A forum for Christian school educators

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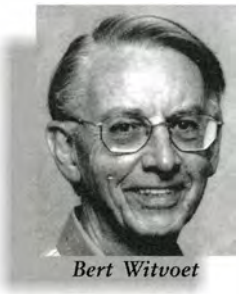
How Then Shall We Evaluate Our Students?

Editorial


Bert Witvoet

Evaluation In the Midst of Social Ills

When the idea of producing a CEJ issue on the issue of evaluation arose at one of our board meetings, it really came out of a concern for grade inflation. Most educators know that a number of books and articles have identified grade inflation as a problem at all levels of schooling.

Harvey C. Mansfield, a professor of government at Harvard University, attracted media attention when he revealed that he had experimented with the grading of his political-philosophy course by giving each student two grades: one for the official records and one for the student's own file. He wrote: "The official grades will conform with Harvard's inflated distribution, in which one-fourth of all grades given to undergraduates are A's, and another fourth are A-'s. The private grades, from the course assistant and me, will be less flattering. Those grades will give students a realistic, useful assessment of how well they did and where they stand in relation to others."

Professor Mansfield calls himself "a longtime critic of grade inflation" because it showers undeserved praise on students and it makes it difficult to distinguish between "the best from the very good, the very good from the good, the good from the mediocre." Grade inflation at university reveals that professors do not take pride in their teaching, argues Mansfield. Anyone who cares a lot about something sets high standards for the pursuit of that something, he adds, using a baseball fan as an example.

The purpose of evaluation

When you read further into our issue, you will soon realize that we moved our discussion from a concern about grade inflation to the perhaps deeper question of what evaluation is for and how a teacher applies it. In her article "Assessment for Learning: A Blessing for Students" (page 6), Elaine Brouwer develops for us the idea that evaluation should be evaluation not only *of* learning, but, first of all, *for* learning. In other words, evaluation should help a student learn better and deeper. Evaluation should make sure that a student does not end up with all kinds of gaps in learning.

"Many of us probably think of assessment primarily as something we do at the end of a lesson, unit or quarter to measure the learning that has or has not taken place," she writes. "To move our assessment practices toward blessing, [w]e need to think in terms of an ongoing process that not only measures learning but also supports and encourages it." I venture to suggest that her advice applies especially to teaching in primary and secondary schools. May we assume that at the tertiary level a student does not need that kind of ongoing process evaluation and is expected to be mature enough to deduce from the results of a test *of* learning whether learning is proceeding in a blessed way? If not, such a student will benefit from a professor's comments in response to papers and presentations and can always consult with fellow students and the professor to fill in the gaps.

Underlying causes

Coming back to the topic of grade inflation, we should address an underlying cause that concerns us all — the whole issue of the process of learning, and learning as blessing. Anton Allahar, a professor at the university of Western Ontario and the author of *Ivory Tower Blues: a University System in Crisis*, thinks that grade inflation is related to "helicopter parenting." Parents hover over their children like helicopters, making sure that their offspring enter university, "going as far as hiring public relation firms to write applications to gain entry into law, medical or business schools." This kind of parental pressure also leads to grade inflation, he thinks. It encourages a culture of entitlement and self-serving rights.

John Merrow, a scholar-in-residence at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, says that grade inflation coincides with college students "spending fewer hours studying, while taking more remedial courses and fewer courses in mathematics, history, English and foreign languages. Students everywhere report that they average only 10-15 hours of academic work outside of class per week and are able to attain "B" or better grade-point averages."

I wonder if the decline in taking the four courses mentioned is not connected with an aversion for disciplined hard work. Mathematics and foreign languages require a certain kind of focus on mechanical, factual learning, while English and history require a lot of reading and the writing of essays. None of these subjects appeal to people saturated with entertainment and sensate models of learning. In other words, grade inflation may result from a weaker work ethic and may, in fact, promote it.

Learning as hunger

Couple that with a materialistic approach to learning, and you will conclude that the kind of learning that

someone like Elaine Brouwer advocates, we might call it "deep learning" or "personalized learning," will not take place. Merrow claims that in 1993, "57 percent of students said that the chief benefit of a college education is increased earning power, and that number has been going up." Grade inflation is a symptom of a much deeper malaise in our culture. Learning should, in a sense, be done for its own sake. If there is no hunger for learning, if there is no curiosity to explore God's amazing creation and the various cultures that have sprung up in response to that creation, we end up with a system of education that serves the idols of materialism and entitlement rather than education for service and responsibility.

Striking a balance

There will, I think, always be some tension between evaluation *for* learning and evaluation *of* learning. Evaluation for learning wants to make the classroom a safe place "in which our students can, without penalty, make mistakes that are inherently part of learning," writes Elaine Brouwer. However, that should not mean (I'm sure that Elaine Brouwer would agree) that our classrooms become places where a student never fails. I make that observation for two reasons. First, students are fallen creatures and will not always work to the best of their ability, no matter how friendly we make the system. Secondly, we have an obligation to uphold certain standards for education and for each discipline within education. That may mean that a student will feel pain and hurt because the material is demanding.

From my recent experience in South Africa, and by comparing our society and schools with their society and schools, I can see that we in the West have become too soft. In certain ways, they are too hard and somewhat lacking in empathy (African attitudes remind me of my own childhood experiences in the 1940s). But we have gone too far over to the other side. We have been softened up by prosperity. Some of our parents, too, engage in helicoptering and apply pressure on teachers and administrators. We must strike a healthy balance between supporting students and challenging them, between encouraging students and rebuking them, between protecting students and making them endure necessary pain.

Our classrooms should, indeed, be places of shalom, where God's creational Kingdom standards are upheld. It would be a shame if our well-meaning gentleness and kindness would prepare our children for the ultimate failure when they appear before God's throne some day. The judgment at the end of our life is an evaluation *of* learning: "Those who have, will be given more; as for those who do not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them." (Luke 8:18)

BW

Post Script:

My resources were taken from the Internet.

For Harvey Mansfield's point of view: http://chronicle.com/subscribe/login?url=/weekly/v47/i30/30b02401.htm.

For Anton Allahar's quote: A CBC interview, May 2007, CBC News.

For John Merrow's position: http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives/sub. asp?key=245&subkey=576.

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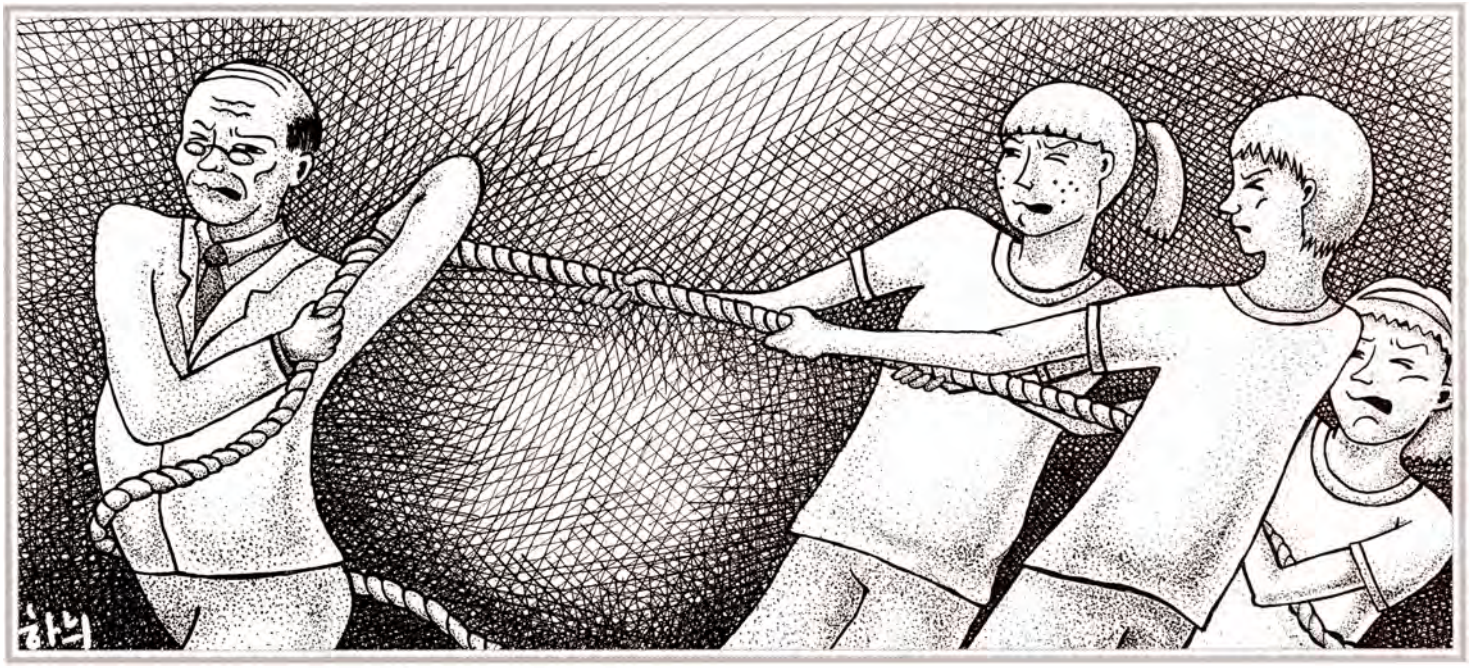
Is There an Elephant in Your Classroom?

by Sean Schat

Sean Schat (sschat@beaconchristian.org) teaches English at Beacon Christian Schools in St. Catharines, Ontario. He has done extensive studies in the area of student evaluation.

"The elephant in the room: a serious problem that everyone is aware of but which they ignore and choose not to mention (e.g. 'It's no longer possible to ignore the elephant in the room')."Oxford University Press



One of the complexities of our human nature is that we have a tendency to overlook things that are right in front of our eyes — we have even come up with an expression for it! One solution for this predicament — start talking about it. Easier said than done, of course. Others in this journal have explored the nature and complexity of assessment and evaluation. It is within this context that I encourage you and your colleagues to explore the question: *Is grade inflation an elephant in your classroom?*

Recent changes to the secondary school curriculum for high schools in Ontario have contributed to a growing concern about grade inflation. A few years ago the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced a "new" curriculum in order to encourage more consistency across the province, with an eye to "raising the bar" for high school graduates. In some circles, however, there is an emerging concern that this has somehow backfired in practice.

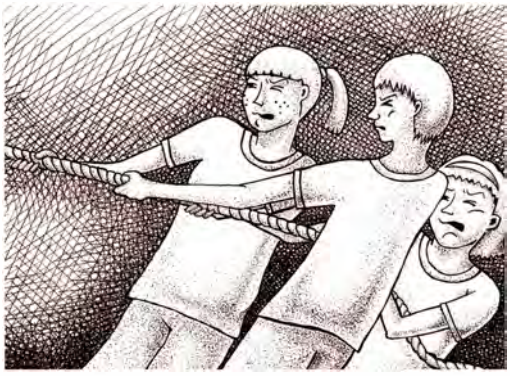
The issue of grade inflation is not new, of course, nor is it limited to our province (even in Ontario, the issue has been smoldering since the late 60s when the same ministry eliminated provincial exams for high school graduates). In one article, Bruce Bartlett suggests that this is a very real and significant issue across the North American continent. According to his research, SAT scores have seen a half grade point rise since the 1970s. Some institutions have suggested that any SAT scores prior to 1995 should have 100 points added to them in order to make them "equivalent" to the same test today (Bartlett, 2003).

Universities are also struggling with this issue. The phrase "the first year wall" refers to the fact that many first-year students experience a 15-20 per cent nosedive in their marks. Many of them will "recover" as they adjust to their new reality. But today's university professors are also struggling with increased pressure from students (and parents and administration) over the marks they assign to student work. Some professors surrender and give higher marks.

Defying definition

The issue is a complex one. Is it even possible to define a baseline for comparison? How would you do so? How would you compare marks between student groups

or over different eras? Would the results have any meaning? What role does a cultural worldview play? Is there a relationship between the shift from modernity to postmodernity, with an accompanying shift from measurability to relativity? What influence could this have on our educational system? Is there a growing cultural climate of entitlement that has created students (and their parents) who over-advocate (read "grumble, complain, threaten") for their marks? Or are kids today simply smarter?



We have improved our understanding of curriculum design, instruction, and assessment and evaluation, particularly given the increase in legitimate brain research. We know more about teaching and learning and remediation, and this should impact both learning in general and marks in particular, right?

University professor Kevin McQuillin provides a helpful distinction, suggesting that the problem is better defined as "grade compression" — that too many students are graduating from high schools with marks over 80%. Rather than a more traditional mark range, most students end up with an 80%+ average — a large proportion of final grade averages compressed into a narrow range.

Pressure points

So is grade inflation happening in our Christian schools? We would hope not, of course (unless we can also compellingly argue that our instruction is measurably more effective). But the reality is: it just might be! We need to at least face the question head-on. We live in an increasingly selfish and consumerist climate, and this pathology necessarily impacts our students and schools. Parental and student pressure on teachers can be very high, particularly with fierce competition for scholarships.

