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Boredom : Gate or Wall?

Editorial


Bert Witvoet

How Do We Face Boredom?

Boredom. All of us have experienced this sorry state of affairs. I remember being bored as a teenager. But I was smart enough not to tell my Mom because I knew that she had a prescription for it — Why don't you do the dishes?" or "Here's a broom; sweep out the back shed." I preferred to linger in my state of boredom, hoping that I could find my own way out of it. Maybe something exciting would take place on our Main Street that would stimulate me into a happier state of mind, without requiring me to exert myself with a task that seemed to yield no personal benefits.

I didn't know it then, but apparently I had fallen prey to a disease that had not been named until Charles Dickens used it for one of his characters in *Bleak House* in 1852: he suffered from the "chronic malady of boredom" (Robert Fulford in his *National Post* column of August 5, 2008). Naming it apparently accompanied the trend of rising individualism. With this rise came the notion that we as individuals have a right to be happy. This notion has entered the church and the life of Christians as well.

Inalienable rights

Someone told me about a man who had remarried after leaving his wife and divorcing her. His family was against it, believing that he should seek marriage counseling, especially since his wife was willing to go for counseling, and the break-up of their marriage would seriously and negatively affect their three children. But he believed that God was in favor of his divorce and remarriage because "God wants me to be happy." Where does this notion that God wants us to be happy come from? You will not find any Scripture telling you that we can make decisions based on the *principle* (a basic truth or reason) that God wants us to be happy. We know that he wants us to be holy, obedient, loving, kind, compassionate, blessed and joyful. Yes, "joyful"! But "joyful" is not the same as "happy." "Joyful" is a fruit of the Spirit, not a right. And fruit of the Spirit come to us by the grace of God, not by inalienable rights, such as those declared in the United States Declaration of Independence: "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." (Is there a significant difference between *pursuing* happiness as a human right and *claiming* it?)

So the naming of boredom seems to be linked to a modern social trend. But the existential experience of being bored must have been there from the beginning. I'm sure that Adam and Eve, after being chased out of Paradise, had times that they were bored stiff. Fulford writes: "Boredom indicates a lack of desire, a blank space where we normally store our hopes, needs and wants." Being away from Paradise must have seriously affected Adam and Eve's hopes and wants. Just imagine — life in Paradise must have been a riot. Naming the animals is so much better than working on a Sudoku puzzle!

Who's at fault?

If our fall into sin resulted in a loss of enjoyment in life (pains in childbearing and sweat on your brow when working) then may we not conclude that boredom is primarily a spiritual deficit? Or is it? When a student sits in a classroom, let's say *your classroom*, and he finds himself "bored to tears," is that because he is spiritually empty, or is it because you as a teacher fail to engage his mind — "his hopes, needs and wants"? See, one difference between teachers I had in 1940 and teachers who occupy the front of a classroom today is that my teachers of yore could be boring with impunity. Nobody thought of a teacher as being in the business of entertaining his charges. If anyone dared to complain that his teacher was boring, he would probably receive forty lashes minus one — the "minus one" being the obligatory assurance that there was a limit to acceptable torture. Anyway, a teacher who lacks passion and preparation as well as the skill to hook into the needs of a young person can induce boredom.

But the burden of justification may also fall on the student, of course. Do students have a right to be bored if the teacher has opened up an area of study that is chock full of creational treasures? May a student resort to boredom when Shakespeare's Shylock pleads, "When you prick me, do I not bleed; when you tickle me, do I not laugh?" (This quotation comes to my mind because I recently met Rev. John Koole, who played the role of Shylock at Calvin College in the mid-fifties. An examiner at Calvin Seminary had later questioned him on the propriety of memorizing words coming from the mouth of a hate-filled Jew. Would it not have been better had he memorized Scripture instead? This man had obviously been bored by Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*.) But I digress. The question is: do students have a right to be bored? In other words, a person may have a "lack of desire, a blank space" in her soul simply because she refuses to take the

"Do Nothing"

I'm just living in a life without meaning
I walk and walk, do nothing
I'm just living in a life without feeling
I talk and talk, say nothing
Nothing ever change, oh no...
Nothing ever change.

(Sung by The Specials)

cultural mandate seriously. Surely such a person (maybe you know a few from the classes you try to teach) is now firmly on the path of spiritual decay. How can anyone, made in the image of a creative God, not be fascinated by the potential that the Creator has laid in the diverse and challenging curriculum called "The earth and all its fullness," which includes Shakespeare?

When I consider

How can anyone lack curiosity after reading Psalm 8?

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.... When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him....You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas."

That sounds like a pretty full curriculum right there. And it requires a fully dedicated and curious mind. A Buddhist saying has it that, "when you are bored, you have drawn a curtain between yourself and the potential of the moment." Write that on your blackboard and ask your students to discuss this statement, or give it as an assignment.

A gateway to freedom

But sometimes we Reformed Christians have a tendency to become too achievement-oriented. Is it the cultural mandate that makes us shun boredom completely? There is a positive side to boredom. Did you know that? Boredom can also be a gate to a fuller experience of life.

For this I'm going to quote a bit more from Robert Fulford's column on "Boredom": "I recently came across a quote from Diane Arbus, the photographer: 'The Chinese have a theory that you pass through boredom into fascination.' If something is boring for two minutes, do it for four minutes. If it's still boring, do it for eight minutes, then sixteen, and so on. 'Eventually you discover that it's not boring at all.'" Maybe that's what my mother had in mind when she would tell us to sweep out the shed. If you do it long enough, it becomes fascinating. Teachers might want to experiment with this approach. Ask your students to do something they consider boring for two minutes, then four, then eight, and so on, until they finally come to the nerdy conclusion that maybe it is not so bad after all. Mathematics can be fun!

Pray and work

Monks apparently have to learn to go through boredom into a contemplative and richly rewarding mystic experience. One Father counseled a younger monk by saying, "You must realize that "acedia," [spiritual sloth or apathy] will attack all the more severely because you have deserted your post [in this case, his cell], unless from now on you strive to subdue it through patience, prayer and manual labor." My mother always favored the "Labora" part of the "Ora et Labora" saying that graced our living-room wall. She was not interested in my becoming a monk.

So now I am torn between considering boredom a state of grace or an opportunity for the devil to keep us from *attaining* a state of grace. I think it depends on whether you enter a state of acedia intentionally, with the "ruler" concept of Psalm 8 goading you into conquest — prayerfully, of course, or whether you allow yourself to be conquered by *ennui,* feeling sorry for yourself, and whining about your teacher who failed to entertain you with jokes and videos.

Bert Witvoet

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Eight Theses About Boredom

by Curt Gesch

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1. Either a compliment or an insult

Recently, I received a strange request from the editor of *CEJ*: Would I consider writing an article about "boredom as a productive state of mind." And he thought about me. The last article I wrote for *CEJ* was about creativity and imagination. Times change. The truth will out.

I once wrote an article about bear poo (*Christian Courier*, November 24, 2008) and received my inspiration while sitting in the little cabin I built last summer, watching bears stand in a field grazing and defecating. I guess that could be considered boring. Perhaps I am qualified after all.

I admit that while trying to come up with an article that would satisfy the editor, I became distracted with self-pity, a most boring emotion. And then ... I thought of Napoleon. His name just jumped into my bored head as I passed the pantry and my eye caught a container with a label on it that said "St. Remy. Napoleon Brandy." Serendipitous, I thought, because Napoleon also spent a long boring time in Moscow during the winter, so maybe *he* knew the key to boredom. And he even appeared to have St. Remy on his side. So I communed while I watched the bears, my mind numbing all the while until a state of pure boredom was achieved. Who says you can't learn from history?

2. Tedious, not boring.

At one time, master teacher John Bron taught all his children a new word the first week of school: *tedious*. They were never, never, never to say *boring*. This type of denial was successful in impressing parents with the teacher's vocabulary-building skills and even vaulted him into principalship where — as Master of Tediousness — he presides over staff meetings.

3. Boredom: the antithesis of sloth

Sloth is so important it's called a sin. You have to work at it. You plot, and scheme and conjecture: "What could I avoid doing and how could I excuse myself?" Boredom and its cousins, apathy and *ennui*, do nothing and still succeed.

4. Boredom prolongs life

Did you ever notice how days take forever when a teacher is droning on and on about something-or-other that she pretends is vital to one's well-being? The hour seems to last forever. Cultivating boredom prolongs the illusion of a long life, making one more successful at that elusive goal of longevity. Note: if teachers don't work as stimulus to boredom, try preachers, or "American Idol," or curling tournaments, or simply contemplate the sex life of a slow loris.

