing to live their lives after their education is over. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., for instance, rejects the idea of “college as no more than a job training program”, yet goes on to assert that “the full value of your education is that it will help you find and prepare for your vocation - which - as we’ve just seen, is much bigger than any particular occupation...Your college education is meant to prepare you for prime citizenship in the kingdom of God” (Plantinga, 2002, p. 115). As in other sources, while the general sense of vocation is affirmed, for students it is projected into the future, with the present moment remaining out of focus.

While much of the literature on student vocation is future focused, there are some sources that discuss being a student as an important task in the present. A number of authors affirm the potential for children to have vocations (Bunge, 2011; Miller-McLemore, 2017), and some point out that studying and the act of being a student can be important vocations.¹ The idea of being a student as both a present-moment particular vocation and an arena in which the general Christian vocation is worked out seems under-explored.

3. What are Christian Practices?

If we focus on students’ present Christian vocation in their existence as students, then the role of teachers and schools is not simply to prepare students for their futures, but to help them

¹ These ideas are seen in the literature as far back as the 1950s and 60s (Calhoun, 1954; Du Plessis, 1968; Meeks, 1953).

grow in their present vocation, a formational process that is in continuity with but not swallowed up by their future selves. Efforts to assess faith formation might then seek evidence of student investment in the kinds of practices consonant with this pursuit, the kind of investment evident in the examples described earlier.

At this point, we intersect with a growing body of work on the nature of social practices, Christian practices, and their intersection with educational practices (e.g. Cooling & Green, 2015; Dykstra, 2005; Griffiths, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Smith, 2009; Smith, 2017; Smith & Smith, 2011; Volf, 2002). As framed in this literature, practices are something more than behaviors, and are not one half of a theory-practice or a belief-practice divide. The construct of “putting beliefs into practice” is not a good representation of what is envisioned. Practices are embodied, involving concrete moves in space and time, but they are also shaped by narratives and commitments and marked by intentionality as well as by socially established frameworks of meaning. Practices not only embody belief; they also shape belief.

Consider two hypothetical enthusiasts for the Christian Eucharist. One loves debating theological views of transubstantiation, substantial presence, or spiritual nourishment, but does not attend communion. The other’s favorite snack is a little bread and wine, and they partake daily in their kitchen, but they have little interest in the story of Christ crucified or the congregation that confesses it. Neither is engaged in the practice of the Eucharist, which involves bodily, communal, and confessional participation. Christian practices are complexes of belief, belonging, and action rather than secondary “applications” of an already complete faith. In this sense, a behavior such as choosing to sit at the front of class or picking up litter on the beach may or may not be a Christian practice, depending on how it is experienced and narrated. Conversely, many intentional practices in learning environments may become Christian practices

as they are lived and narrated in ways rooted in Christian faith. It then becomes feasible to investigate the degree to which students are invested in such practices; such investigation may provide clues for the school concerning whether its pedagogy helps sustain such investment. This set of connections, which move beyond assessing belief alone or specifically religious behaviors alone, has framed our project.

Through a process of literature review, focus group interaction with students, teachers, and student life professionals, and the construction and validation of an assessment tool, we sketched and refined five basic domains of practice that together might form the backbone of the vocation to live as a Christian who is a student. They are briefly described here.

Intellectual Practices

Intellectual practices seek to disciple the mind and are directed at truth-seeking. These could include, for instance, seeking out thought mentors, reading directed at improving one's grasp of Christian faith or its consequences, trying to think through how an issue discussed in class relates to Scripture, or seeking to formulate a Christian perspective in an essay. This emphasis relates to pedagogical emphases on the formation of a Christian mind, perspective, or worldview, as well as to those that emphasize orthodox belief as focal to the Christian school's mission.

Relational Practices

Relational practices focus on attentiveness to the wellbeing of others in the immediate community. Examples might include attending to whether other students are struggling, working to encourage, support, or include others. This emphasis connects with approaches to Christian education that emphasize the living out of faith in love for others and the formation of Christian community.

Introspective Practices

Introspective practices focus on discerning one's own motivations for learning. Examples might include reflecting on one's motives for seeking academic success or considering how to combine learning with humility. This emphasis connects well with those strands of Christian practice that focus on the development of Christian discernment.

Benevolence Practices

Practices associated with concern for the wellbeing of the wider community are benevolence practices. Examples might include committing to justice-oriented projects as a result of learning, engaging in service projects, or engaging in creation care that is informed by faith and school learning. This emphasis relates well to an emphasis in many Christian schools on service and ethical action in the world.

Formational Practices

Formational practices are directed toward growth in faith. These include traditional devotional practices such as reflection, prayer, Scripture reading, and fellowship. Examples might include attempts to cultivate thankfulness, praying about one's work or for teachers and other students, or reading the Bible in conjunction with themes in classroom learning. Here, too, our interest is less in religious practices in general than in ways in which devotional practice intersects with the student's vocation *qua* student.

4. Conclusion

Astley (2018) suggests that "formation" denotes "all the processes of teaching and/or learning that help to shape a learner in a tradition and its beliefs, experiences and practices, in a way that leads to the learner's acceptance of that tradition in her thinking, valuing, feeling and perceiving, and her dispositions to act and experience, together with her appraisal of the

tradition's merits and faults" (22). If "all the processes of teaching" that have formational force and all ways in which students come to live a tradition are relevant, then faith formation and teaching may intersect at points other than overtly religious practices or theological learning (Glennon et al, 2011, 366). The task of teachers becomes, as Holm puts it, to "create classroom conditions that help to shape the hearts and lives of the students in ways that do not hinder the receiving of grace but instead make it easier to believe" (Holm, 2008, 161).

It is part of the vocation of Christian students to seek out, respond to, and intentionally work with such pedagogical investments. In consequence, we can think about the challenge of assessing Christian education in terms of attempting to discover how students are intentionally invested in this process. If student investment in Christian practices that represent the lived vocation of being a Christian student is assessable, this may offer an assessment window into the school's contribution to faith formation. What is learned from this can be offered to students as a tool to inform their own further investment, and to teachers as a way to review the contribution of their pedagogical practices. It is with these goals in mind that we have been developing the Practicing Faith Survey and turning it into a workable tool.

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