According to a recent article in the *Toronto Star*, in some cases in Ontario, parents and students have e-mailed complaints about teacher-assigned grades to the Ontario Ministry of Education. In other cases, complaints given to a school's administration have resulted in changed marks (sometimes even without the teacher's knowledge). The same article also referred to the possibility of inexperienced teachers defaulting to higher marks on the side of caution (Brown, 2007). In our Christian schools, we so often want the very best for each of our students. What impact could our good intentions have when it comes to determining standards or assigning marks?

Ask the question

It is important to keep the issue in perspective, of course. Assessment and evaluation initiatives over the past decade or so have attempted to increase objectivity, reliability, and validity in the process of assigning marks, but we can never lose sight of the fact that, to some degree, at least, marks are simply an attempt to assign a measurable and symbolic meaning to learning; something which often defies quantification and measurability. What is an "A" or a "B"? What is a "good" mark? Are "C"s still acceptable? The entire enterprise *is* an elephant in its own right. But we can't throw the elephant out with the bathwater.

The reality is that, as long as schools remain the way they currently are, there will always be marks and grades. And in this context, there will always be the potential for grade inflation. The challenge, then, is for teachers and school systems to define authentic and appropriate principles and standards for assessment and evaluation. We need to face the question squarely: are our marks fair and consistent? Is there a potential for grade inflation in our current practice? We can perhaps draw encouragement from the fact that, in many respects, the most important things our schools teach can't be measured — nor should they be. But we still need to ask the question.

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ALTA VISTA

Alta Vista, an educational service organization based in Seattle, Washington, is expanding. Founded by Dr. Al Greene in 1970, Alta Vista has enjoyed a long and rich history of serving Christian education. Over the years the central question driving the work of Alta Vista has been: "What makes Christian education distinctive?" A Christian school, Dr. Greene urged, has no reason to be if it cannot be distinguished from the public school around the corner. His latest book, *Reclaiming the Future of Christian Education* (ACSI, 1998), is an eloquent and compelling testimony to his vision. Even though he is in his nineties and retired from Alta Vista, Dr. Greene continues to write about Christian education.

Following his retirement, the work of Alta Vista continued under the leadership of Elaine Brouwer, Larry Reynolds and a visionary board. Alta Vista offers seminars, workshops, courses, and resource materials designed to call attention to the special calling and task of the Christian school. The organization is now poised for expansion of its outreach.

In preparation for the expansion, the board and staff spent time this past year reviewing its identity, vision and mission statements. Although details may change, the central purpose of the organization remains: to participate, through its educational services, in God's Kingdom agenda. Alta Vista seeks to help equip people for faithful, visionary, competent and compassionate discipleship in a hurting world. More than ever before, it aims to be a Spirit-directed voice of hope, discernment and empowerment in the realm of Christian education.

John Van Dyk, recently retired from Dordt College, has now joined the Alta Vista staff serving alongside Elaine Brouwer as a full-time Senior Member. His arrival signals a sharp increase in international outreach. John is active in Christian teacher education and staff development programs in Latin America, Asia, and Europe. Alta Vista celebrates John's long history of work in Christian education both internationally and domestically, and enthusiastically welcomes him to the work of Alta Vista.

The agenda offers workshops, courses, and consulting services, along with publication projects of various sorts, all designed to encourage a style of Christian education continuously guided by a vision of shalom. Alta Vista intends to help identify and support practices that help equip students for redemptive action in a distorted world.

Alta Vista is particularly hoping to avoid unnecessary duplication and wasteful overlap of efforts. Consequently, Alta Vista vigorously pursues partnerships and collaboration. Already Alta Vista partners with Christian Schools International, the Society of Christian Schools in B.C., the International Association for the Promotion of Christian Higher Education, and the Christian Educators Association International, and maintains relationships with the Association of Christian Schools International and Worldwide Christian Schools.

Christian education is surrounded by a cacophony of voices clamoring to be heard. Voices such as dualism, secularism, individualism, materialism and consumerism contradict the message of God's Kingdom agenda. They reflect false gospels promoting self-serving success, blind conformity, and synthesis. Such gospels, if heeded, create tensions and contradictions or an accommodating complacency in Christian education. While recognizing and celebrating the work God is doing in Christian education, Alta Vista commits, with humility, compassion and courage, to being a clear compelling voice inviting Christian educators to impact our culture and our world in ways that point to genuine shalom.

Elaine Brouwer
John Van Dyk
Senior Members
Alta Vista Educational Services

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING:
A BLESSING FOR OUR STUDENTS

by Elaine Brouwer

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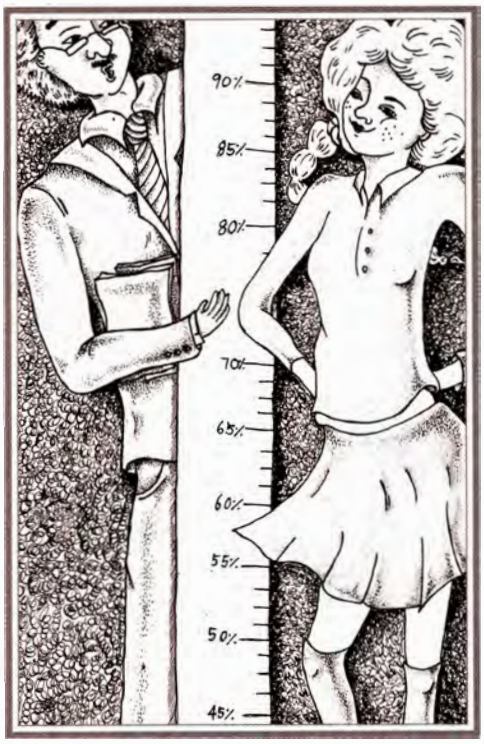
Blessing is likely not the descriptor that most of us have attached to assessment. More often the word conjures up images of endless hours of marking student work, the dreaded report card season, the sometimes-painful process of justifying the mark to students and parents, and accusations of grade inflation. Burden is a more likely descriptor. Likewise, student experience of assessment is often far removed from blessing. Many regard assessment as a threat hanging over their heads, something teachers do to them. They see the resulting grade either as a reward for doing what the teacher asked them to do or yet another confirmation that they are "D" students. It does not have to be this way. Assessment lovingly and skillfully practiced by assessment literate teachers together with their students can be a blessing for all concerned.

Many of us probably think of assessment primarily as something we do at the end of a lesson, unit or quarter to measure the learning that has or has not taken place. To move our assessment practices toward blessing, we need to think of assessment in much broader terms. We need to think in terms of an ongoing process that not only measures learning but also supports and encourages it. This broader view of assessment requires us to think clearly about *what we are assessing*, *why we are assessing it*, *who needs the results, and how the information will be communicated*.[1] This is where the distinction of assessment *for* and *of* learning is particularly helpful.

Maximize learning

If we are assessing primarily for the purpose of gathering evidence of student achievement at a certain point in time in order to communicate that information to educational decision makers, we are clearly in the realm of assessment *of* learning. Such assessment yields a snapshot of learning achievement useful for those who make large-scale educational decisions. If, however, we are concerned not only to measure learning but also to encourage and



support learning, we will engage in assessment *for* learning. In assessing *for* learning, we seek information about where our students are in their learning journey prior to and during the course of a unit or lesson in order to make day-to-day or even moment-to-moment instructional decisions. The goal is to maximize the learning of each student in the classroom.

Prior to learning, we seek information about what our students already know and can do in relation to the area they will study, as well as what they think and believe about the material. Brainstorming, pretests, content knowledge boxes, focused conversations, and other such tasks provide information that enables us to modify our learning plan to serve the particular students in our classrooms.[2] We can further personalize the learning journey by using surveys, questionnaires, inventories, and focused conversations to gather information about patterns of differences such as learning styles, work habits, intelligence preferences, and interests.[3]

As we teach, we gather a wide range of data to assess progress toward learning targets and use that data to modify instruction and learning activities. If we keep assessment *for* learning at the forefront of our thinking, we will recognize that our teaching and learning activities provide multiple opportunities to gather the kind of information we need to inform our decision making. The important assumption behind assessment *for* learning is that we will use the data we uncover to modify our teaching and learning plans while the learning is taking place.

Pass it on

We are not the only users of the information we gather. Our students need the same information so they can improve their learning. To that end, we feed back to them the information we uncover in the form of rich and timely descriptions that allow them, with our guidance, to take the next steps in learning. Quick checks like thumbs up or thumbs down, response cards, ungraded quizzes, and one-minute writings provide information about emerging needs. Information-based tests and demonstrations of growing skill development help us determine whether, in the end, our students are meeting learning targets necessary for a successful demonstration of learning in the end. The goal of assessment *for* learning is not comparative judgment or gather-

ing scores to contribute to a final mark. The goal is feedback to further learning.

Perhaps even more important, we need to ask our students to take an active role in assessing their own learning as an ongoing part of their learning process. Some refer to this assessment *as* learning.[4] In assessment *as* learning, we empower our students to reflect on their own learning and to talk about it in their own voice. Self-assessment in which students evaluate their work against a rubric or a sample encourages growth in self-monitoring and self-management. Student reflections on their thought processes, reflective journals or focused conversations with peers or the teacher makes student thinking visible, open to examination and redirection.

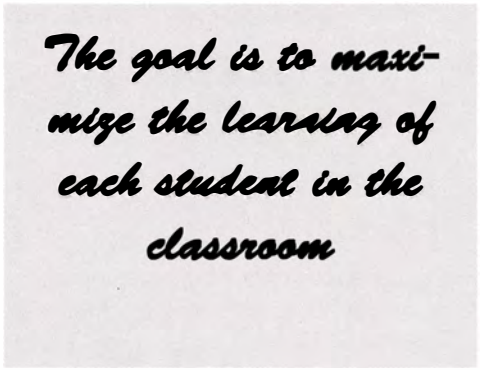
Encourage ownership

When students are becoming true partners in assessment and, therefore, in their learning, they will be able to describe in their own words the purpose of their work, how it connects to prior work, how they will demonstrate their learning, and the criteria they and the teacher will use to evaluate the work. With increasing sophistication, they will be able to talk about what they understand, using discipline-appropriate language. Assessment *as* learning asks us to remember that students are important educational decision makers in the classroom, perhaps the most important.[5]

They are always thinking and deciding. That thinking and those decisions could be naïve or sophisticated, constructive or destructive, on track or misdirected. To maximize the learning of each student, we need to find a way to make that thinking and deciding visible long before the summative assessment. Research indicates that continuous assessment *as* and *for* learning that is used to modify the learning plan to meet emerging needs results in improved student learning for all, but especially for lower achieving students.[6] The neediest in the classroom receive the greatest blessing and the overall achievement gap in the classroom narrows.

Develop partnership

Effective use of assessment *for* and *as* learning shifts our primary emphasis from what we are teaching to what our students are learning. When we take student thinking, beliefs, prior knowledge, and unique learning approaches seriously as we design the learning plan, we honor our students as active participants in their own learning. Our students become co-workers in the learning journey as they learn to talk about their learning in their own voice. They grow in independence as they learn to take greater responsibility for their learning, but they also have the opportunity to practice and experience the kind of interdependence and mutuality that is characteristic of the body of Christ. As we listen carefully and lovingly to our students, they learn to listen to us and their peers with expectation of useful feedback and guidance.



Research indicates that continuous, formative assessment improves the learning of each student and, when practiced by the learning organization as a whole, facilitates school improvement as well.[7] However, Richard Stiggins and the folks at the Assessment Training Institute point out that traditionally assessment *for* (and *as*) learning has occupied a much smaller percentage of our assessment practices than has assessment *of* learning. They ask us to flip that pyramid. They advocate a continuous array of assessments *for* (and *as*) learning punctuated with assessments *of* learning.[8]

Establish targets

Thinking about assessment in this broader manner has implications for our curriculum design process. One of the keys to quality assessment is being very clear about what we are assessing.[9] Assuming that we want our students to understand key concepts or big ideas imbedded in a unit of study rather than rehearsing and repeating rote facts and skills, we need to begin the curriculum design process by clearly identifying those key concepts or big ideas. Having done that, we need to break down those big ideas into the learning targets that will guide student learning. We can think of these learning targets as the scaffold that our students will climb as they work toward unit goals.[10] Since learning is the responsibility of the learner, we need to make these learning targets public and accessible to them. Meaningful assessment *for* learning requires that both teacher and students are clear about the big ideas toward which unit activities are directed as well as the knowledge, skill, reasoning, product/performance, and dispositional goals that will help them get there.[11]

Provide evidence tools

Another implication for our curriculum design process is that we need to plan for assessment already in the earliest stages of the design.[12] We need to ask the evidence question as soon as we have identified the big ideas and the learning targets. What kind of evidence would indicate that our

students understand or are on the way to understanding the important ideas and concepts we identified? As we answer this question, we need to think in terms of demonstrations *of* learning that probe beyond surface knowledge to the ability to use learning in new situations and contexts. Tools such as performance tasks,[13] extended written responses, portfolios, or other products would serve us well in this regard. The tools we identify become the assessment *of* learning that we will use at the end of the unit to yield evidence of deep understanding or lack thereof. At this stage we also need to anticipate the variety of assessment *for* learning tools that we will use along the way.