5. "Mulling things over"

Long ago, when Christian schools barely knew what "curriculum" meant (didn't we have textbooks?), my friend and I received a grant to write an up-to-date summary of major Canadian denominations for a church history class. We worked very hard, and met the deadlines, even producing this booklet on a "spirit-master" ("Ditto") machine. Two pages of my submission were yanked as substandard.[1] In the words of one member of the committee who (unfortunately) had listened to me blabber on and on about creativity in the past: "Gesch, you told us once that Bertrand Russell was able to write so prolifically because he actually was working on a bunch of projects at the same time. So if he published a book or paper each month, it actually took him much longer to write each piece because — as you told us — he "mulled things over" for a long time and then ... SNAP! the work was ready for writing. Gesch, you need to "mull this work over" some more.[2]

Mulling things over is not the same as slaving away at them. It's more like letting something percolate (no instant coffee metaphor works) or ferment. Ah, *ferment*. That's a nice word. Fermenting may be part of a larger process of *distillation*, which reminds me of Napoleon again. The bears are hibernating, but there must be something interesting out in the backfield. All I have to do is miss it.

6. A different way

Once, for a birthday present, my wife announced: "Oh, I made you an appointment with the Christian counsellor at 5:00 p.m. this afternoon." So I paid good money to Dick Fahrenhorst, who asked me how I did my creative work. Proudly, I explained that I grit my teeth, light a cigarette, and walk in a circle while I think, talking ideas through with myself and then furiously hammering them out on a typewriter (yes, that long ago, when I still smoked and punched out articles on an old Remington). For $50, Dick told me to try to write another version of the story by sitting on the couch, slouching, with sloppy handwriting, to accept distractions, and not to finish a paragraph before putting it aside. Then I should take a walk, hunting for ducks without shells in the gun, without a watch, and no plan — just wander the 100-acre farm.

So I wrote two versions of the same article: one was a high-intensity article that cost me lung capacity and produced stomach acid, and the other one that was very frustrating. The unfocussed activity, incom-

plete activity, non goal-oriented activity nearly killed me until I realized that version two of the story was just as good as version one, and that — with practice — I could cultivate another approach.[3]

7. Meditation, usually best accomplished without thinking about Napoleon, might even match our editor's idea of boredom.

Meditation may involve intentional non-focus. When I'm intent, bird-book in hand, binoculars around my neck, and mind and eyes peeled, I get stressed. Other times, however, I daydream. And it's then that I spot most unusual bird species and otherwise-missed activities. When in a meditative daze, I walk right up to a deer, watch a hooded merganser land on a fence post, see a meadow lark crash into a blackberry thicket.

In a sermon-inspired daze I realize that Joe is sitting alone again, that the carving on the pew in front of me is actually a love-note (John V. loves Sarah), not graffiti, and that the smell of Holy Communion is as real as the taste.

When a Power Point projector goes on, my attention goes off the screen, and I see words reduced to physical images, a living speaker replaced by electronic wizardry, a hard-working farmer valiantly fighting the room's heat to pay attention while wondering about mastitis, and a student zealously taking notes for extra credit. I doodle, filling in all the "o"s on my handout, drawing lines, thinking about various curves and straight lines and how they fit together, wondering why my doodlings drive everyone else crazy when they have a screen to look at.

I shift position a hundred times;
listen to the chair creaking;
cross and uncross my legs;
contemplate eternity ;
and observe my life moving
yet more slowly
toward something in which intensity
is matched by acceptance,
activity perfectly merged
with passivity:
a place in which I know my own place
— a state of grace.

8. Telling students about the value of boredom: a deadly sin.

Important Notes:

1. They paid me anyway.
2. The booklet is out of print.
3. I'm still ticked at Dick for charging me $50 for that lesson, but, then, he took all those boring classes to earn his doctorate in psychology, so....

Bored?

Most people blame boredom on the circumstances, but psychologists say this emotion is highly subjective and rooted in aspects of consciousness — and that levels of boredom vary among people. Some individuals are less — and others considerably more — likely to be bored than others.

Boredom is not a unified concept but may comprise several varieties, including the transient type that occurs while waiting in line and so-called existential boredom that accompanies a profound dissatisfaction with life.

Boredom is linked to both emotional factors and personality traits. Problems with attention also play a role, and thus techniques that improve a person's ability to focus may diminish boredom.

From: *The Scientific American*

Who Cares Anyway?

Engaging Apathetic Students

by David Mulder

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Over the decade or so I've been teaching, I've come to a realization I think is rather profound: students often have no desire to learn what is being taught in schools. Of course, if you have spent much time in a classroom, my observation will likely not be earth-shattering news for you. The sheer volume of information and entertainment available to our students gives them cause to tune out, lest they become overwhelmed by it. And I've observed that the way we "do school" absolutely fails to engage some students at all.

Now, I know that some teachers are content to accept the apparent fact of student indifference toward the curriculum. Never mind that the students in their classroom are slowly dying of boredom, or subconsciously plotting their escape, or consciously planning their rebellion!

What troubles me is a painful truth lying beneath students' classroom apathy: teachers often do nothing to entice their students into *wanting* to learn! So your students don't seem to care about least common multiples, the geography of sub-Saharan Africa, the water cycle, subject-verb agreement, or Amos's prophecies against Israel. What are you going to do about it? Assign the same readings, ask the same "discussion" questions, work through the same problem sets, give the same quizzes you used the last time you taught your subject? What are you doing: continuing to "teach, test, and hope for the best?"

No surrender

Teaching is hard work, after all, and not for the faint of heart. Oh, sure, you can pick up a suitably "teacher-proof" curriculum guide telling you just what to say, which assignments you must give, and exactly what to spoon-feed your students. But is this really teaching? I would say not! Such an approach reduces the *teacher* to a mere *technician*. Teaching is a complex, holistic task, one that is much more than simply presenting information and expecting students to somehow siphon it into the gray matter between their ears. Surely, this type of "teaching" provides a sort of education, but what a sorry, frail, and lifeless education that must be! Yet, sadly, if I go by what fellow teachers across North America tell me, this is just the sort of education many students receive, even in Christian schools.

Shouldn't we who claim to view the children in our classrooms as "unique image-bearers of God" actually *teach them as such?* What would it look like if we actually put this catchphrase into practice in our classrooms? Would students experience a more engaging, robust, and vibrant educational experience? Would students' classroom apathy begin to evaporate?

I'm not going to pretend to have this all worked out yet; my teaching practice definitely remains a work in progress! I have, however, begun to work at reducing the gap between philosophy and practice in my classroom, trying to find ways of creating a *desire* to learn. What follows are short explanations of several different things I've begun to change in my teaching practice to combat classroom apathy — practices I have found successful.

Tell stories

I confess — I am a storyteller. I love to tell my middle schoolers stories about the silly things my two-year-old daughter says and does. I love to tell my students the story of climbing Half Dome in Yosemite National Park. I love to tell my students the story of the mission trip I was on when my faith in Christ became something I *lived* rather than just *believed*.

Students *love* stories. I've found that even the most reluctant learner in my classroom will sit and listen to a well-told story. Stories have a powerful way of affecting students emotionally that simply reading a school textbook or filling in a worksheet can never do.

The good news is, almost any content can be taught by telling a story. When my seventh-grade science students are learning about simple machines, I tell stories about my days working as a masonry tender, using pulleys, levers, and other tools to make the work easier. As my eighth-graders study bones and joints, I tell the story of how, when I was in the sixth grade, I dislocated my elbow in a terrible bicycle accident. In my seventh-grade Bible class, I often take on the role of a character in a story from Scripture and retell it in the first person. Even the college students I teach as an adjunct instructor love to hear stories about my classroom experiences!

Granted, I happen to love telling stories. But I think *any* teacher can hone their craft by developing their skill at telling stories.[1] Just be prepared — your students will want to tell you *their* stories as well!

Teach for understanding

This might sound obvious, and, indeed, it ought to be. However, it took me seven years of teaching to figure out that I was not teaching with the goal that my students *understand* the content. Sadly enough, I was teaching to *cover* the content.

This is an incredibly important distinction. Of course, many of my students *did* understand what I was teaching before I became committed to teach for understanding. What I'm really talking about is our focus as teachers. I was much more concerned that I "covered" the assigned curriculum in a year than I was concerned

that my students should actually *understand* the content I was teaching. I needed to change my focus from *my teaching* to *my students' learning*.

Planning backwards

Realizing this need has meant a change in the way I approach lesson and unit planning. These past few years, I've incorporated more backward design into my teaching practice to help me focus on teaching for understanding, rather than just for coverage. In "backward" design, we begin (as with traditional unit planning) by planning goals for my students, including knowledge and skills I want them to learn and key ideas they must understand as a result of studying this unit. The "backward" part is what comes next. Rather than planning any learning activities or teaching strategies, I plan the *assessment* of the goals I've set. Only after the assessment plan is in place do I begin planning specific lessons.

Why would I do this? The key here is "understanding." I've begun telling students on the first day of a new unit exactly what they are going to need to know at the end. I have actually handed them a half-sheet of paper with a list of the key things they should know, understand, and be able to do at the end of the unit, as well as key questions for them to consider throughout the unit. When I first began doing this, my students thought I was a little crazy. After a few units planned this way, however, my students have come to see the benefit.

Planning the assessments first helps me keep focused on specifically how I'm going to ask students to demonstrate their newfound learning. If I am intent on ensuring that my students *really* understand the content I'm teaching, I'm going to need to teach it in such a way that they actually know it! The specific lessons I teach them are all aimed at ensuring students will meet the goals I've set for the unit. I really want them to understand the content come final assessment time. Some teachers have called this "teaching to the test." I call it teaching for understanding![2]

Give choices

Have you overheard colleagues lamenting that their students just don't seem to "take responsibility"? I have. In fact, I have uttered the same lament myself. Then I realized how little students actually have to take responsibility for during their school day. Oh, sure, you might point out that your students don't do their homework, that they leave their locker or desk a mess, and that they don't study enough for quizzes. But there is a deeper issue here.

Do the students in your classroom have any *real* decision-making power? Giving up "control" as a teacher can be a scary thing. What might happen if you let students decide what specific content they would learn? Or decide how they would learn it? Or decide how they would show what they have learned? Are you brave enough to try it?

I don't give students free reign in my classroom, of course. But I *do* give reasonable choices to my students. It might mean giving the choice of half a dozen different research topics to specialize in before reporting what they've learned with the class. It might mean giving the choice of reading individually, reading quietly with a partner, or reading in a small group with me. It might mean allowing students to either take a traditional pencil-and-paper test, or write an essay, or participate in an "interview" to show me what they have learned.

Teaching this way might mean you have groups of students doing very different things in your classroom, all at the same time. You might be shaking your head, exclaiming, "Chaos!" But what if this is what meeting the needs of "unique Image-bearers" is all about? Are we totally sold on "one-size-fits-all" instruction? Or is there room in our classrooms to meet individuals where they are? This is the key idea behind "differentiated instruction," one of the biggest buzzwords in education today.[3] In my estimation, giving students the power to make these kinds of choices is the beating heart of differentiation.

I'll be honest. As I've incorporated differentiation into my teaching practice, there certainly have been moments when I feel like I have eighteen things all going on in my classroom at once — and sometimes I do! However, as I've worked to give stu-

dents more choices in their learning, I've found that their interest, motivation, and responsibility have increased as well. Differentiating instruction seems to me to be a very "Christian" way to teach.

Lighten up

I confess: my classroom is a noisy place. (I am one of the main culprits!) But people wandering past my classroom door would surely note an energetic "buzz" even if my voice wasn't ruling the roost at that moment. It wasn't always this way. I once thought my classroom had to have no sound other than the sound of my voice in order for learning to take place. I once thought students had to be seated rigidly in their desks in order to be learning. I once thought the best way for students to show what they know was by pencil-and-paper tests. I once thought I had to wear a tie when teaching to be taken seriously. My students are thankful that I don't think this way anymore.

I realized that if I want my students to learn, and perhaps even enjoy being in my class (who said school has to be unpleasant?), I need to lighten up. For instance…

- I try to not take myself too seriously. If you visit my classroom today you are as likely to find me sitting on top of my podium while teaching as standing behind it. A colleague who teaches language arts has used me as an example when teaching the definition of the word "whimsical." Unbeknownst to me, she once challenged students to get out of their seats and lie down on the floor during my class, promising to take the blame if their experiment went poorly. When I lay down with them, the whole class broke down into a fit of giggles.
- I encourage my students to move in my classroom. If a student needs to sharpen a pencil or get a tissue in my classroom, I encourage them to do so by all means! Sometimes the short walk around the room is just what they need to refocus. If I know I'm going to be lecturing for more than 20 minutes in one shot, I plan to break it up with a stretch break or a body-crossing exercise.[4] These are small things, perhaps, but my students have come to appreciate the freedom to move.
- I want students to *think* in my class. Thus, I want them to not only answer questions I ask, but to ask their own questions as well. I'm learning to let them ask questions and be willing to let my lesson plans go, for a while at least, while we follow where their questions might take us. Sometimes we've discussed more important things than the lesson plan I had written for that day!
- Students want to talk to each other in class — why not let them? As long as they have a purpose beyond *simply* socialization, I have found this to be a productive teaching technique. I love to pose a question to the class, give them a minute to think about it, and then have them talk with a partner about it for a few minutes. This gives them a real chance to both think critically and to converse!
- If I'm having a downer of a day, I'll (kindly) let my students know it. I encourage them to do the same for me. The way I explain it to them is, if I'm grouchy and someone gives me a hard time, I end up grouchier and more likely to snap. If I'm grouchy and someone shows me some kindness, my bad mood often begins to lift a little. I've found this helps foster an attitude of respect and honesty about the needs and feelings of others.

Taking this sort of approach to my classroom atmosphere has made a huge difference in the way students perceive my role as a teacher and their role as students. They see me as a human being, while I see them as the unique image-bearers I claim them to be.

Teaching from Who We Are

We need to recognize that we teachers, too, are unique image-bearers of God with our own gifts, talents, challenges, strengths, and weaknesses. We teach from who we are.[5] And *we* are all distinct individuals!

It may be that as you've read about these things I've experimented with in my classroom, you've thought, "This guy is nuts!" Perhaps I am. But that's okay with me — I am learning, more and more, to teach from who I am.

This wasn't always true. When I started teaching, I tried very hard to emulate an excellent high school math teacher I had and from whom I learned a lot. I soon began to realize, however, I am *not* that teacher. I am…me.

If the sort of classroom I've described doesn't seem to resonate with you, that's okay. You are probably teaching from who you are. And that is a good thing!

Perhaps, however, there is some part of all this that piques your interest and makes you say, "I'd like to know more about that!" or, "Hmmmm…a little odd…but I'd be willing to try that." If so, I'd strongly encourage you to experiment with some of these things. Learning to embrace who *I* am as a unique, creative, talented, enthusiastic image-bearer has made a difference in learning to honor my students' God-designed individuality as well. Christian teachers who make an effort to truly understand their students' needs, struggles, gifts, and talents can't help caring about the individuals. And *that* is something that will engage your students!

References:

[1] This isn't just my idea, by the way. Check out Kieran Egan's *Teaching as Storytelling: An Alternative Approach to Teaching and Curriculum in the Elemen-*

Continued from previous page

tary School (1986, University of Chicago Press.) for more thoughts on arranging curriculum along the idea of telling stories.

[2] Again, this isn't my bright idea. Check out *Understanding by Design** (ASCD, 1998.) by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe for more on backward design, and lots of other great ideas to help ensure students understand the content you are teaching!

[3] I had the opportunity to hear Carol Ann Tomlinson (the "guru" of differentiated instruction) speak at a National Middle School Association convention a few years back. She makes differentiation seem like the most reasonable and appropriate classroom methodology, and you'd be doing your students a disservice to *not* consider doing so! Her book *Fulfilling the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom* (ASCD, 2003) is *full* of examples, and tips to make incorporating differentiation in your classroom easier and more productive.

[4] Stand up and touch your left elbow to your right knee. Now touch your right elbow to your left knee. Repeat about 10 times. This is a great way to keep their right and left cerebral hemispheres communicating!

[5] This is one of the key themes in Parker Palmer's excellent book *The Courage to Teach** (Jossey-Bass, 1998.) CEJ

* *(Reviewed in previous issues of CEJ)*

"God may not come when we want him to, but he's right on time!"
Sung by Mahalia Jackson

"Carpe Diem"

Above all, trust in the slow work of God,
We are, quite naturally,
impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.
We should like to skip
the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being
on the way to something unknown, something new,
and yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through
some stages of instability —
And that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually —
let them grow,
let them shape themselves,
without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today
what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make you tomorrow,

Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,

and accept the anxiety of feeling
yourself in suspense and incomplete.