Thinking about assessment before we design teaching and learning activities is a departure from a more traditional design process in which planning for assessment is typically the last step. Asking the evidence question early on in the process serves to focus and direct our teaching. There is something just as important. When we tell students at the beginning of a unit how they will be able to demonstrate their learning at the end, we remove the mystery of how their learning will be evaluated. By revealing to our students the intended learning targets, the avenue through which they will be able to demonstrate their learning, the criteria that will be used to evaluate their work, and samples of strong and weak work, we pave the way for our students to take greater responsibility for their own learning.

Adjust mark assignment

Perhaps the greatest paradigm shift required of us when we make assessment *for* and *as* learning a large part of our assessment process is a shift in our grading practices. It is common practice among us to populate our grade books with numerous scores assigned to various assignments and assessments and to use those scores to determine a final mark. It is also common practice to adjust the mark — lowering it for missing or late work or raising it for effort, extra credit or other factors. Assessment *for* learning requires a change in both practices.[14] The first change is that the final mark we assign must be based on the student's *current* level of achievement as measured against the learning targets we identified early on. That means that we use the periodic assessments *of* learning but *not* the assessments *for* learning to determine the final mark. The grade should communicate the *current* level of achievement, not a history of attempts on the way to learning.

Our students become co-workers in the learning journey

As we carefully distinguish between that which will be part of the final mark and that which serves as feedback for further learning, our classrooms become safe places in which our students can, without penalty, make mistakes that are inherently part of learning. When we help our students distinguish between assessment that helps them improve and assessment that measures *current* achievement, avoiding the use of assessment as reward or sanction, we also preserve the space necessary for our students to build intrinsic motivation.

The second change is that the final mark we assign should reflect current learning achievement *only*. It should be unclouded by other information about the student such as tardiness, effort, participation, or late work. It is not that these factors are unimportant. They are very important. However, if we include them in the mark, we muddle the communication about current learning achievement. We should separate information about these other important facets of our students' work from the learning achievement mark.

Fully equipped

The blessings inherent in this approach to assessment are sufficient to recommend it. However, as Christian educators, we have an even stronger reason to consider this approach. We are concerned that our instructional practices help maximize each of our student's learning, because we know that our Lord calls each of them to take up their place in his great narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. We know he calls our students to work toward shalom in all their relationships both now and in the future. Such work requires that our students become as fully and completely equipped as possible. It is our task and our privilege to use the powerful educational tools at our disposal to help nurture and equip these budding disciples of Christ. When we do so, the blessings inherent in the tools we use are magnified and multiplied.

Endnotes:

[1] Stiggins, Richard J., Arter, Judith A., Chappuis, Jan, and Chappuis, Stephen. (2006). *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: doing it well-using it right*. Portland, OR: Educational Testing Service.

[2] For a toolbox of assessment strategies see: Chapman, Carolyn and King, Rita. (2005). *Differentiated Assessment Strategies: one tool doesn't fit all*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

[3] Personalized does not mean individualized. Personalization means that teachers work to benefit more students by implementing patterns of instruction likely to serve multiple needs. It does not mean that teachers design a unique lesson plan for each student – an overwhelming, if not impossible, task. For a discussion of patterns of needs and patterns of instruction, see: Tomlinson, Carol Ann and McTighe, Jay. (2006). *Integrating Differentiated Instruction + Understanding by* Design. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

[4] *Rethinking Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind*, http://www.wncp.ca/

[5] *New Mission, New Beliefs: Assessment for Learning,* a DVD presentation by Rick Stiggins. Portland, OR: Educational Testing Service.

[6] Black, P. and Wiliam, D. (1998). "Inside the Black Box: raising standards through classroom assessment." Phi Delta Kappan, (80) 2, 139-148.

[7] Stiggins, Richard J., Arter, Judith A., Chappuis, Jan, and Chappuis, Stephen. (2006). *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: doing it well-using it right*. Portland, OR: Educational Testing Service.

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[12] Wiggins, Grant and McTighe, Jay. (2005). *Understanding by Design, Expanded 2nd Edition.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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Beyond Evaluation

by Katie Hoogendam

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"It's the frames which make some things important and some things forgotten. It's all only frames from which the content rises." – Eve Babitz

"True genius doesn't fulfill expectations, it shatters them." – Arlene Croce

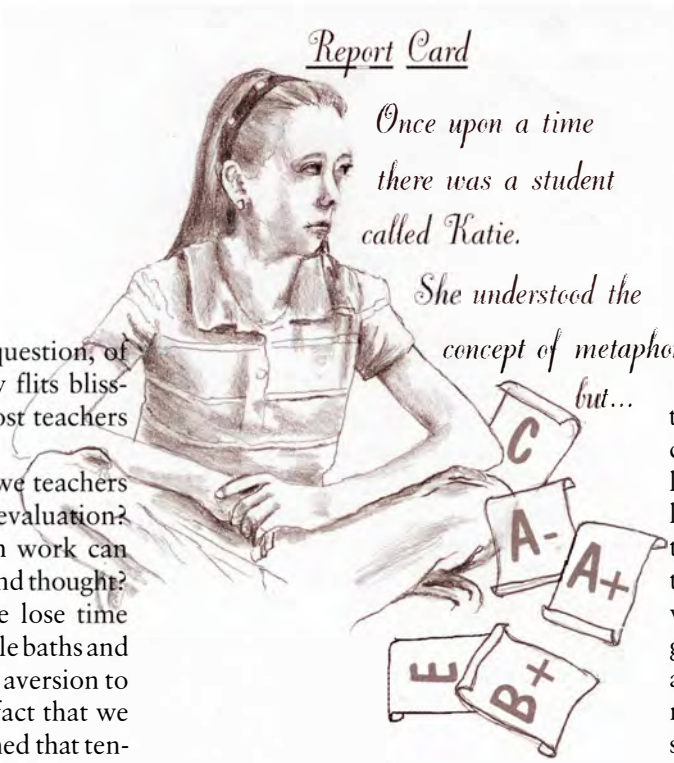
I spent a semester studying without grades. As a student who had always put a lot of emphasis on her marks, it was difficult, to say the least, for me to spend an entire semester without the cold comfort of a number or a letter to inform my concept of academic self-worth. Though challenging in many ways, I count this semester — the fall of my senior year of university — as the pinnacle of my academic career. I spent this time at a place called the "Oregon Extension," a program that was offered by a collection of Christian colleges in the U.S. as an accredited off-campus experience.

The program was different from "regular" school in many ways, but one of the most fundamental was its very intentional refocusing of students away from grades and numbers and towards written and conversational feedback from professors. Obviously, in order for the program to have merit with its cooperating institutions, assigning grades cannot be avoided indefinitely. However, it wasn't until the very end of the semester that we students learned the actual marks assigned to our various projects and papers.

Through that experience, I learned just as much about my own unhealthy fixation on marks as I did about the subjects that those marks reflected. At the time, this approach to marking seemed quite iconoclastic to me. In retrospect, the pedagogy behind the choice to give "grade-less" evaluation is one that many institutions — and not just colleges and universities, either — espouse: that critical thinking and "learning how to learn" are just as important as the material of the course. Unfortunately, many of us find our own pedagogies constricted by the notion that we must "quantify, quantify, quantify" our students' work — a difficult task that can, at times, rip the heart right out of true evaluation.

Desire for authenticity

Wouldn't it be wonderful, my colleagues and I have often mused, *if we didn't have*



to mark? This is a rhetorical question, of course, but one that probably flits blissfully through the minds of most teachers on a regular basis.

But what is it, exactly, that we teachers don't like about marking and evaluation? Is it simply the fact that such work can take hours and hours of focus and thought? Is it because, in doing so, we lose time with our families, friends, bubble baths and television programs? Or is our aversion to evaluation simply due to the fact that we are the ones who blithely assigned that ten-page essay on *Hamlet* in the first place, and in marking we are receiving our just desserts?

Is the general teaching population comprised of heartless people who don't want to respond to their students' ideas and efforts? I doubt it.

The teaching profession draws all sorts of people, but I would venture to guess that there are a few common traits among our motley crew. One of those traits is a penchant for the authentic. The experiences of my colleagues and myself have shown me that when a student hits on Truth — whether in a poem or an equation or a slam-dunk — something beautiful happens. Both the student and the teacher share a moment of authenticity. In that instant, the student has found something within herself that she didn't know existed. The teacher is a joyous participant in that experience and a proud observer of it.

These are the "kairotic" moments that we are reflecting upon when we talk about our love of teaching . When our students pass through the thin membrane of not knowing into the universe of understanding, and we were fortunate enough to have been there when it happened, we experience a joy of a high order. Can these moments of truth and authenticity be properly translated into a number or letter? The task can be a difficult — and, in some ways, philosophically disturbing one.

And, yet, paradoxically, there are also the times when we wonder what in the world is going on with our students (I'm speaking from personal experience here — I'm sure my classroom conflicts are entirely anomalous).

Puzzling behavior

A student enters the classroom in an obviously unsettled state. She walks up to the teacher's desk and, with determined jaw and fiery eyes, begins a histrionic monologue: *I just checked online last night and I have an 89% in this class. I had a 90% on Tuesday. What happened? Why is my mark different!* This is a student who writes beautifully, loves Calculus, and excels in spiking on the Volleyball court. Yesterday, she was all smiles and interest — she really seemed to enjoy discussing *Oedipus*' dysfunctional family! Today, it seems that her dark doppelganger has taken her place — the one who doesn't care about learning or discussing or exploring at all. The one who works toward the test and is intent on getting that university scholarship.

Why the Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde split? How can our students love learning one day, and despise our class, our teaching style, and our subject area the next day? Interestingly enough, this seemingly contradictory attitude towards education is not limited to the life of a student, as (gasp!) even the most levelheaded, mature teachers have (in secret moments of confession, of course) admitted to similar feelings. One day we teachers are in love with our students, made warm by their intelligent and engaged participation in class, excited by the lesson that we just taught on iambic pentameter (my goodness, but how riveted they were!) and the next we are bogged down by marking, made guilty by the piles of essays that we have not had time to get to, and made bitter by our own lack of organization. In some ways, it's funny how much we teachers and students have in common.

System problems

Yet how much of this tension involving teachers, students and grades comes down to the numbers and letters that we assign to students' work? Can true evaluation — not just dutiful grading — occur within the confines of our particular curriculums, schedules, and institutional policies? Can we find a way to evaluate that both fits our pedagogy (teaching students to think critically and to love learning for learning's sake) and satisfies the need to assign a grade? Is it possible to quantify on paper those authentic learning experiences that we so value in our students?

If our evaluation methods do not reflect our personal standards, it is hard to get axcited about marking. It is also difficult to defend one's evaluation methods if one does not much like them. Almost nothing brings about my disgust for marking more than the student who wastes her creative energy on being upset about one percentage point when she could instead channel that energy into something more constructive and positive. As a teacher, I feel deflated when this happens — did I not teach this student to care more about the subject

than the mark? And yet I know that, like me, this student has spent over a decade in a system that encourages her to seek affirmation and worth in the numbers that are assigned her by others.

Lots of feedback

The semester that I spent *sans* grades was academically successful only because something was put in their place. While I did not know my actual mark until the very end of the semester, my professors spent many hours giving my work both written and oral feedback. Suffice it to say, our professors lived on the same small mountaintop community as we students did and had, many years before, designed the program to fit into their schedule, curriculum, and educational philosophy. In an ideal world, our classes would be small enough, our budgets large enough, and our system accommodating enough for each of us to have such a natural and fulfilling evaluation experience. In the "real world" of overbooked classes, tight curriculum and only a few short months to fit it all in, it is difficult if not impossible to replicate the ideal into our own lives. At the same time, striving for the difficult and impossible may just be one of the most interesting and intellectually challenging aspects of the teaching profession. I know nary a teacher who is not, on some level, up for a good ole' challenge once in awhile — especially if the results are rewarding.

A delicate balance

So what is there to do? Should we abandon marks altogether, or should we simply resign ourselves to a system that asks us to quantify the unquantifiable: a student's passion, creativity, insight and interest? Perhaps a few of you have found a delicate balance between the two. I know some of you have, as I have been fortunate enough to have worked with and been taught by educators like you — those whose own love of learning shines so brightly that grades become a peripheral matter. This is a goal to strive for, and such educators prove that one can find a balance between clear, consistent standards and an honest and uncritical appreciation for authentic, messy growth.

Certainly, the emotions surrounding evaluating and being evaluated are as old as the sun and as common as dust mites. Likely all teachers struggle with balancing notions of process versus product, scientific method versus postmodern dialogue, when assigning a mark to a student's work. As with most things in life and in education, some of the best lessons come from personal experience. A valuable resource lies close at hand — one's colleagues. Talking with them about their struggles and successes with evaluation can do much to help one find a mode of evaluation that goes beyond marking and fits with one's pedagogy and personal philosophies. It is when we forget that we are part of an educational community that we feel the most isolated and lonely as teachers. The knowledge that someone else has gone through similar struggles in teaching can be enough to encourage one to continue to strive for the ideal in the classroom.

"What is it exactly that we teachers don't like about marking and evaluation?"