Teilhard de Chardin (1881 – 1955)

They Have Everything

by Jan Verburg

Translated from the Dutch, with permission from Familieblad Terdege, by Bert Witvoet. The author is a teacher of pedagogy in the Netherlands.

Our children have an abundance of choices to be able to turn every holiday into a festivity. Alas, the opposite seems to be the norm. Along with the growth of the supply of toys the moments of boredom seem to increase as well. Someone has said, "When you increase prosperity you increase boredom."

Few parents are at peace when they watch their children being bored. Parents, especially mothers, quickly come to the conclusion that they are responsible for the boredom of their children. They think they have not been successful in making the program for the day interesting enough. As a result they immediately become busy trying to solve the problem. Parents love the idea of making their children have a good time. That's understandable, because if their child is happy and satisfied, they get the feeling they are doing a good job.

There is a temptation, therefore, that parents play the role of courtiers to their princes and princesses. There is a better way. Children have to learn to solve their own problems with boredom. Just tell them that you yourself know what it's like to be bored, and, thus, you leave the emotion with the child. This way he learns that the feeling is normal and temporary, and that it disappears as soon as you are gripped by something else. And make them aware that they themselves can do something about it. That discovery strengthens the child's self-confidence and prevents a lazy mind.

Too much choice

We and our children simply have too much to choose from. Every day we can choose between 30 kinds of bread, 15 caregivers and hundreds of holiday destinations. The supply of entertainment possibilities has dramatically increased. The number of attractions and events has multiplied at least eight times since 1985. In spite of all these possibilities to fill our time, we don't know what to do with our free time. Even during the holidays, while in a hotel, we get bored. Many vacation brochures add the statement: "You won't be bored for a minute."

When children in the '50s and '60s spent a week on a camping trip, they would talk about it for two months. Today a child of 12 has traveled to a variety of exotic places and is not particularly excited anymore. They can be quite blasé about the things we offer them.

In other words, our children do not differ from their parents. When we are not working, we amuse ourselves to death. We bike through the countryside of Spain, we shop in Rome, and we take our baby along to Thailand. The main purpose is not to get bored. Research has shown that the way the parents use their free time and the room they create for their own imagination, is the best indicator of how their children will handle similar situations.

Learn to be bored

The strange thing about boredom is that it's one of the most difficult things to get the hang of. When you think of all the things that children learn at school, then it's mighty strange that there are no lessons available on how to deal with boredom. Children will often encounter situations in which they have to provide meaningful activities to fill the free time available to them. And that "free time" is only increasing.

Waiting passively for Mom to come up with all kinds of ideas is actually a reward they should not be given. We tend to reward passive waiting. Indeed, it's the kind of thing that characterizes the life of many adults. They don't actively tackle things, but they allow themselves to be entertained. And, of course, there's a huge industry that is prepared to entertain you. But the duration of this entertainment does not go beyond what this industry offers. And the element of thinking things through yourself disappears. If you as a parent continually provide something to make boredom disappear, the child will learn not to escape the situation on his own.

A little advice

Yet, I want to give parents some practical tips.

- Agree with the child that you understand that she is bored, but that she should experience that in her own room, not in the living room. That way you don't have to be irritated by demonstrations of boredom.
- Avoid the average toy store! Buy toys that have no end product that needs only to be assembled. Simple basic Lego sets are much more fun than the kind that can only produce one result.
- Make cards that show all the fixed activities of the day, such as: getting up, breakfast, brushing teeth, lunch, supper and going to bed. For the in-between moments, you or the child make cards that indicate things she can do herself. After a while, your child can make her own daily rhythm cards. It might even be good idea to make a card that says, "I'm bored." You can show that card when it's required. In this way you make your child aware of what's going on.

There's Nothing Like a Good Story (teller)

by Ruth O'Neil

Ruth O'Neil (roneil@liberty.edu) lives in Lynchburg, Virginia.

I love a good story. It doesn't matter if I'm writing it or watching it as a play or movie. Reading was one of my favorite hobbies as a child. My sister and I would ride our bikes to the library on summer days and then spend the afternoons in front of the pool with our noses in books. I read so much that after a while it became difficult to check out books that I hadn't already read.

When my oldest daughter was old enough to enjoy being read to, we would pick out a new book at the grocery store each week. That would be her "well-behaved" treat. I thought a book was better than candy. When we got home and had put groceries away, we would sit together and read our new book. My other daughter would bring out all of her favorites when Aunt Susan came to visit. They would sit together and read several books in a row while they ate chocolate.

As my kids got a little older and reading wasn't on their own top ten lists of favorite things to do, I would bribe them by offering money for each book they read. It worked because they would read and find they actually enjoyed a book at which they had previously turned up their noses.

Recently I have rediscovered reading to my kids. Most parents read to their kids when they are young, but we all seem to stop as the kids get older. Because one of my kids is a teenager and another one almost, I didn't think they would like to listen to me read.

I started with the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and they loved it! Since the movie was coming out soon, I wanted to get them excited about seeing it. Reading it worked! Everyday they would ask me to read another chapter. It was a story they looked forward to hearing more of everyday.

A passing custom?

Despite the excitement of a good story in our household, I have learned, the art of storytelling is something that seems to be on the verge of extinction. Most children aren't taught to read aloud in schools anymore; therefore, when they do have to read out loud, it is choppy and not easy to listen to. How to tell a story is something that should be continued and passed on to our students and children. This can be a fun and exciting way to pass the time and enjoy being with our children (or if your house is like ours, the children of the entire neighborhood).

Don't let storytelling fall by the wayside. In my experience, even the children who have difficulty sitting still and being quiet have no trouble being still and quiet once they have been drawn into and are mesmerized by a good story. You can help storytelling to be something that your children look forward to. Make story-telling days special days. Rainy days are perfect for this because otherwise we will be tempted to allow them to watch too much TV. Instead, sit everyone in a circle on the floor or cuddle up on the couch with a quilt if it is a cool day and help their imaginations run wild as you tell them a story.

Real benefits

Storytelling is a great way to connect with kids and let creativity flow – theirs and ours. Don't be afraid to relax and let your hair down, so to speak. Don't be afraid to let kids laugh at you. If it is a funny story and they laugh, you have told the story successfully. The same is true if it is a sad story and they look like they want to cry.

Storytelling is a good way for kids to learn about deceased relatives. Whenever one of my children does something that reminds me of my mother, the grandmother they never knew, I tell them a little story that they will think is funny or that they will enjoy. This gives them an opportunity to get close to her even though she is gone. It also is a way they can see where their own idiosyncrasies came from.

Storytelling can be a way to minister also. At one point all the children that were in our Sunday night class at church were ones that my husband and I had brought from our neighborhood. My husband had the idea of having something special at our house. This was great for all the kids, but especially for all those children whose parents wouldn't let them come to church with us. We have them come over at a specific time, and they hear stories from God's word.

Helpful pointers

So, how can you make storytelling interesting?

— When you read a story, read loud enough for all to hear and understand. Trying to listen to someone speak whose voice is hard to hear is more stressful than enjoyable. If my family is watching TV, I am in charge of the remote because I turn the volume up during the show and down on the commercials. My family finds this annoying. If your listeners can't hear you, they will become annoyed and tune you out completely. During lectures or sermons, if I can't hear the speaker, I have a tendency to zone out and not pay any attention. When working with children, this is definitely not something we want to happen.

— Read with excitement in your voice instead of sounding monotone. I have listened to books on tape, and I have to admit that I much more enjoy the versions where the reader uses different voices for different characters. Kids are going to be the same way. They like to hear those voices, especially if they are silly. This helps their imagination to develop. When they begin to do more reading on their own, the character's voices will develop in their own heads.

— When you are telling a story from memory, use facial expressions and make eye contact. When you make eye contact with those who are listening, you keep their attention better. When I was a child and had been caught daydreaming by my teacher, I felt embarrassed. I felt guilty that I had been caught not listening. Also, facial expressions keep kids' attention. If you have a funny face for a particular character, the children will wait in anticipation for you to do it again.

— Allow the children to participate. Let them tell the story in their own words. Let them reenact the story using drama, by giving different children different parts. Interrupt your storytelling to ask them what they think will happen next, then continue talking or reading the story to see if they are right.