True evaluation

In the end there are as many ways to be a didactic evaluator as there are teachers doing the evaluating. When we are giving honest and specific feedback, positive affirmation, and individual attention, we are manifesting the heart of true evaluation. It is difficult to stand behind a grade if we are not happy about the mode of evaluation that we used to come to that number or letter. I suppose if I were to ask individual teachers about what they believed to be the true purpose of evaluation, I would be given a myriad of different answers. I'm quite certain that, despite our differing styles, skills, passions, and subject areas, we all agree on many things.

Evaluation is not about authority or criticism or ego or judgment. Evaluation is about the relationship between the student and the world, as it is evidenced in the subject and assignment at hand. Like a tailor who alters the suit to the client's body type, we must work hard at knowing our students in order to tailor our modes of evaluation to suit their particular needs. This does not negate or dilute the importance of the particulars of our subject areas; rather, it reflects a sincere desire to transmit the information that we are passionate about to the students we are passionate about. We will never get it "right" as evaluators, but our students will notice that we are teachers who care enough about them to be engaged and authentic — qualities that cannot be quantified on any scale or marked in any book, but which bear the most important and lasting results. CEJ

What About Those Who Can Run Ahead?

A critical look at AP courses

by Lois De Vries

Lois De Vries (LDeVries@grcs.org) is a retired teacher of English at Grand Rapids Christian High School, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

In the current climate of No-Child-Left-Behind legislation, "meeting the needs of all students" is a catch-phrase familiar to every educator and to most of the general population in the United States. Certainly, ensuring that schools provide for all students, including those with "special needs," is a righteous and just goal for all schools, both public and Christian. In the February 2007 issue of this journal, several writers contributed their wisdom and experience to the discussion of the reasons for and challenges of "inclusive education," effectively reminding us that not all of God's children are "average." Amen.

In a broader sense, of course, every student in one way or another has "special needs" — a truth that makes teaching the challenging profession that it is. Every teacher, faced with anywhere from 25 to 130 students a day, knows the frustration of trying to reach every learner, including those who seem most determined not to be reached. And I do believe that most schools have attempted, albeit with varying degrees of success, to provide appropriate learning opportunities for all students. Even the curriculum of my 1960s high school offered a very defined three-tier system of general, commercial and college preparatory studies. In the 35 years since I began teaching, I have watched various "tracking" methods go in and out of fashion. And today the call is to leave no child behind and to include all. A daunting task, indeed!

Meeting the needs of all

Perhaps it's no surprise then that schools handle one "special" group — the academically gifted or superior — in a somewhat *two-handed* way. On the one hand, overwhelmed by these academic, emotional, physical and financial challenges to address the needs of all students, we adopt a somewhat Darwinian view about these strongest students. After all, they will survive, no matter what opportunities we do or do not offer them, right? In fact, at times we sneer at programs for the gifted as elitist luxuries. According to some reports, these students are the least studied and addressed of any "special" population. Linda Gottfredson, a professor at the University of Delaware and an expert on the challenges of educating the brightest students, notes, however, that these young people also have particular needs, including the need for academic peers, for accelerated learning, and for challenging work.

"We adopt a somewhat Darwinian view of strong students."

Perhaps even more unjustly, we sometimes cater too much to these students while at the same time using them to polish our image and reputations. After all, it is they who win the awards and get their names in the paper as "superstars" at graduation time. We revel in their high test and GPA scores as ways to show others that our schools matter and can compete with the best. As a result, we may be tempted to inflate grade points or to give extra credit for the demanding courses they select.

Neither of these approaches strikes me as covenantally sound. *"From each according to his ability and to each according to his need"* is true not only for disabled students but for all, including the brightest and most successful.

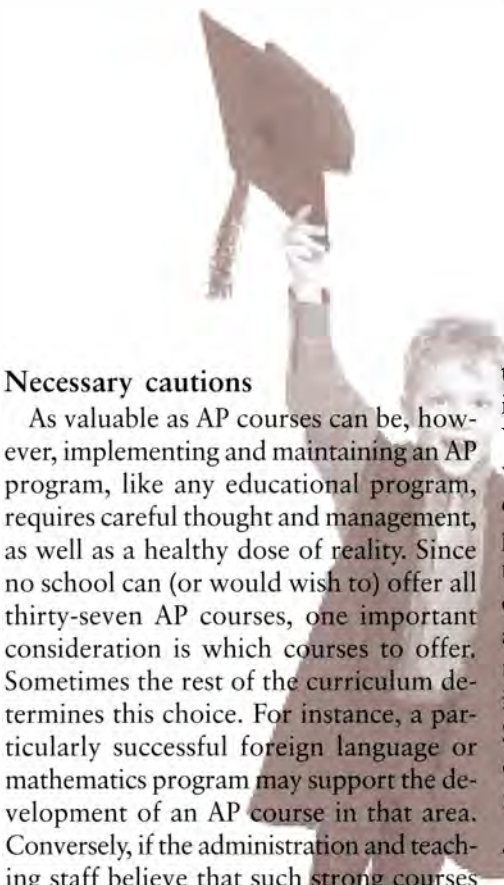
Realities of AP courses

One way many high schools increasingly try to provide the best learning environment for these students is by offering the Advanced Placement program. And students are selecting those courses in growing numbers. Whether they do so because of rising college tuition costs, the real or perceived dilution of high school curriculum, or a genuine thirst for challenge and knowledge, Advanced Placement (AP) courses have become increasingly popular in recent years. According to the February 23, 2007, issue of *Chronicles of Higher Education*, in 2006 the number of students who took at least one of the AP exams rose 9.7% over the 2005 figures.

Administered by the nonprofit College Board, the AP program offers thirty-seven courses and exams across twenty-two subject areas. Science courses range from biology to chemistry, from environmental science to physics. Language students may choose from seven language offerings, including Chinese and Italian. In addition, courses are offered in various areas of art, history, geography, literature, composition, and government. Exams, given in May and costing about $80.00 per student, are graded on a scale of 1 to 5. Ostensibly, students receiving passing scores of 3 or above may either receive college credit or be waived from taking entry-level college courses. Today, however, very few colleges waive requirements for a 3, and "rewards" vary widely among colleges even for scores of 4 or 5.

Positive spinoffs

From my own experience teaching AP English for a number of years and from conversations with other AP teachers, I have concluded that these programs can offer



tremendous value. Students who otherwise might have breezed through high school with little effort often find the challenge such a course offers surprising and even exhilarating. For those students who rarely have had to study outside of class, the more demanding work and heavier workload of AP courses help them develop stronger study habits and problem-solving skills. The level of precision demanded on the examination reinforces in students the need for attention to detail, and the increased demands for writing forces students to clarify both their thinking and their expression. Because most AP courses demand more independent work, students learn to push themselves and begin to see what they can do on their own. One of my colleagues who teaches AP Calculus also observed that the test requires the same type of application of knowledge as such post-college tests as the GRE, CFP, medical school entrance, and CPA certification.

While most AP students welcome the challenge of higher-level learning, many also have secondary reasons for enrolling in these courses. For some there is joy in being able to dig deeply into a favorite subject. English Literature and Composition students, for instance, may relish being able to read more whole works rather than abbreviated anthology selections. Dedicated musicians revel in the freedom not only to play music but also to study its structure. Some students with college majors in mind may elect to take AP courses outside of their particular field of interest in order to have more course time to devote to their major in college. Some look to those two little letters as a way to distinguish themselves as they seek admission to college. And for a few students and parents, a high test score is the number one goal — another academic feather in their cap.

Necessary cautions

As valuable as AP courses can be, however, implementing and maintaining an AP program, like any educational program, requires careful thought and management, as well as a healthy dose of reality. Since no school can (or would wish to) offer all thirty-seven AP courses, one important consideration is which courses to offer. Sometimes the rest of the curriculum determines this choice. For instance, a particularly successful foreign language or mathematics program may support the development of an AP course in that area. Conversely, if the administration and teaching staff believe that such strong courses are already meeting the needs of the most able students, it may be wiser to develop an AP course in another subject area. When selecting which courses to offer, one needs to avoid the mistake of substituting a higher-level course for students who do not yet have the broader basic understanding any good high school course should offer. If we are to think of AP courses as having a level of "early-college" difficulty, we need to avoid pushing students into courses for which they are not ready. Careless course selection can also "force" students to choose a major in high school rather than experience exposure to a broader strong high school curriculum.

Expert teachers

One other critical component of any AP program is staffing. Obviously a school cannot offer a course if it does not have a teacher certified to teach the subject. However, in addition to being certified, the successful AP teacher must also be willing and able to shoulder the demands of such a course, which likely will involve both more work and pressure. Of course, it's a joy to teach good students who have selected the course and who rarely create any serious discipline problems. Teachers also praise the opportunity both to delve more deeply into material and to proceed more quickly. Yes, it's fun to work with students who want to work and who almost always succeed. Yet to legitimize the extra demands placed on students, teachers must assure themselves that they design and maintain courses that will challenge these students, allow them to thrive in the learning environment, prepare them for college learning, and help them prepare for the AP exam. Staying ahead of bright students requires diligent preparation and deep knowledge from teachers.

Test pressures

One point noted by all the AP teachers with whom I have spoken is that, no matter how well the teacher may feel things are going, the specter of "The Test" always looms over their shoulders. True, "outside agency" tests, including state merit and exit exams, are a constant reality for most teachers. Yet, most such tests are designed to assess minimum or average skill levels, not the staggeringly challenging demands of the Advanced Placement tests.

Some teachers also suppose that awareness of "the test" can force them to "teach to the test," an approach that limits their flexibility and even their creativity. In addition, the demands of a daily "college level" course leaves little time for the often delightful mini-breaks that may be appropriate, even necessary, in other high school courses. As one teacher stated, "There is no room for the fluffy, fun-for-the-sake-of-fun silliness that accompanies high school classes at certain times of the year." On a slightly different tack, one camp of commentators proposes that the tendency to place the strongest teachers in AP courses can negatively affect the learning in other courses.

To prepare for this challenging assignment, teachers considering taking on an

AP course are wise to take advantage of the AP teacher preparation courses. These courses are offered every summer at many locations around the country by the College Board. Information about AP preparation courses is available at the College Board website: www.collegeboard.com.

Shoring up the standards

Those critical of the AP program claim that, as the number of students enrolled in AP programs has grown, lowered course entrance requirements have resulted in watered-down courses. In an effort to maintain its high standards, the College Board earlier this year piloted a heavy-duty AP audit program. For the first time, all AP teachers were required to complete the AP audit, a pretty hefty assignment, which was due in early June. Over the summer, teams of AP teachers and college professors evaluated the course audits for compliance with the AP requirements, giving teachers opportunity to address any gaps the evaluators discovered. Only when full approval was given could schools list these courses as AP courses so that students taking them may receive AP credit. Although current AP teachers will not need to go through the audit process each year, a new teacher will have to be certified and any new course must be approved as part of the process.

Besides course selection and staffing, student placement also demands thought. In the spirit of not leaving anyone out and encouraging all, some schools allow a student to take as many AP courses as she can fit into her schedule. This can backfire. Like the college courses they are patterned after, AP courses generally demand much independent work and much homework. Because high school courses are taught every day, the high school student does not have the luxury of two or three days between classes in which to complete assignments. As a result, AP work can actually be more time-consuming than its college equivalent. And because these students often have many gifts and interests, including sports, outside music groups, and theater, they already have extremely busy lives that keep them occupied for hours beyond the six or seven they spend in school.

The AP program is not perfect. Its implementation does demand clear, well-defined motives as well as high standards and expectations. Yet, with care, it can offer one more way to address the very real needs of our most able students — those who deserve the opportunity and the responsibility to run ahead.

AP Courses Put Pressure on Grades

One area that affects both teachers and students in AP courses is grading. Teachers comment that the pressure of grading increases in AP courses. They struggle to inspire the best work from students without killing the course by developing a reputation for "ruining" students' grade averages. In a climate of grade inflation driven by the perception that even the slightest fall in points can cost scholarship dollars, both parents and students worry about grades. Faced with the higher demands of AP courses, students who have always earned "A"s may be shocked when those no longer come easily.

Last year I had to comfort a young woman who tearfully wondered why she had not received an "A" for the first marking period. When I reviewed her grades with her, she remarked, "Oh, it's those test grades. I never do well on tests." Yet this student had a 4.0 GPA. While one may be tempted to shrug and say, "Welcome to college-level work, kid," the issue is not so simple. Another parent told me, "This [grade of "A-"] is going to cost me $7,000.00 in scholarship money." Ouch! Such comments are hard to receive, and deciding how then to handle grades becomes a real challenge. Of course, college admissions folk look at more than grade points. They examine carefully the student's transcript, noting the type of courses the student has taken, including AP courses. It is also true that as college freshmen such students will face the reality of college grading; however, by that time they already have or do not have a scholarship.

To compensate for the difficulty of AP courses, some people advocate granting "extra credit" to students willing to tackle such work. However, such an approach strikes me as flawed. If, as noted earlier, we believe our Christian schools are part of a covenantal community dedicated to providing what each student needs and requiring from that student what she can give, is it, then, right to "pad" the grades of those who have been "given much" and from whom then "much is required"?

In an ideal world, questions about grading expectations would be moot. No one would worry whether teachers should use a different grading scale, weigh various types of assignments, or just expect students to "tough it out." But in our real world these are serious questions and demand our thought and attention.