Telling Bible stories

If you are telling a Bible story and want to read directly out of the Bible, read a kid- friendly version like the New International Version or The Living Bible. They need to be able to concentrate on the story as a whole, not trying to rearrange the words in their heads so that they make sense. Reading stories directly from the Bible is a great way for kids to learn to read the Bible. In our class at church my husband and I bought the kids Bibles. These Bibles were all the same, so that all the kids could find the right place, by using the page numbers if they were unsure of the order of the books of the Bible. Even the youngest children were able to keep up with the rest of the class.

In Deuteronomy 4:9, the Israelites were commanded to teach the laws of God to their children. I can imagine that in this process the stories of their deliverance from Egypt were passed from generation to generation. We as parents and teachers also need to pass along the stories of God's laws and provision for us to our children. We can use storytelling for entertainment, but, depending on which stories we tell, it is also in this way that children will be able to grow and develop in the Lord.

When is the last time you told your kids a story? Today is a great day for a story!

My Best Field Trip

by Pete Post

Pete Post (pete.post@trnty.edu) is assistant professor of Special Education at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Illinois.

Somewhere sandwiched in the middle of my 30 years of teaching high-school special education at Elim Christian School, I was assigned to teach my fine crew of nine students with various disabilities in a portable trailer just beyond the playground. There was a building project going on at Elim (a credit to a progressive administration and often a nuisance to laboring teachers), and the trailer was to be our classroom away from school for the year. Actually it was a fine facility with three compartments — one for computers, one for the general class, and even a small room for an office (a little perk that I had never before experienced as a teacher). A ramp had been constructed so that my two students in wheelchairs would have access, and the trailer seemed sufficiently level and stable.

There was just one problem — we had no electricity.

I had worked pretty hard to create a friendly atmosphere — going so far as to create a sign that declared our sanctuary "The Post Office." Desks were in place and supplies had been delivered. All seemed ready except for the fact that there were no lights and no air conditioning. Our administrators assured me that the situation was temporary and that power would be coming soon. I was advised to be patient, and, since I had put the classroom together without power, it surely seemed possible to conduct classes out there for a while. But after two days, the temperature had begun to rise, the novelty of our dark quarters had worn off, and patience was running a bit thin.

Give us power

So on the third day of school I proposed to my class that we take a little field trip in search of "power." Since I always drove my Special Olympic basketball team to our games, had acquired the proper driver's license and Elim had a trustworthy fleet of lift busses just outside our door — it wasn't too hard for my teacher aide and me to load our crew into a bus and head off to our neighborhood Commonwealth Edison facility. I have to confess that after working for years with students with special needs that I may not see them in quite the same light as the general population. As we unloaded and moved slowly to the entrance of the power company's office, I suddenly realized that we certainly made an interesting spectacle — something like that famous Revolutionary poster with the soldiers hobbling back from a battle with flag and drum — and one that the secretaries inside may not have been used to or experienced before.

> "We have a very nice trailer but it would really help if we had lights."

I can remember feeling fairly conspicuous as the stares of the corporate workers checked us out. I thought that one secretary may have been reaching for the telephone to contact security as another asked us, "What can we do for you?" I quickly declared that we were not here to cause any trouble but that we were from Elim Christian School, and we were simply looking for power. I'm not sure that the message was conveyed just right, and it may not have helped that one of my students asked if he could have a pencil as a memento (after he had already snatched it off a secretary's desk).

Quick response

"Where are you from?"

"From Elim Christian School. We are in a portable classroom and our principal says that we should be hooked up soon but so far — Oops...." One of my student wheelchair drivers came a little too close to the desk and rammed it, startling both secretary and wheelchair occupant.

"Let's check on the computer, shall we?" the secretary suggested.

"That's a great idea," I answered. "Patrick, quit sitting on the secretary's desk."

"I don't see any work order for Elim."

"Well, that must be the problem. Thanks for your help. We'll tell our principal that we need to get on that list." And as our class turned to leave, the students waved goodbye and yelled back a hearty "Thank you." All except for Aaron, who complained that he wanted to stay because it was much cooler and lighter here — plus he had made a new friend. We made it back to our trailer without anyone knowing where we had gone (which, of course, I will admit was not a good idea). The students were very excited about our wonderful adventure — wondering where else we could go that was bright and cool.

But then some very interesting things began to happen. Within an hour a black Mercedes pulled up to our trailer and a man in a suit approached. "Are you the people looking for electricity?"

"Yes, please come in and meet my class. As you can see we have a very nice trailer but it would really help if we had lights." "And air conditioning!" Aaron chimed in.

"Well, we'll be sure that you get what you need," the man said and he was gone.

As I came in the next morning, I was greeted by a large Commonwealth Edison truck and two workers declaring that we were "good to go." Our first lesson of the day would be to express our appreciation for the persons who got us our power (and gave Patrick a pencil).

Personal touch

Recently I was reminded of this story as I sat in the audience at the Orland Park Civic Center surrounded by parents and some children who had come there to hear local legislators respond to a printed statistic that declared that Illinois had dropped from #1 (in 1977) to #51 (including the District of Columbia) in services to persons with disabilities. I couldn't help feeling impatient as the lawmakers introduced themselves and spoke of personal commitment to making things better. There wasn't much time for questions from the audience, but I will never forget the statement of one mother who said...

"I am the mother of a 23-year-old who has the mental capabilities of a five-year-old. If I were to leave my five-year-old at home while I went to work — and something happened — DCFS would immediately file charges, and I might end up in jail. But if I leave my 23-year-old at home — nobody seems to care."

The legislators really couldn't respond with any great new plan for aid. They did make a point that e-mails, or faxes, or signed petitions really don't make much of a difference and may not be worth the effort. What was needed was the personal touch.

And I began to think about how I could round up my old crew — all of whom are probably older than 22 today — and take another one of our "best field trips."

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Should the adjective "Reformed" be dropped? (Part II)

In the December issue of CEJ, Al Boerema raised the question whether it is still important for our communities to use the adjective "Reformed" in identifying our schools. What are the implications of using it or not using it? The Panel took a crack at answering the question, but they got so excited that they wanted a second round. You can tell how passionate they are by the fact that their answers are getting longer.

Bruce Wergeland had the last word in the previous issue. His main contention was that we are "making huge assumptions that the Reformed tradition is really embraced by all CSI schools.... From my own experience, it is apparent that this tradition, in most CSI schools, is only about the sovereignty of God. The totality of the reformational perspective has been flattened."

Al restates the question:
Thanks for that clarification, Tim. Don't other Christian traditions also hold that "God created the universe, redeemed it, and is in the process of making all things new," as well as the idea of the sovereignty of God? And if they do, what is the purpose of the adjective "Reformed"?

Al

October 14, 2008

Tim Leugs responds with:

You make good points, but they lead me to ask what your interpretation is of the Reformed tradition ...and what our purpose is as Christian educators.

We really have to consider what the role of the Christian school is — and I don't believe it is to indoctrinate or to convert students (although the turning of a young heart to Christ may often be a wonderful part of teaching). I don't believe that, even from the start, the brand of Christian education we are talking about was intended. Instead, from the beginnings of our Christian Schools, parents of students (and not denominations themselves) wanted to help their children to see the world both the way it is and the way it should be. If you are saying that a Reformed tradition is a matter of holding to creeds and confessions, I would have to agree that we are probably not aligned with the Reformed tradition.

On the other hand, if you say the heart of the Reformed tradition holds that God created the universe, redeemed it, and is in the process of making all things new, I would say the sovereignty of God is central to the Reformed tradition in our schools.

This second perspective is what I hold to, and it is where I try to do the best job I can of being faithful to God (and to the parents of my students) through my teaching. I believe that Christian education provides an opportunity for my students to see the world as it really is — fallen, but redeemed and in the process of renewal. They no longer are seeking knowledge of the world from a worldly point of view; instead, through the grace of Jesus Christ, they are working towards the integration of their faith and learning.

Tim

October 17, 2008

Bruce Wergeland adds:

The Reformed tradition is distinct within Christendom and must be recognized for its intrinsic differences from the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox or other Protestant streams of the Christian faith. John Calvin and company established a narrower interpretation of Christian theology as they reacted to the hypocrisy of the Roman Catholic Church. If people are going to call themselves Reformed, they must embrace the entire tradition: election, two sacraments, covenant faithfulness, sanctification, priesthood of believers, and, of course, the confessions that outline the theology.

As a teacher in a CSI school, I believe that the label "Reformed" has become a symbolic marker that is used by Christian educators to set themselves apart from other schools — Christian or public. This adjective no longer represents a distinctive view of the Christian faith because the word "Reformed" is no longer linked to the totality of the Reformed tradition. I believe that the growing separation of the adjective from the noun is a result of the secularization of the Christian church in the West, which has allowed Christian education to become more inclusive, both to its benefit and detriment. Ironically, the use of this adjective for a school that is authentically participating in the Reformed tradition would probably invite alienation in the public and Christian community of the school, because of the social connotations associated with this word and the religious implications associated with the Protestant Reformation.

Bruce

Albert Boerema
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December 27, 2008

Pam Adams rejoins the Panel with a personal story:

Perhaps I can add my personal experience of encountering the Reformed perspective in the church that made it so meaningful to me. I was raised as a Roman Catholic and went to elementary Catholic schools. It was what I expected. When I was a teenager, I started dating Charlie, my husband now, and we, right from the first date, talked religion. His family was going through a crisis with his father, a Roman Catholic, objecting to the children being sent to the local Orthodox Presbyterian Church. This led Charlie and me to go see a priest and ask him some questions. Unfortunately for the Roman Catholic Church, he said not to ask questions but to accept whatever the church said.

This did not sit well in two teenage minds. So we went to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and asked the same questions of Ray Commeret, the pastor of the Grace OPC. He gave us straightforward answers but allowed us to question them. This openness helped us look to the Bible for answers to our questions. It led me to the church of which Charlie was a member of. It was this attitude of openness that became a life-line to us.My conclusion is this: we must allow openness in our schools but not give all thoughts equal status. For if Ray Commeret had not allowed questions, I might not have understood the Reformed nature of that church and the several Christian Reformed churches we have been members of in the years following. We need to allow our students to question as well as have possible answers for them. We need to present them with our answers, derived after years of searching, reading the Bible, and praying.

Pam

January 2, 2009

Christian Altena concludes the discussion:

I've been thinking about Bruce's comment about the word "Reformed" being a symbolic marker of what might distinguish a CSI school from another Christian school. Has describing ourselves as Reformed, or adhering to the Reformed tradition, become merely our brand of Christian schooling? If these and other distinctive words and phrases do make it into our promotional material, are they adequately or correctly explained? Are they honest about who we are? As I noted in the discussion in the previous issue, the overwhelming majority of my students can't confidently identify or explain the finer points of Reformed theology — with the exception of predestination, which often sets off a spirited classroom debate.

So how brand-loyal are we? How does our brand influence what goes on in the classrooms? What books are in the library? What textbooks are in the lockers? What are our chapel services like? What about our mascots? (The Crusaders, really!?)

CSI schools vary in their emphasis on the brand. Some strictly guard theological homogeneity, particularly among the staff and board, while others, for a variety of reasons, have allowed for or even promoted diversity. What do the former believe they are preserving, and what do the latter think they are gaining?

To me, a school in the Reformed tradition, apart from strict theological points, is about the kind of openness Pam (welcome back!) describes. Our classrooms should not be cloisters. Our students should read and discuss works by non-Christians with the expectation that they can learn profound things about their lives in Christ. We take Scripture seriously — studying it across the curriculum, wrestling with it, even at times questioning it. We promote the idea that, irrespective of vocation, there is Kingdom work to be accomplished. We teach that all good things can be done worshipfully. We remind ourselves to step outside the sacred versus secular worldview to recognize that every last thing belongs to our Lord and is controlled by him.

Christian

January 3, 2009

Bruce Wergeland summarizes the discussion:

After re-reading the entire discussion, I think that there is a general consensus that we believe CSI schools are not "Reformed" schools, but places where students can receive a holistic education that constantly points them to their Creator. They can make mistakes and receive grace (along with the consequences); they can investigate and critique the great ideas and literature of our culture; they can explore the revelation of God through Scripture, creation and each other; and they can serve the members of their community with acts of compassion and forgiveness. However, I believe that the most important idea in this discussion is the importance of Christian education for Christian families in their local communities, not the distinction between CSI schools and other Christian schools. Our North American culture is working hard to sever our society from its Christian heritage, and the children of this generation witness minimal evidence of the Christian faith in public places.

Christian schools offer the last refuge where a diverse

Concluded on page 23

The Puzzling Student:
an uncoordinated, pudgy, messy writer

by Paulene Kamps

Paulene Kamps (drkamps@telusplanet.net) is a registered educational psychologist and kinesiologist who used to be a special education teacher. She and her husband, Don, have four children and live in Calgary, Alberta.

You may be a first-year teacher, or one with many years of experience. One way or another, there may be students in your classroom that have you very puzzled — because you can't quite put your finger on the cause of their difficulties at school. For instance, you may have one or more pupils who are actually quite bright — they quickly tell you answers to questions — but they have tremendous difficulty with any written assignment. In fact, you are fully aware that these students have very poor penmanship, and their efforts at printing or writing actually seem laborious. You may have observed them holding their pencil with a "death grip" and pressing very hard on the paper. Usually these students write exceptionally slowly; in contrast, these same students sometimes write with "break-neck" speed — just to try to get their written work done as quickly as they can. Have you also seen them position their head close to the paper? Are their fingers right at the very tip of the pencil? Do these students also hold their pencil with an unusual grip? And do these learners cover their work when classmates are looking — or when you walk by their desk?

Because of their difficulties with basic penmanship, you may have come to recognize that these learners resist any type of writing task. They have likely become "masters of avoidance," or they withdraw from doing group assignments with classmates because they are embarrassed about their poor quality of work, or they might act like the "class-clown" — so as to draw attention away from the fact that they cannot write with skill and proficiency. When told to write anyway, these students may exhibit fine motor problems in all language arts assignments, whether they are copying notes, doing spelling tests or working on assignments. Furthermore, the problems with penmanship may extend to their math papers and work sheets as well.

Yet another condition?

You have probably all heard about students who have AD/HD, learning disabilities in reading or math, problems with emotional or behavioral issues, autism, and other such conditions that affect learning. However, you may or may not have yet heard about students who have problems with "motor learning." In case you think this is another made-up condition to bring some extra work your way, I am able to tell you that this is a formal disorder identified by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in their Diagnostic and Statistical Manual — Fourth Edition. It is referred to as Developmental Coordination Disorder or DCD.

> "Research shows that, over time, students with motor learning problems often become withdrawn and depressed."

And what you may also find very interesting is that the World Health Organization (WHO) also recognizes that when "typical learners" struggle significantly with motor performances, over time, the motor problems affect their psycho-social development as well. Although the WHO uses a slightly different name for this condition, (i.e., Specific Disorder of Motor Functioning) the underlying diagnostic criteria are very similar between the APA and the WHO. [From here onward in the article, the term used is Developmental Coordination Disorder, or DCD — because clinicians in Canada and the USA typically use the diagnostic criteria set out by the APA].

Before jumping the gun and asking parents to check out whether or not their child may have DCD, realize that motor delays and problems with motor performances can be related to numerous factors. DCD is just one of these possible causes. And in order for the diagnosis to be accurate, the motor problems must affect more than just penmanship.

Gather other data:

If you have students who have weak printing and writing skills, I would encourage you to look at their other motor behaviors. For example, watch to see if the students are also rather klutzy and uncoordinated when they move throughout the school building. Do they struggle with tasks in physical education and when they are outdoors? Is she one of the last students chosen for sports and games? Do you sometimes see the same student standing by herself on the playfield? Does this student also seem to have difficulty with articulation or oral-motor control? Does this same student also have difficulty with fine motor tasks other than just writing (e.g., doing buttons, zippers, tying shoelaces), and, in the elementary grades, did she struggle with scissors, folding, gluing, and coloring activities?

If you have a sense that the student in question may have struggled with other fine or gross motor skills, review her school file to see if there are any notes from an occupational or speech language therapist

indicating difficulties with articulation or fine and gross motor control when they were younger. These are big red flags that something much more interesting is likely going on with this learner.

It is very important to be a detective and start to gather some anecdotal data about the movement patterns and emotional state of these students — because you may be a large part of the solution in helping this child now and in future years. But remember, when students encounter significant problems with motor performances and proficiency of movement, it does not always mean that they have DCD.

Other possible causes

If you have noticed significant motor problems in certain students, have these students tested by a medical doctor, educational psychologist, or other professional who understands the motor domain — professionals such as occupational therapists and physiotherapists. Although it may be difficult to locate one, the best option is to find a professional who knows about DCD and understands the short- and long-term impact of this motor condition on the learner's overall functioning.