LDV

ROOM 219

Class Reunion

Nancy Knol
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Several years ago my high school class gathered for a reunion. It was a two-day affair. The first day we had a picnic at a beautiful local park, and the second day we gathered for worship at our former high school. I was one of three graduates who was asked to speak, and I share part of that speech in this column because it seems timely in regard to a sad event that happened in our school community this past summer. *(Nancy Knol concludes this column with a reference and dedication to the families involved in this sad event. Ed.)*

If I had to choose a story that was somewhat representational of my own life's story thus far, I think I know which one I would choose. It is a true story that a dear friend of mine recently told me, a tender story about her son. It was his first real ball game, and he was very excited. There were two outs, and he was on second base. Another boy got up to bat and delivered a pretty solid hit for a beginner. The coach yelled to my friend's son, "RUN HOME!" so he did. But he didn't bother with third base. He was so excited and so eager to obey his coach that he simply took the shortest way home — straight across the pitcher's mound from second base.

People react in assorted ways to mistakes like that. Those who are "into" sports might comment that a kid like that makes a coach tear his hair out. Spectators who don't know the boy well probably react with laughter, re-telling the event to others later. And those closest to the boy, like his mother, who told me the story, are initially embarrassed and sorry that as parents they hadn't made the rules clearer to him. And from there a deep love and protectiveness surfaces — the kind a mother bear feels when her cub is threatened.

That story has been a kind of parable to me in a couple of ways. As I was thinking of what to say to my former classmates today, I kept coming back to my memories of high school. To be honest with you, those days were often quite painful, mostly because, like my friend's son, I didn't ever quite grasp the rules. Let me give you just one small example. An unwed mother, who was staying with us the summer before I entered high school, had learned how to knit. She made me a sweater as a way of thanking me, I suppose, for sharing my room with her all those weeks, and as a gesture of friendship. I loved that sweater, mostly because it wasn't a hand-me-down from one of my three older sisters. So I wore it to school...A LOT. Finally someone asked me if I had any other sweaters at home, and the light went on.

In general my high school years were painful because I was a misfit — too opinionated, too naive, too self-absorbed, too headstrong.

But that's OK. Because in general, life doesn't always work according to the rules anyway, does it? I mean, if you keep in mind that baseball metaphor, how many times have you struck out since you graduated? We have all been shaped most, I suspect, by the times when we made mistakes or had the wind knocked out of us. Most of us were so clueless back in high school. We had no idea how life could surprise or disappoint us on a big scale. Didn't you believe that you would find your true love and live happily ever after? And didn't you think you would find a job that was perfectly suited to your skills and allow you a comfortable, carefree life style? Weren't you sure you wouldn't make the same mistakes your parents made? Did you even worry about your health?

Life knocked me off my feet the day I got a phone call from our children's school that our second child, Adam, was experiencing intense pain. After many tests and intrusive pokes, we were told that Adam was suffering from a children's kidney cancer called Wilm's tumor. We were given optimistic odds on this kind of cancer, but I remember thinking that I was going to have to relinquish my child before too long. Sure enough, in October, two years after his diagnosis, Adam ran home. He didn't cover all the bases — and yet he did. After his death, his older sister and younger brother would always say, "If I grow up, I'm going to be a...." And that "if" instead of "when" cut me. I knew that they had been scarred early by a harsh reality — that sometimes the game ends prematurely, or, at least, it feels premature. And yet, if we live in the light, not the shadow of eternity, we keep our ears tuned to the call to "RUN HOME" — because that call will come.

Today, as I look out at all these familiar faces from my high school days, I can say that my hope for each of us is that we embrace whatever time we have with joy and purpose, and that we urge those we interact with each day to do the same. There are some who are not here today because they have already run home. There may be some who wonder if they will be going home soon. And there are some who would really just rather not think about it.

The great cloud of witnesses is becoming a more familiar group to me these days. Is that true for you as well? When they finish the game, they go into the bleachers to their ultimate reunion and cheer the rest of us on. I will not be sorry to join them, but until I hear that call, I want to play well. May we anticipate that final reunion without fear. And may grace lead us all home.

This column is respectfully dedicated to the Hillbrands and Warners families from our school community, who learned this lesson in July, 2007.

The Value of Living Water

by Peter Rhebergen

Peter Rhebergen (peternelly@bulkley.net) is a teacher at Bulkley Valley Christian Elementary School in Smithers, British Columbia.

Air and water (i.e., global warming and other environmental issues) are prime-time news these days. Political parties will rise and fall on these issues. Much of big business is worried and will fight changes, while others see new business opportunities. There is now widespread doom and gloom; and yet, I believe that if we but trust in God to guide us, if we follow his ways and offer our service faithfully, then he will give us hope and strength.

Water is big talk in the news today. I've heard it prophesied that the thick, black gold of oil now flowing through our pipelines and transported around the world in supertankers will some day soon be replaced by water. Water will be the world's new currency. And new wars will be fought for the control of water.

Essential to life

Believe it or not, we can live without oil and gas; but without water, we humans die within a few days. Is it any wonder, then, that water imagery is prevalent throughout the Scriptures? In Psalm 42 the simile of a white-tailed deer drinking from a forest creek is used to describe our thirst for communion with the Living God.

From supertanker to a mere liter of bottled water, let's consider its worth. Take half a liter of bottled water. Cost? A buck. Buy two bottles and you have a liter of water for $2. That's double the cost of a liter of gasoline (in Canada, that is).

Yesterday in math class we came across a problem that stated it takes 100L to take a bath. If we were to use bottled water, that would come to $200! In my house, we'd stop flushing the toilet if a 15L flush would cost $30.

In current events, we looked at an article about bottled water. We made reference to David Suzuki, Canada's guru on the environment. Okay, so Suzuki was on one of his environmental rants. Some hail him as a prophet; others as a lunatic. I think he fits the biblical description of prophet, a modern-day Amos proclaiming earth care as though sent by God. He might not acknowledge God as the author and director of his message, but the United Church of Canada apparently does in an article we had read.

What about us? Is the Amos I present in my biblical studies course alive and well today? Are we willing and ready to proclaim the good news about water? How shall we as teachers and school begin to do so?

The Bible on water

Psalm 23 says that when God is my shepherd, I don't need a thing beyond what he provides because he has bedded me down in lush meadows and has found me quiet pools to drink from (The *Message*). A lovely poem, isn't it? So pastoral. I like the old hymn version too: "In pastures green, he leadeth me, the quiet waters by."

Sheep need water, every day. I know, because if my sheep don't get their water, they'll let the whole neighborhood know. Like the people of Israel in the desert, they bleat when they are thirsty. Moses struck a rock, and water flowed. And when wedding guests complained, Jesus gave them fermented water to drink — and it tasted better than the best wine.

And when speaking to a Samaritan woman one day at a well, Jesus offered her the water of life — living water — water with a slightly different flavor. Slightly? Here's a proposition to contemplate in the coming week. From God's point of view, water as H2O is essentially the same as that which we all too readily spiritualize as uppercase Living Water.

Our idolatry

Consider the following: Both come from God; both are essential to life eternal (which begins here and now, on this earth); both should be proclaimed with the fervor of farmer Amos. In our role as prophets, we should embrace the Suzukis of our day. But we ignore, hesitate, resist, discredit, dismiss, even kill the prophets — why? Why did Christ die on the cross? Do we love our idols more than we love the waters of life?

Think back to creation, when at first all of nothing was covered with waters, which then were separated into skies and seas, out of which arose dry land, and the stars up above. The waters gave birth to life — living water, the work of our Creator God. Water is indeed the source of life. Jesus is the source of life. There is a fluid connection: Jesus is the Living Water of Life. Hallelujah!

Thank you, Creator God, for parting the waters to create life.
Thank you for making water the critical factor in sustaining life.
Thank you for entrusting to our care the essence of life — water.
We confess, that as stewards of your water, we have, from the time of the Fall to this very day, squandered the resources of your creation.
But you sent the Messiah, to restore the waters of life — to extend life beyond the troubled waters of sin. He is the Living Water of life.
Thank you, God, for once again, placing into our hands the wind and the rain.
We've got the whole world in our hands!
Oh, River of Life, immerse us in the rivers of life.
Bless the vision and passion of Kris Kingston[1] as he reworks the powers of wind and water.
Open our ears, our minds, that we might actively hear the words and warnings of the Suzukis and Al Gores as you direct their words, we pray.
Redirect the learning objectives of our IRPs, and the monies of our school budgets.
Give us wisdom and courage as teachers with the young prophets, priests, and kings in our lives.
Make us faithful stewards of our world, for to you it and we belong.
Forever.
Amen

Footnote:

1) As I reflected on the belated growing concern for our planet and on world-wide environmental politics, my heart went out in gratitude to David Suzuki and Al Gore. And it also goes out to former student and writer, Rebecca Kingston, and her pioneering father, Kris. May God continue to bless their every effort to make our world a better witness to the awesome glory of our God. To the river of life let us go!

Note to Our Advertisers

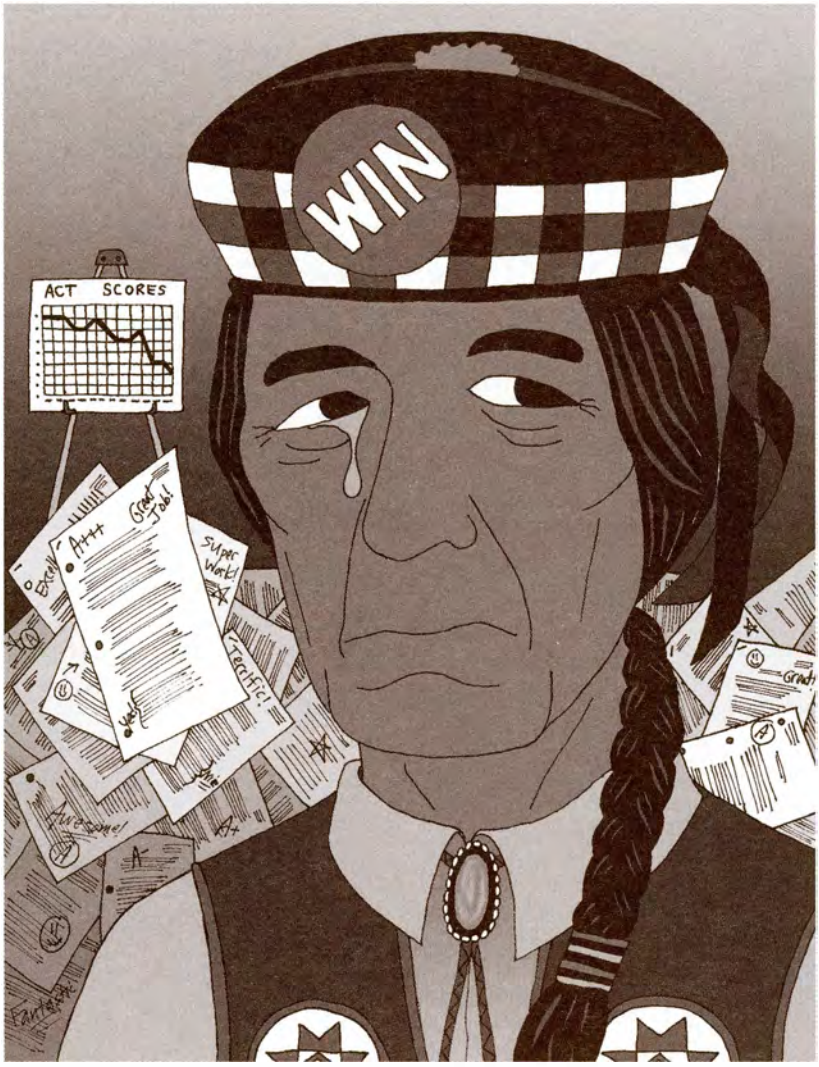
Please make sure that all camera-ready ads are emailed as PDF files to the editor before the following dates:

October Issue — August 15
December Issue — October 15
February Issue — December 15
April Issue — February 15

The Grades of Wrath
or Zen and the Art of Grade Inflation

Jan Kaarsvlam

Jan Kaarsvlam reports that he has given up trying to sell his recently completed spy novel, The Spy who came in from the Cold, Put on A Sweater, Then Went out Again. His final rejection letter advised him to "Never, ever write anything again. Ever. Not even a note to somebody." He has decided to self-publish the book. In the meanwhile, Jan has returned to the classroom, accepting an offer from Christian Academy of Guatemala to teach home economics. He plans to enrich local cuisine with what he calls "an injection of pop tart panache."



Principal Bentley VanderHaar knew his staff like he knew his own kids, and so, as he entered the faculty lounge at morning break, he expected some tension. Bedlam's teachers, by and large, took their professions seriously, but they did not always take constructive criticism very well. His had been the unenviable position of drafting a memo to the staff regarding last night's school board meeting. The school board was concerned at a trend that seemed to have emerged over the last four or five years: the average GPA at Bedlam was on the rise across that period, but through the same years the average ACT score had dropped steadily. The school board, in Bentley's mind, was rightly concerned about the discrepancy, and he had said as much in his memo. But Bentley was not naïve; he knew that Bedlam's teachers' first posturing would be defensive.

Still, nothing prepared him for what he saw as the staff room door swung open. Not surprisingly, Rex Kane was in the middle of the excitement. He had dredged up from a back corner of his desk drawer an old W.I.N. button from the Ford presidency and was displaying it proudly on the tam-o-shanter perched jauntily on his head.

"The board is right, brothers and sisters. This grade inflation is a big, big problem. That's why we need to Whip Inflation Now! I plan to wear this button until you all join me in lowering the boom on students who just aren't measuring up. No more free rides!"

Rex continued to chant "No free rides!" while ignoring the angry glares from some of his colleagues. Someone from across the room launched a jelly donut at him. It missed Rex, hit the wall, and slid down in slow motion, leaving a slug-trail of jelly behind it. Shop teacher Gord Winkle gasped in horror before pulling the half-empty box of donuts toward him protectively.

Art teacher Gregg "Rigor" Mortiss looked angry. "Sit down, Rex. You're making a fool of yourself!"

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Easy A," shouted Rex, "trying to silence the voice of real academic standards."

"Get down, Rex!" Bentley's voice rang clearly through the room, and within a moment, silence ensued. Rex grabbed his tam-o-shanter off his head and sheepishly climbed down.

"Sorry, boss," he muttered. "Just having a little fun on a Friday, blowing off some steam. I just thought you raised a good point in your memo, but no one else seems to agree."

Bentley looked around the room sadly. If Rex was his only ally, perhaps he and the school board really were over-doctoring a minor malady. As if reading his mind, math teacher Zelda Roberts spoke up.

"Not everyone disagrees with your position, Rex," she said, "just your justification and presentation. I think grade inflation is an obvious problem. In my calculus class, kids don't get "A"s for showing up. They have to work, and work hard."

"But you have a certain kind of student," said John Cloudmaker. John was on a one-year appointment at Bedlam, in exchange for Bible teacher Cal VanderMeer who had taken his place at Red Mesa Christian School in Arizona. He was Bedlam's first Bible teacher to ever wear his dark brown hair in a long, braided pony-tail. "Only advanced students take calculus. Of course you can demand more of them."

"But we need to demand more of everybody!" snapped Zelda.

Rigor Mortis asserted, "Not in my class! Art class is all about nurturing each student's latent talent, no matter what level of ability they possess. I'm helping them to find their inner voice so they can express what's most important to them. If students work hard and I give them a C, it could crush their budding creativity. As Bill Freschler says in episode #37 of his video series *How to Draw Like the Pros*, "Not all great art is made by great artists, but to the artist, all art is great!"

Zelda stared at him, blinking, allowing Rex to step into the pause.

"I know exactly what you mean! It's like when I do my martial arts unit, Tae Kan Bo (and So Kan You). I always tell the kids, 'Be the fist extended in peace.'" Without warning, Rex dropped to a crouch and demonstrated his patented "Soh nee" takedown technique on Gord Winkle. One tap to the back of the shop teacher's left leg, and he crumpled against the wall, spilling coffee and powdered sugar all over Zelda's cardigan.

Predictably, the redness started creeping from Bentley's jowls, working a slow path toward his temples. Zelda harrumphed and began to dab at the mess on her sweater with a wadded napkin offered by Rex, who was uncharacteristically remorseful. Gord, meanwhile, found himself nose-to-nose with the donut someone had thrown minutes ago. He forgot entirely that he could no longer feel his left leg from the knee down and greedily snatched at the sugary treat.

Being fairly new to the staff, John Cloudmaker hesitated to speak, but he felt obliged to do something to ease the growing tension. "Perhaps we are thinking about this all wrong. Maybe grades are being inflated, maybe not. Maybe ACT scores reveal that our students don't know what they should, or maybe not. Rather than talking about grades or about test scores as an end unto themselves, we should maybe focus on what we want our students to learn and on whether they are, in fact, learning it. Grades and test scores seem to be of secondary importance."

"Dude, that is profound," Rex said, clapping his new colleague on the shoulder. He proudly placed his tam-o-shanter atop John's head. "You speak with the wisdom of the proud and ancient people of the Southwest."

Cloudmaker wagged his head and smiled. "I was born in Toledo. I graduated from Pepperdine University with a degree in cultural and ergonomic history and a minor in biblical studies. Before they hired me at Red Mesa, the only Native American I'd ever met was my father, who grew up in Livonia, Michigan where he was adopted by Lithuanian immigrants."

Disillusioned, Rex ripped the tam-o-shanter from Cloudmaker's braided hair. "Gimme that, you poser!" In a flourish, he left just as the bell rang, sending all of Bedlam's teachers, except the still-immobilized Gord Winkle, back to their classrooms with absolutely no resolution on how to better grade their students.

Responding to the Cultural Mandate

by Phillip M. Hash

Phillip Hash is assistant professor of music and coordinator of music education at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

My father spent most of his career as the superintendent of a very small rural school district in central Illinois. In watching him make the day-to-day decisions of the job, I quickly learned that there is only so much money, space, and time to go around, and that he often had to make difficult decisions as to how these resources would be used.

Little has changed. School administrators continue to allocate resources based on what they believe is ultimately best for the children they serve. Unfortunately, however, these decisions are sometimes detrimental to music classes when school officials choose to reduce or cut the program when finances are tight, or fail to realize the importance and value of quality music instruction in the curriculum.

While I certainly appreciate the inherent tensions involved in managing the money, space, and time of any school system, I fear that decisions related to music instruction may sometimes be made without carefully considering the place of music in creation, God's mandate to us regarding music, and the responsibility of Christian schools in preparing believers to answer this call. This article will examine these issues in order to 1) provide a deeper understanding of the role of music education in Christian schools; 2) discuss the challenges of Christian school music education; and 3) offer a working definition and set of criteria for developing a *quality* music program.

Music as part of Creation

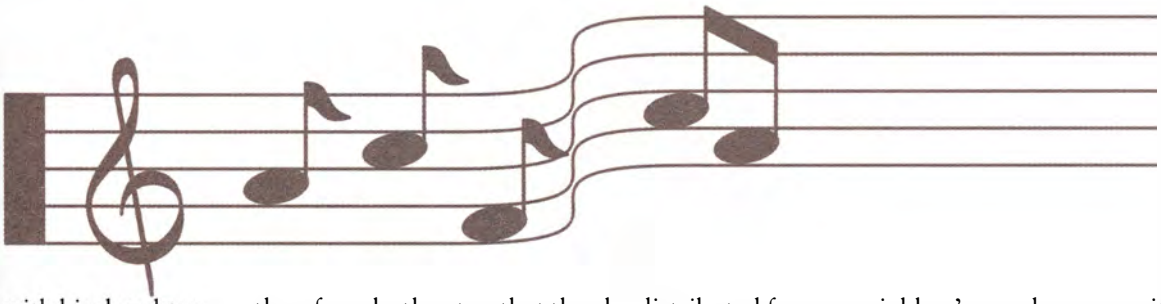
Music is humanity's way of using both the human potential and physical materials given by God at creation to organize sound (De Mol, 1999). These sounds combine to reflect, in both pleasurable and profound ways (Reimer, 2000), the ebb and flow, tension and release, struggle and fulfillment of human life, enhanced by corresponding musical emotion (Leonard & House, 1972; Reimer, 2003). Though some have been especially gifted in this area, all people are created with the abilities necessary to enjoy and engage in music. This assertion is supported through numerous research studies, which indicate that even infants are capable of distinguishing between various musical stimuli (Hodges, 2000; Pratt, 1998). Gardner (1993), in his *Theory of Multiple Intelligence*, furthermore proposed that all people possess musical intelligence, as well as several other forms of intelligence that go beyond the linguistic and mathematical knowledge emphasized in most schools. Hence, music is not merely an indulgence, but a unique aspect of our created beings.

In developing his world of sound, humans image God (De Mol, 1999; Hardy, 1990; Plantinga, 2002) in the act of creation. Sound forms a means by which we commune with other people as well as find personal meaning and satisfaction. Music is, therefore, universal — all people throughout history have had some type of musical culture and each society has its own unique musical practices. Music is also individual — everyone has a unique combination of musical gifts and abilities (Reimer, 2000). Because music is a reflection and representation of human experience and emotion (Leonhard & House, 1972; Reimer, 2003), and humans are made in God's image (Genesis 1:27), music should be understood as an interwoven part of the Kingdom.

God's musical command

The cultural mandate commands all people to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28 NIV). Through this verse, God calls people to not only reproduce physically, but also use the materials and human abilities given by God to create culture (Plantinga, 2002). This includes using the sound elements (pitch, rhythm, timbre, etc.) physical elements (wood, metal, calfskin, etc.), and musical capabilities God has given (De Mol, 1999) to "work and play, worship and [serve]" (Christian Reformed Church, 1984, p. 15) to the best of one's ability. Answering this call may include creating music through performance or composition, singing hymns of praise, healing broken bodies and spirits, or simply learning to delight in God's sonic world by enjoying the music making of other people. We further heed this command by seeking to understand the great diversity of excellence in the music of the world's people, and by sharing our musical gifts with others.

As with all of creation, we have also been called to be stewards of music, distinguishing the best compositions and performances from those that do not demonstrate musical potential to its fullest. Some people will devote their lives to this task, becoming professional performers, educators and composers. These professional musicians, however, are not the only believers responsible for this aspect of the Kingdom. Just as God has given all humans an aesthetic dimension to interact with works of art, so too must we "seek to enrich our enjoyment...develop our discernment...and [learn] to recognize and work against distortion and evil when it occurs in music" (De Mol, 1999, p. 19). According to Schultze (2004), "even tasks that we perceive as ... unimportant can, by God's grace, become part of God's working through us" (p. 25). Young couples choosing appropriate music for their wedding or a father sharing his love for jazz



with his daughter are, therefore, both acts of musical stewardship.

Music education's role

Many people believe that schools exist primarily to impart the skills and knowledge needed to allow one to obtain a well-paying job and survive in the world. Others view the elementary and secondary curricula as stepping-stones for getting into a prestigious college, affirming only course work that leads to this goal. Education, however, should amount to more than this. It should be about helping students develop, to their fullest potential, all the gifts God has given them for working, playing, serving, and delighting in creation. Wolterstorff (2004) affirms the need for a curriculum that includes both the arts and sciences, saying, "When science opens our eyes to the astonishing pattern of creation, and when music moves us to the depths of our being, then we experience some of the shalom that God intends for us. Art and theory are a gift of God in fulfillment of our humanity. A life devoid of the knowledge that theorizing brings us, and of the image that art sets before us, is a poor and paltry thing, short of what God meant our lives to be" (p. 30).

While this approach may not lead students to high-paying careers, it will improve their quality of life by increasing their potential to move beyond ordinary experiences that serve as a means to an end, such as laboring, eating, sleeping, to those that are extraordinary — valued for the experience themselves.

Music education is the medium by which people are prepared to engage fully and deeply with the sonic elements of creation — to work, play, worship, and serve through music. This is a noble and sacred calling in light of Calvin's statement that "all the gifts we possess have been bestowed by God and entrusted to us on condition that they be distributed for our neighbor's benefit" (McKim, 2001, p. 82). Although everyone has musical gifts on some level, few can meet God's musical call without instruction in the discipline.

Quality music program

A quality Christian school music program recognizes the unique place of music in creation and seeks to provide instruction that effectively responds to God's command to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28 NIV), fully developing all students' abilities to use the sonic elements God has provided to the extent that their musical gifts will allow. A music program prepared to fulfill this mission to the greatest extent possible will seek to do the following:

1. Provide adequate instruction time. The most important resource for any music educator is instruction time and access to students. Music class at the elementary level should be held a minimum of twice weekly for 30 minutes. Music courses at the middle and high school levels should meet as often as any other subject if music is to be treated as equal to other disciplines in the curriculum (e.g., DeMol, 1999). Furthermore, schedules should be created that allow all students access to music courses and ensembles throughout their elementary and secondary education.

2. Establish a formal curriculum. Research indicates that a feasible, organized, sequenced curriculum is the most essential factor in student achievement (Marzano, 2003). Furthermore, if music is to have an equal place among the disciplines, it, too, should be taught through a curriculum that articulates specific goals and objectives, meets state and national learning standards, and utilizes meaningful assessments. Beyond these guidelines, individual schools should feel free to create a curriculum that reflects their values and community, knowing that there are many effective ways to teach music.

In addition to implementing a formal curriculum, music educators should desire to teach the best of the world's music throughout history. Much of the music intended for school use is formulaic and has no connection to that encountered in the real world. According to Budiansky (2005), it is not written by any composer you have ever heard of — not classical, not jazz, not pop, not rock, not blues, not folk, not alternative Czech heavy metal fusion, not anything. You've never heard it on the radio, not even late at night at the bottom of the dial. In fact, it exists nowhere in the known music universe — except for the twilight zone of school musical performance (p.B.3).

If we as Christian educators are to lead student to think about whatever is "excellent or praiseworthy" as commanded in Philippians 4:8 (NIV), then we must incorporate the best of the music available for instruction rather than the plethora of generic pieces written solely for the classroom. Although publishing companies have inundated the profession with this type of material, many authentic examples of world music, Western art music and jazz, are available at every level of instruction.