Even though testing may be expensive and time-consuming, it is important to assess the motor component along with other learning issues because motor difficulties are often indicative of other learning problems or medical conditions. Not all students with motor problems have DCD. A student may have problems only with penmanship and written output; if so, he should be diagnosed with a learning disability in that area. Or the individual with motor difficulties may, in fact, be a slow learner; have Asperger's syndrome or another form of Pervasive Developmental Disorder. He may simply have problems moving because of difficulties with vision, balance, or depth perception. A student may also be overly klutzy because of high anxiety, the presence of AD/HD, or he may not be interested in moving with grace and efficiency because he is extremely depressed and unhappy. To a professional trained in this area, a child's motor skills reveal a great deal of very important information.

Please encourage parents to investigate the cause of their child's motor problems, because there are many short- and long-term impacts of the condition called DCD.

Short- and long-term impacts

Research shows that, over time, students with motor learning problems often become withdrawn and depressed. This is so because they do not fully understand why they are struggling so much at school. In addition, because these "clumsy" students cannot move with skill and efficiency, they become physically tired and quite exhausted at the end of the day. They may over-react to certain situations and even have melt-downs when at home with their family members. Because of their good social understanding, it is quite rare to see such melt-downs at school. In contrast, if you have a student who reacts very sharply to certain situations at school, something else is probably going on.

> "You may have observed them holding their pencil with a death grip."

More often than not, students with DCD do understand and want social contacts. They can read facial cues and are not socially "odd." However, they may not display much eye-contact because they are ashamed of their poor skills and abilities.

Not surprisingly, students who are uncoordinated, sad, and exhausted tend to spend more time alone. Without truly understanding the cause of their difficulties, they may end up eating food to "comfort them-selves." Then, because children with DCD do not have natural athletic skills, they typically do not usually engage in high levels of physical activity. Combine this with eating for comfort, and the possibility of weight gain is great — and harder to deal with over time. Hence, these children add a few pounds, and, then, have to deal with more rude comments and remarks made by classmates.

And so the cycle continues — resulting in high levels of depression, isolation, and stress. They may resist going to school or being with others altogether. Sometimes these students are identified as having significant emotional or behavioral difficulties, when, in fact, the underlying cause of their difficulties has never been identified or addressed.

Action plan

In summary, students who have problems with motor skill proficiency usually develop secondary issues that affect learning, academic achievement, sense of adequacy and self-worth, and, over time, general physical and emotional health. If this article explains what you have observed in one of your students, or if you are worried about the potential of this happening to one of your pupils, encourage the parents to seek professional help as soon as possible. Here's what you can do:

1. Start with a medical check-up with a family doctor or pediatrician to rule out any physiological cause for the student's lethargic behaviors and depression.

2. Conduct your own (and ask parents) to do a web-search on Developmental Coordination Disorder (canchild.ca is a web-

A Letter to Teachers of Mathematics and Science

by Steve J. Van Der Weele

Steve Van Der Weele is a retired professor of English at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

As I was examining some new books the other day, I was attracted to a slim book (55 pages) which features illustrations of an assortment of measuring devices from about the 1600s. The book gives special attention to the Kunstkammer Museum in Dresden, Germany, province of Saxony, which houses many, though not all, of the devices described in the book. It provides a history and an explanation of terrestrial and celestial globes, clocks, measuring devices, and charts and graphs addressing mathematical problems. It is a handsome book, done in lively color.

Since I had concentrated both in graduate school and in my teaching career on these earlier materials — medieval and Renaissance authors such as Dante, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and the dramatists of those decades — I had become well acquainted with this pre-scientific paradigm of the universe. Understandably, this book, *The Geometry of Power*, reminded me of that world, with its own set of questions it put to the universe, its own metaphors, its own orientation to the cosmos.

> "The sciences were part of the family of arts."

C. S. Lewis describes this worldview in his book *The Discarded Image*. Even though he does not wish to return to this world, he reminds us of an important point. The point is this, that scientific models vary from era to era, and that our present one, with its emphasis on verificationism, and on seeking to isolate the tiniest particle in the universe, has its own set of assumptions and will some day yield to other paradigms. Those who have invested time and effort in understanding this older world cannot help harboring some nostalgia for it — including C. S. Lewis, whose chair, after all, was named Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature.

As I paged through this book of illustrations and the accompanying text, I reflected about what we can still affirm in the work of these scientists and the craftsmen who constructed the artifacts with such skill and beauty. Here are some of the observations

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site at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, that has incredibly helpful resources on this topic).

3. Take some of the printable brochures from the Canchild website, offer them to the parents, and ask them to take the same material to their child's family doctor or pediatrician. After the doctor reviews the information sheets, suggest to the parents that they ask if the doctor can help investigate the possibility of DCD affecting their child's weight gain, sadness and behavior difficulties,

4. Ask parents to seek out professionals who will be able to help them determine if DCD is related to their child's difficulties. This usually involves the collection of data from multiple sources — a cognitive assessment being one piece of the puzzle.

5. Once it has been determined what is causing the problems, take information from the professional who made the diagnosis and ask for specific help at school. (If the student has DCD, Alberta Education recognizes this condition and offers support for motor (and secondary) difficulties via an Individualized Program Plan. It is assumed that other provincial regulatory bodies offer the same level of support.)

6. Help parents seek out other programs or other resources in the community to help their child acquire fundamental motor skills. Over time, a positive response to such purposeful intervention will likely help the student gain some confidence and skills. Eventually, such students may be able to move with greater efficiency and interact more frequently with their peers and classmates, a result which will result in possible weight loss and more self-worth.

7. Finally, once parents know with certainty what factors are contributing to their child's weight problems, they will be able to address the issues at home, and the staff should be supporting the child at school.

There really is hope for the pudgy, tired, and uncoordinated student!

Note:

Although Dr. Paulene Kamps conducts assessments for students of any age who have learning, attention, emotional, or behavioral difficulties, her area of specialization is helping students who struggle with motor and social skills. In fact, Paulene believes that the promotion of public knowledge about and identification and support for students with DCD is her "calling" in life. She is passionate about this work, conducts workshops and other presentations, and has published a book with LinguiSystems of the USA on this topic. She welcomes your questions and comments at (403)217-5749 or e-mail. Paulene, her husband Don, and their four children have been and remain active members of the Christian Reformed Church denomination.

and thoughts that occurred to me. I offer them in the hope that they may encourage science and math teachers to continue to provide the larger contexts of their disciplines to their students.

1. The quality of the human mind does not alter, or improve from generation to generation. Mathematicians and craftsmen were no less brilliant and innovative than today's Nobel Prize Winners. All generations stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before. The sixteenth-century workmen were exceedingly resourceful and innovative in their striving for efficiency, simplicity, accuracy, and concern "for preserving the appearances."

2. These mathematicians and craftsmen never thought only in terms of utility.

The sciences were part of the family of arts, and an acknowledgement of the role of aesthetics entered into the planning of the models from the start. I hope that in preparing the students for their MEAP or other exams, teachers can find time to do justice to the elegance of Euclid's theorems, the periodic chart, and the formulas of Newton and Einstein. And of the heavenly bodies. In the haste of the Enlightenment to dismiss astrology once and for all, it divested the sun and the planets of their proper glory and distinctive characteristics. Michael Ward has demonstrated that each of C. S. Lewis's seven Narnia tales takes its quality, or atmosphere, from one of the seven planets—**The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe**, for example, takes its cue from Jupiter, **Prince Caspian** from Mars, **The Silver Chair,** the Moon, and so on. Lewis apparently was trying to restore some of the traditional wisdom associated with these heavenly bodies—including places in the Bible where heavenly bodies are used for their metaphoric value.

3. The mathematicians, geometers, and craftsmen worked *sub species Aeternitatis* — as under the eye of an all-seeing Creator. **The Book of Wisdom** has a passage which reads "Thou hast ordered all things in measure and movement and weight." Armed with this legitimization of their disciplines, these scholars and workmen were encouraged in their investigations to uncover the divine structure of the universe and to learn how to exercise stewardship over it for the benefit of mankind. Nature was one of the sets of spectacles by which man could come to know God. (See Don Oppewal's article in the December, 2008 issue of CEJ).

"The quality of the human mind does not alter, or improve from generation to generation."

4. These folk saw the world sacramentally, symbolically, pictorially. They saw the world as a treasure-trove of both inert and living entities, all linked by analogy — a device called the Great Chain of Being. Correspondences between terrestrial and celestial realities were the stuff of poetry. With the Enlightenment, as Bishop Hurd said, "We have gained a good deal of sense, but we have lost a world of fine fabling." Can we restore something of Nature as being more than the stuff of which it is made? As Eustace has to be reminded (VDT), a star may be made of a huge ball of flaming gas, but it is a great deal more than that as well.