3. Hire skilled, knowledgeable, certified instructors. Music educators hired to teach in Christian schools should have a degree in music and be eligible for state certification in the discipline. A quality program involves more than occupying children's time in games and activities and preparing music for public performance. In fact, state and national standards (e.g., MENC, 1994) call for a comprehensive curriculum that engages students in learning activities beyond performance — including composition, improvisation, and age appropriate lessons that connect music to history, culture, and other disciplines.

Administrators responsible for hiring music teachers must, therefore, take steps to insure that candidates have the broad skills and knowledge necessary to meet these curricular goals in their area(s) of specialization (instrumental, choral, or general music). Involving other music educators in the interview process and asking interviewees to teach a lesson or direct a rehearsal are the best ways of determining a candidate's ability to teach music effectively.

Develop God's gift

A distinctly Christian education should include a comprehensive, sequential, quality music program that prepares students to use the musical gifts God has given them to their fullest potential. Although some schools may not be able to meet all the above criteria at the present time, administrators and board members should carefully consider the place of music in God's Kingdom as well as his command for us regarding music (Genesis 1:28 NIV) when setting long- term goals for budget, staffing, and curriculum.

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When and How Do We Grade?

Albert Boerema
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Al Boerema (ajb37@calvin.edu) associate professor of education at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Mich., asked the Dot Edu panel to discuss the matter of grades, especially in the light of what some consider to be grade inflation. What is the role of grades in the educational program? Is this a role that needs to be changed or abandoned?

On November 18, 2007

Tim Leugs wrote:

Judging by the amount of stress my colleagues and I feel around report card time, grades [of course!] involve a lot of time and work. What is the value of getting all of those grades and comments out? Quite a lot, it seems, for some students. The reinforcement and motivation that "getting good grades" provides is a powerful motivator for many students and for their work habits, as pushed by their parents.

This is not the case for all parents, however. I often find parents telling me that the things they are most drawn towards in their children's report cards are not the letter grades, but the comments inserted below each subject and the comments in the "work and social habits" portion of their students' report cards. Comments can be a lot better indicator of not only the knowledge that a student captures but also of the learning in which the student engages.

We must do some kind of assessment of student progress and knowledge on a daily basis as well, but what kind? Well, it seems that evaluative assessment is not always as helpful to students as formative assessment — helping students to correct errors and helping teachers to know which students need what reinforcement.

In our society today, the status quo seems to make grades a necessary evil (at least at this point), even if inflation does make all the children appear to be above average. In an environment of dilution of the meaning of grades, it's important that we as educators reinforce the reasons behind the grades we give with concrete and specific directions which can then guide students in their academic work.

Tim

On November 19, 2007

Pam Adams wrote:

Thanks, Tim, for your response. I work with future teachers and, while content knowledge is important, it is the dispositions of our students that are so very crucial. We do not attach a grade to them but do expect our students to display kindness, responsibility and other important traits. We use these dispositions in discussing each student when they apply to our program and to do student teaching. Here is where grade inflation is not a factor. I think we expect even more of our future teachers today than we did a decade or two ago. While this does not directly relate to grade inflation, it does make us realize the importance of assessment — both formative and summative when it comes to the areas that we don't traditionally grade. Any thoughts from others on the evaluation of character traits that we want our students to display?

Pam

On November 19, 2007

Tony Kamphuis wrote:

I tend to be a "you get what you inspect, not what you expect" kind of person, and that is why I think the question of report cards and marking schemes is at least as important for keeping teachers focused as it is for students. When I teach, I am very aware of what I need to put on the report card. Do I need to say something about or evaluate "spiritual formation"? Well, then I had better design some sort of activity to justify my eventual comment or evaluation. Thus the report card becomes a path to monitoring student achievement, but it **can** also be the rudder that steers the program delivery by the teachers. I say, let's care-

fully design the report cards to clearly and transparently reflect ALL of our school goals. That way we end the practice of having nice spiritual goals on the walls but not incorporating these goals into our lesson plans.

Tim

November 20, 2007

Al summarizes and calls for final comments:

Okay, Tim outlines the importance of formative evaluation, with a brief note of the role of grades as motivators. Pam adds the importance of grading character and dispositions. Tony supports that by suggesting a redesign of our assessment tools to get at all the things that we want to effect in the lives of our students. Let's think about that. Can we assess the broadest range of development in our students, and should we?

November 21, 2007

Jolene responds:

For my own understanding, I need to tie some of these abstract ideas to concrete examples. When Tim talks of a kind of "assessment of student progress and knowledge on a daily basis," I think of anecdotal notes. I have found this assessment tool to be very valuable. Though it takes continual attention, anecdotal notes help me to see a snapshot of a student working through a typical math problem, mastering some tough spelling words, or working out a disagreement with another student. I keep these on sticky notes, which I make up for each student in my class. The anecdotal notes help me pay special weekly attention — even if just for a few minutes — to each and every student in the class. I'm reminded to not let any one student slip under my radar. I also find that I then have a good place to record significant personal struggles or friendship difficulties that a student is facing. I also hope to catch those moments when interest in learning is fading or strengthening in an individual student. I aim to use this tool in "helping students to correct errors and helping teachers [me] to better know which students need what reinforcement" with both academic grades, as well as learning attention, and social behavior at school.

Grading character, on the other hand, is tough. I've struggled with this issue as well. If I think I know the students well — and have enough anecdotal notes on their behavior — I can give proof of my assessment of their character development. But if I were to teach in middle school, or even high school with more than 100 students in and out of my classroom, I don't think I could aim to assess such things as the character development of persons that I don't personally know. Maybe this is why I teach second grade.

Our school bases character development assessment on our Elementary Creed, using our Creed as a rubric of sorts. The Creed includes lines such as "God calls me to use words of kindness, to respect God's creation and all authority, and to encourage and serve the people around me." And so, our elementary report card's character section has lines such as, "Uses words of kindness" and "Respects God's creation" and, "Serves others." We give grades of "Usually," "Sometimes" or "Not Often." If I then use the creed's language to explain expectations to my students — even in the moments of reconciliation of a conflict — I hope that I can assess what I've made clear I will inspect. Although this is still, and always will be, subjective, I do hope it is helpful.

One last issue needs to be raised: grading students with learning disabilities. In discussing this panel with my colleague who gives extra reading support to our struggling students, I was again troubled by the difficulty of grading students with learning disabilities. When a student is working so hard and making so much gain — especially considering the disabilities they are up against — yet failing against the grade level standards, do we give them a true failing grade? As of this date, we don't have any documentation to give an individual student an individual set of grading standards; and so my colleague relies on comments to tell of the effort and progress made in each student. In this way, she includes the student's academic issues, the motivation for learning, and the character development. Occasionally, she simply refuses to give a number grade.

Jolene

The panel consists of:

Pam Adams (padams@dordt.edu), professor of education at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa.

Tony Kamphuis (TonyKamp@aol.com), executive director of the Niagara Association for Christian Education, Smithville, Ont.

Tim Leugs (tleugs@legacycs.org) a fifth-grade teacher at Legacy Christian School, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Jolene Velthuizen (jvelthuizen@rcsnm.org) a second-grade teacher at Rehoboth Christian School in Northwest New Mexico.

Query

Three Rookie Questions

Tena Siebenga-Valstar serves as Education Administrator at Fort McMurray Christian School, Alberta. We encourage teachers and principals to submit questions for this column, even if they think they know the answer. Send your questions to Dr. Tena Siebenga-Valstar, 168 Windsor Dr., Fort McMurray, Alta, T9H 4R2, or email her at tvalstar@telus.net.

In this column I will answer questions presented by education students at Trinity Christian College. Although I do not have specific training in the area of special education, I believe that all students are created in the image of God and therefore worthy of respect and an opportunity to develop the gifts with which God has blessed them.

Beginning teacher's qualms

Question # 1

I have a question about education. It is always good to get a perspective from different teachers on things. What was your biggest fear about being a beginning teacher in your own classroom?

Response:

My biggest fear was, "Could I really do this job?" I wanted to be a teacher since I was in the primary grades. My teacher from grade one through my second year of grade three was a wonderful role model who gave me the sense of being someone who was loved. Even though I had difficulty learning, not only she, but also my parents, instilled in me the idea that I was capable and that I was to use the gifts I had been given. I always struggled with reading but was blessed with determination to put in the necessary extra time. When I went to school, assessment of reading problems and subsequent assistance were not available. I continued to have difficulty in college because of my reading, but God provided some wonderful caring people to advocate for me, so that I was eventually able to do my practice teaching assignment. It was done in the fall rather than the spring like everyone else, and was a first for the college. I loved teaching and the practicum experience, which concluded in November, was a good one.

As teaching positions were not available mid year (maternity leaves were not common then), I began my teaching career the following September, being blessed with a small class of fourteen students. As Jeremiah 29:11 says, "For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord … plans to give you hope and a future." My dependence was and still is totally on God. I moved to a new city, without knowing anyone, but chose to live by myself because I knew I would have to devote most of my time to preparation for teaching if I was to be a good teacher. I read all the teachers' guides and in a methodical way "digested" them so that I was prepared to teach. I tried my best to be well planned and to meet the needs of the students.

Teaching is different now from what it was then, but one thing remains the same — each child has to feel loved and capable; loved because he is an image-bearer of Christ and capable because God has given gifts to that special someone. I am reminded of the words we find in Zechariah 4:6, "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty.

Parental misbehavior

Question # 2

What do you do when you have a child exhibiting behavior problems in the classroom, and the parents are not reinforcing proper behavior at home?

Response:

Most Christian schools with which I am familiar have an enrollment policy that outlines the criteria for admission of students and the expectations of the students in various aspects of their life. Many Christian schools require that at least one parent is a Christian and that both parents will support the vision and mission of the school. That being said, one may still face the problem you have encountered. Although the stated desire is that the church, home and school work together and share the same values, this may not always be the case in actuality. As teachers we can work to change the behavior of the student when the child is in the classroom or during the school day but I believe we may not tell the parent how to parent in their own home. We each hold a different God-given office, one as parent and the other as teacher.

A teacher has the opportunity to develop a life changing relationship with a student. Bill Hybels uses an expression, "You never look into the eyes of someone who does not matter to God." At a recent conference the following phrase struck me as an addition to the previous one; "Every student is a success story waiting to be told." When we put those two statements together we are not only speaking of all the "someones" around us who are created in God's image and for whom God has so much love that he sent Jesus to die for them, but also that those "someones" have potential, capable of using whatever the gifts are which God has given them. Numerous stories are told of the profound

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impact a teacher had on the life of a student despite the home situation. You have the potential to be the teacher that can change the life of a child as you obediently listen to the Spirit to guide you into a loving, caring relationship with the student. As you experience success in dealing with specific behaviors, you may have the opportunity to discuss these with the child's parents.

You will have to work at developing a respectful relationship with the parents so you can convey to them the strategies that are working well in school. No parent wants to feel belittled or inadequate. Too often we hear from a parent, "I know you must think I am a lousy parent." Through the development of a positive relationship, a parent may ask for suggestions of how these strategies could be transferred to the home situation. You will have to depend on the Spirit's leading as you try to understand the perceived lack of home support.

In conclusion, you, as a teacher, have to love the child, helping the child to reach the goals that are attainable. The child is not responsible for the home situation although he or she is deeply affected by it.

Too much Physical Education?

Question # 3

With such demanding curriculum and other factors, how would you feel about having Physical Education five days a week? I went to school in Illinois my whole life, and they have a law requiring Physical Education all the way through senior year. I am curious to hear your thoughts on benefits or negative feedback.

Response:

Although almost all public elementary schools (99 percent) in the US reported that they scheduled physical education for elementary grades, the proportion of schools that provided daily physical education ranged from 17 to 22 percent. Alberta Education mandated 30 minutes of daily physical activity at the beginning of the 2005/06 school year.

Studies in both the US and Canada indicate an increased need for physical activity in children of all ages to combat obesity prevalent in school age children. The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute estimates that approximately 82% of youth are not active enough to meet international guidelines for optimal growth and development.

arch supports a role for sport and physical activity in enhancing self-esteem, feelings of competence and reducing initiation of high-risk health behaviors in children and youth. Other research demonstrates that active adolescents are significantly less likely to initiate risky behaviors such as smoking and drug use, and significantly more likely to express confidence in their future health. A pattern of healthy life style choices in adolescence lays the foundation for healthy choices throughout adulthood.

Gurian (2001) presents a compelling argument for increased physical activity. He states:

"Physical or body movement in class …is a powerful asset in managing stress, and leads to learning advantages in all areas. Blood flow to the top of the brain does indeed increase when the body moves in space. Movement of blood — or, more accurately, glucose — increases in limbic areas of the brain, where emotional processing occurs (p.150).

I believe there is sufficient evidence that increased physical activity enhances the life and learning of our students in the classroom and in life in general. In our Christian schools we must always keep in mind that our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, and we are to honor God with our body (1 Corinthians 6:19). The apostle Paul also told Timothy that physical training is of some value but Godliness has value for all things (1 Timothy 4:8). This is a lesson for the whole of our lives.

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Book Reviews

David Schelhaas. *The God of Material Things. Fifty Poems.* Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College Press, 2007. 51 pages. $8.50. Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele (Calvin College, Emeritus)

I read recently that only 50 copies of a book of poems need to be sold to warrant the designation "Best Seller." It's no wonder. A run of the Poetry magazine, as well as poems in other journals, justifies the suspicion that poets have conspired to grant no easy pleasures to their readers. Poetry, it seems, to be acceptable to "the mainstream" — whatever that is — needs to be obtuse, narcissistic, bereft of metrical patterns in order to be accepted. Exceptions prove the rule. Thus, it is refreshing to come across such a collection as *The God of Material Things* — by no means simple, but very accessible to a reader of good will. And notice the title. I have just acquired a book of poems by medieval mystics — wonderful in their way, but advocating the life of the spirit somewhat at the expense of material things. Poet Schelhaas, Professor of English at Dordt College, helps us work to the spiritual through the material.

And that is what is refreshing about these poems. They are rooted in growing things, in places, events, and people with names and at various stages of their lives. A solid idea resides at the core of the poem. They get somewhere. They have beginnings, middles, and endings. The poet has mastered the idea and is, therefore, able to express it graphically and economically.

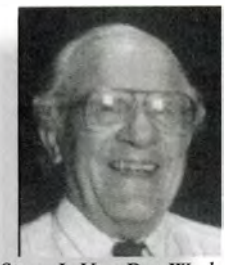
Schelhaas revels in the material world. He knows it is good, because God said so. We give him no pleasure by averting our gaze from his handiwork. The poet gives us sharper lenses and improved hearing aids and additional taste buds to experience this world. The poems, for example, are very chromatic. This man should be a painter as well. He writes about sumac (it reminds him of Pentecost), pink mittens, a green tree interspersed with a red maple, yellow paint of the cedar waxwing, black tar, a red-necked wren against the green, fir trees in white tuxedos, red beets, brightly-colored parkas. And he listens keenly to this world. He hears the music of the playground, the sounds of mourning doves and crows, the raucous morning sounds of starlings, the tumult of the world. In fact, he gives us a whole poem on sound, "All Nature Sings," wondering whether the sound of rats scratching behind the corn crib is as pleasing to God as a cathedral choir anthem. And he invites us to taste and see that God is good. Have a slice of this striped watermelon beauty, or red berries "that gush when I crush." But something of Augustine's dialogue about nature seems to lurk in and between these lines as well. For all this, nature is incomplete. It has not created itself, but invites us to see the God above us, the one "who made us." And that is as it should be. The poet does justice to this requirement by using nature as parables to reflect some reality or other, heightening our sense of our daily experience.

The title poem, "The God of material Things," is introduced by an aphorism of Father Daniel Berrigan: "We put on Jesus with the flesh and bones of our race, taking him in with our mother's milk." Schelhaas plays with the idea. Is it only metaphor? Could some "covenantal mystery actually have come to him through his mother's milk?" What follows is a testimonial — the poet's statement of an odyssey played out in the presence of God from very young on and through all the stages of his life. "Years have passed, graduations, marriage, children and still,/ More often than not I see him hanging around." (30) But he pushes on. He meets people — people of all sorts and in all sorts of situations, reflecting the graces and gifts of a good Lord. He revels in all these vitalities and then declares that all this peace and kindness and truth and the other gifts aren't really anything "...until they're some/ thing, some material thing/ some done/ thing, some seen or heard or smelled or touched or tasted thing." In some way or other, all the poems take their life from this perspective. "Mother's Songs" does this very well. Mother has loved opera during her lifetime, but, as her end approached, she weaned herself "from all earth's songs," and the family sings the well-known hymns. And "Two Stories from the Old Retired Farmers," celebrating both physical and spiritual seeds, serves as a fine commentary on I Corinthians 15.

"Squirrelways" (41) and "Rag Rug" show what can be done with pattern poems. Each of them pleasingly suits the form and the words to the idea. The first, tree-shaped, invites us to frolic with the squirrels in the intricate highways of tree branches. The second sketches the shape of the oval rug done by Aunt Jen from clothing scraps. Here, too, we are invited to watch her as over time she labors over her craft and then offers the work as a gift.

Reading these poems is good for one's material and spiritual well-being.

Dale Brown, The Book of Buechner: A Journey Through his Writings. Foreword by Frederick Buechner. Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press. 2007. 375 pages plus 17 pages of bibliography and index. Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele, Calvin College (Emeritus).



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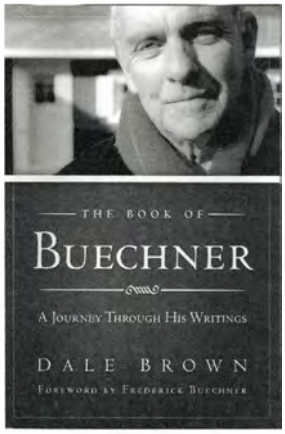

National Public Radio often recites the slogan "A great nation deserves great art" after broadcasting one of its classical concerts. Of course, that requires some exegesis. What makes a nation great in the first place? Samuel Johnson said the glory of a nation is its writers. The slogan suggests that greatness resides in something else. However one wishes to construe the relationship between greatness and art, it is a sad situation when one of the great writers of our time has been largely ignored except for serious readers who have become Buechner aficionados. The reasons why Buechner is often slighted are complex. Buechner is ignored, for example by secular readers because he allows for transcendence and mystery and joy. And he is ignored by certain evangelicals who find his realism too much, who are seeking simpler answers than Buechner provides, who are uncomfortable with the blend of faith and doubt, goodness and sin which make up his characters. Who would want to be a Christian writer in such a divided world? Who would want to be a Christian writer who has to deal with the turbulent sixties, Vietnam, and the cultural revolutions of recent decades? Serious Christian readers should acknowledge the gift we have in Buechner, the gift of his novels, in which he treats life's serious issues with integrity and literary finesse. And we need to thank Dale Brown, who has studied Buechner over a twenty-year period and has given us a comprehensive overview of this writer's work. In his foreword to the book Buechner expresses gratitude for Brown's discerning analysis of his work; states that Brown has understood and interpreted his novels with great accuracy; and acknowledges Brown as his chief "promoter and advocate."

Brown takes off on Buechner's Book of Beeb for his title — a work which consists of four separate novels. He accomplishes at least four things in his comprehensive study of his author. First, he provides a thorough analysis — including helpful plot summaries of each of his novels — beginning with the first, A Long Day's Dying and concluding with The Storm, but giving special attention to the last several — Godric, Brendan, The Son of Laughter, Revisiting Jehovah, and The Storm. Secondly, he provides helpful biographical information about the stage of Buechner's life when he wrote the novel he is discussing. After all, Buechner has done some teaching, attended seminary, received ordination as a Presbyterian pastor, worked for social agencies in Harlem, was married and has children. Then, third, he provides quotations from a variety of critics who have responded to Buechner's work — both negative and positive responses. Finally, he provides observations from a variety of individuals who comment on the cultural scene in a broad sense, observing the seismic shift in reader expectations and charting the deep spiritual currents of our time. With all this material to deal with, no wonder it took Buechner himself three days to read Brown's book — an enlightening experience, he reports. We should really add a fifth component to the book's achievement — the deep conviction which Brown keeps drumming into our minds that in this author we are confronted with a master writer, one who deserves a seat at the literary table along with the likes of Walter Percy, Graham Greene, Flannery O'Connor, among others.

We need this context for Buechner's novels because Buechner is difficult to classify. On the one hand, his sources are many — both older writers, such as Shakespeare, Trollope, Chesterton, and, of course, the Bible, but also the more modern writers already listed. He also learned much from his professors at Union Theological Seminary — Tillich, Barth, Niebuhr, and Muilenburg. In addition, Buechner creates fictional worlds from many times and places — from his experiences at Harlem, ideas he received from The Wizard of Oz, and his very fine adaptation of Old Testament narratives (especially in his Son of Laughter) to bring out some of the drama lurking behind the biblical text.

Despite this variety, certain themes provide a unity to Buechner's work, from his first to his last novel and his other writings besides. He masterfully creates characters who show the human condition — people afflicted with moral ambiguities ("All of us are charlatans," he says — not very complimentary, but not a surprising observation for people who believe, as Buechner does, that some deep catastrophe occurred early in the history of the human race.) In Godric he has a character say, "…nothing human's not a broth of false and true." Buechner peoples his novels with characters that parents would surely warn their children against. Many are feckless drifters, loners, cheats who lead estranged, broken, aimless and incomplete lives. They travel around, drink too much, make and break friendships. They also love a lot — marry, divorce, lie, do right things with false motives and wrong things with good motives. They live with Chaucerian exuberance; they are a boisterous, noisy crowd. And they talk a lot — and very often about subjects that have religious implications.

Buechner shows how complicated such issues can be. Whose story is true — Godric's, the unvarnished truth about himself, or Reginald's expurgated version of this saint? In Treasure Hunt, will Tono be able to manage the several ongoing mysteries of his life so that he will be able to put his unbelief behind him and regain his faith? Or will he slide back into the rain and muck of his past? The complementary theme is that Buechner concludes his novels with affirmation — with resolution, with joy, with

laughter, even — though these are hard-won triumphs. He does not write soap operas, whose episodic structures avoid final moral judgments. At the end of the boisterous journey of each novel, grace shines through, and, very often, as in Graham Greene's whiskey priest, through the agent initially the least likely to be the one who provides the redemptive moment. Here is how Buechner defines his purpose:

"...As a novelist no less than a teacher, I try not to stack the deck unduly but always let doubt and darkness have their say along with faith andA hope, not just because it is good apologetics — woe to him who tries to make it look simple and easy — but because to do it any other way would be to be less true to the elements of doubt and darkness that exist in myself no less than in others....I must be as true to my experience as a Christian as black writers to their experience as blacks or women writers to their experience as women. It is no more complicated than that." (9)

Buechner's ideas about writing fiction will turn away evangelicals who prefer the sensational Hal Lindseys or the sentimental, often contrived, simple, formulaic, artless productions that do little to strengthen the reader's faith or gain the respect of the literary world. But he also turns away those who are accustomed to deal with religion sarcastically. Joseph Dewey speaks perceptively when he writes that Buechner will always be marginalized because "...he has violated the most basic premise of our artistic culture — he writes out of belief in an active supernatural presence." (146) Let us hope that Dale Brown is correct in predicting that "the integrity of ambiguity" will in due time be discovered and acknowledged and lead to a recognition of the gift of Buechner not only to the Christian community but also to the literary world generally. Brown's masterly study will surely contribute to this overdue appreciation of Buechner's life and literary accomplishment.

Den Pluimer, Praise the Lord: Pass the Leeches. Mustang, Oklahoma: Tate Publishing and Enterprises, LLC. 127 E. Trade Center Terrace, Mustang, Oklahoma, 73064. 2006, 117 pages. Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele, Calvin College (Retired)

Here is a pleasant book, one which will be enjoyed by several groups. Those who, like the author, are professional hunters and fishers — the author guides on thirty-five different lakes in Minnesota — will enjoy comparing their experiences with the lively narratives the author relates in this book. Those who prefer golf or other sports will be content to slog through sloughs and beds of cattails for the elusive grouse and experience inclement weather or a bad fishing day, vicariously. And they will be able to do that, for the description is graphic and lively, appealing to all the senses. One gets the sense of 'having been there.'

The full enjoyment of the book requires an agreement with the author's belief in the lively, very direct action of God in relationships — to family and friends, to God himself, and to Nature. Sam Harris, an outspoken atheist, scoffs at interpreting such signs of God in the works of nature or fellow human beings. He calls such exercises an illusion, a "ludicrous obscenity," a danger to the human race. But Pluimer is wide open to the workings of transcendental forces. He hears God speaking even on a day that yields an empty game bag. He exults over the loveliness of creation and finds it impossible not to believe in the one who gifted us with it. He takes the injunction "Consider the lilies" seriously. He gleans much wisdom from his experiences and acknowledges these insights as gifts from God.

I enjoyed especially the episode when, fully equipped with just the right tackle for the fish of the day, he experiences a family of amateurs who must have been on the wrong page for what they intended to do. But at the end of the day, it is the amateurs who went home with the big catch, not the expert. And the author had to learn something about the protocol of hunting and fishing. Birds and fish are, he says, renewable resources. They are more than meat; they deserve dignity and respect. One day he is initially thrilled to have shot a sitting grouse. But the friends who had invited him for the day were not amused. One simply does not shoot a sitting grouse. Once more, they warn him, and he forfeits their companionship. Pluimer selects biblical texts to illuminate such lessons. All these are fine passages, but some fit the situation being addressed better than others.

A notable example is the day when he and a friend become so engrossed in their piscatorial success that they pay no attention to the developing clouds and wind. They narrowly escape drowning. God graciously overrode their folly with his preserving grace.

For Pluimer, hunting and fishing are not mere hobbies. They are not isolated activities. They define his life. They occur in a matrix of a sense of stewardship, respect for all life, alertness to every casual and wayward beauty — including watching an osprey take small branches from a tree to repair his home. And he has much to say about the bonding that takes place among himself and his sons. They obviously learn more about the world than those who spend their time on video games. I have no doubt that the book will "hook" many a lad who is "hunting" for worthwhile ways to spend his time.