5. The scientists and craftsmen of the sixteenth century believed that the world has meaning. They would have recoiled at the conventional view taught in many universities that nature is a result of "a chain of accidents reaching back to the first three minutes," that it has no design or purpose. To folks in the earlier age, the world is a moral theater, where enormous moral battles are being waged for the soul of man. They saw things wholistically. They saw man and all of life acting out roles appropriate to their status as creatures functioning as they were created to do.

This is some of the wisdom I would wish to pass on to my students were I to teach mathematics and the sciences. I would try to warn them against chronological snobbery. I might even use the term *Intelligent Design* — or some less controversial phrase — when appropriate. Yes, and I would pay some attention to the way language is used, in this postmodern age, when this gift is often reduced to the strictly denotative and stripped of its connotative values. I would try to get my students to see — after they had accomplished the hard work of the first mile of discipline — the elegance of these studies and to develop a sense of wonder and awe, in order to inoculate them against the depersonalization and commercialism of the particle physics approach to contemporary science.

Note: The title of the book, **The Geometry of Power: Mathematical Instruments and Princely Mechanical Devices from about 1600**, was written by Michael Kory and published in 2007 by the Deutsche Kunstverlag in Berlin, Germany.

Slouching Toward Bedlam

Portrait of the Artist as a Bored Professional or Carpe Diem – or else!

Jan Kaarsvlam cashed in his Christian School Pension last year and invested it in the stock market, then retired from teaching. Due to the recent economic situation, he has now accepted a job as full- time athletic director at Unity Christian School in Fulton, Illinois. He has also accepted a position as fulltime athletic director at McBain Christian (in Michigan). Kaarsvlam claims that with some careful scheduling he should be on the road to economic recovery (though he is apprehensive about the commute — as the only vehicle he owns is a 1972 Chevy Vega hatchback with four bald tires.

Generally, Thursday afternoon faculty meetings proceeded quickly and without interruption. Though Principal Bentley VanderHaar viewed it as a time to review his troops, encourage them in the fight, and pass on important intelligence that would aid them in their continuing battle to impart knowledge unto eager young minds, the faculty saw the meetings as a necessary evil. The sooner the meetings were over, the sooner everyone could get back to their grading, extra-curricular activities, or, in the case of art teacher Gregg "Rigor" Mortiss, the sooner he could leave school, go home, and take a nap.

So it was unusual to have an interruption, but even more unusual that the interruption should come from Mortiss himself. VanderHaar had just been explaining that the school board was once again providing money for Bedlam Christian's faculty to attend the upcoming Christian Educators Association Convention. When VanderHaar was pausing for a breath, Mortiss blurted out, "Not again! That convention is so boring! There is only, like, one sectional that has anything to do with teaching high school art, and it's usually at 8:00 in the morning. Do we have to go?"

"Boring!" Rex Kane shouted from the back with disbelief. "How can you call it boring? Convention is awesome!" Here Rex turned to Red Carpenter with a sly smile and whispered just loud enough for him and Gord Winkle to hear, "I get in a couple rounds of golf every year while you dopes are sitting inside listening to speakers drone on and on."

English teacher Christina Lopez turned in her seat to face Mortiss. "But Gregg," she said, "you can find all sorts of things that are applicable if you look with an open mind." His eyes wide, Gregg choked on the coffee he had just sipped, spraying a fine brown mist across Jane VanderAsch's math papers. She shook her head in disgust and wiped at them with a discarded napkin that lay on the table. Gregg didn't seem to notice.

"Go with an open mind?" he said incredulously. "Last year, I 'kept an open mind' and went to that sectional you suggested. Suddenly I find myself trapped in a room listening to some bearded dude in Birkenstocks and a ponytail talking about comic books. Yeah, great advice, Christina."

"That 'dude' happened to be an education professor from the Kuyper Institute of Christian Studies, and he was talking about promoting literacy through graphic novels!" Christina said through a clenched jaw. Sometimes she questioned why she stayed working at Bedlam. "I found his talk fascinating, and I tried several new things in my classroom last year because of him."

"Well, I found him boring," Gregg replied, "and I didn't change a thing in my class." He took another slug of coffee, then slammed his mug a bit too forcefully to the tabletop. Some coffee sloshed over the side, puddling around an apple VanderAsch had just set on the table. "And I'm a comic book fan. As a kid, I used to collect first editions of Captain America, for crying out loud. But I still thought Professor Ponytail was boring."

Christina looked ready to take a swing at Gregg, as did VanderAsch, who was in the act of wiping down her apple. Principal VanderHaar stared, his mouth open, unsure of whether to call for order, for the police, or, perhaps, for pizza. Choir director Carrie Wellema noted the tension and stepped in to try to preserve the peace.

"I wonder, Gregg, if maybe part of the problem here might be an issue of worldview."

Gregg rolled his eyes.

"No, I'm serious. You guys knew my dad. I think he actually taught you when you were a student here, Gregg. When he was dying of cancer last year, we had a couple of really serious talks. One of the things he said to me was that, as Christians, we ought to take to heart the verse about this being the day the Lord has made, and how we ought to rejoice and be glad in it. We ought to be glad for every day — and that means making the most of whatever we've got. When you allow yourself to be bored, aren't you saying 'no thanks' to whatever God is giving you?"

"Oh, come ON!" shouted Mortiss, gesticulating wildly and backhanding VanderAsch's apple with such force that it landed in the base of a potted plant behind her. "Now you are telling me that I can't even be bored without you questioning my Christianity. What, like, you've never been bored, Carrie?"

Christina Lopez rose from her seat. "I think she has a point, Gregg. Look, the CEA convention might not always be a laugh a minute, but it is amazing what they have there. There is a ton of people who work to try to make those few days worthwhile, and there are some cool sectionals, but that isn't even the point. Even if you want to skip out on sessions like Rex — don't give me that look, Rex — we all know you're only in the conventional hall long enough to make eye contact with Bentley before you head

for the links. At least you could be doing *something* to benefit you professionally. I usually skip at least one session to have a long lunch with some of my fellow teachers, and I always come away from that lunch with great ideas for my classroom. But just sitting there and whining about how bored you are...?" There was fire in Lopez's eyes, then she spat out, "That's pretty pathetic."

Several things happened in quick succession: Rex began describing the one sectional he had attended (admittedly two years ago) and how it had taught him some great things about the difference between coaching and something else (though he couldn't remember what); Gregg Mortiss slammed his fist down on the table, turning over the rest of his coffee, which rolled like a dark brown tsunami over VanderAsch's math papers and on to Bible teacher John Cloudmaker's study Bible; VanderAsch, who had been wiping the coffee and dirt from her apple, wound up and whipped it at Mortiss.

The red missile rebounded off the unsuspecting art teacher's forehead and he sprawled onto the table, further distressing Jane's math papers. Amid the chaos, guidance counselor Maxwell Prentiss-Hall stood on a chair and began pleading with everyone to stop the violence.

After determining that Mortiss hadn't been seriously hurt, Principal VanderHaar told everyone to "Cool out!" and called an abrupt end to the meeting. The faculty warily shuffled out of the room.

John Cloudmaker stayed to tend to Mortiss, who was still semi-conscious but had begun moaning. When he was finally coherent enough to speak, Mortiss looked up at Cloudmaker and managed a weak, "What happened?"

That left Cloudmaker with the last word. "Well, Gregg, I don't know for sure. I can't say the meeting was educational, or even useful, but one thing is certain: it wasn't boring."

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Christian community can worship together, on a regular basis.

I believe that Christian schools provide the greatest opportunity today for experiencing the same Christian communion that was demonstrated by the Early Church (Acts 2: 42-47). It is in the daily life of our Christian schools (lunch, chapel, athletics, devotions, math class and service projects) that our students are able to converse and learn with other believers who share a commitment to Jesus Christ and who may or may not understand the purpose of his Incarnation), but may not necessarily share the same interpretation of Scripture or life experiences. Our classrooms may be the only place where our students read and interpret Scripture, critique the role of science in our culture, or analyze a movie from a variety of perspectives. We live in a secular age where Christian living (the communion between the created and the creator), which exemplifies the founding values of Western culture, is usually associated with social justice or political maneuvering. Therefore, Christian education, which includes all CSI schools, has the profound opportunity to make real connections — not distinctions — between individuals and their communities, between individuals and their Creator.

Bruce

Where Are the Christian Outlaws?

by Charles C. Adams

Charles Adams (cadams@dordt.edu) is Dean of Natural Sciences at Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa.

Last year the issue of racial justice permeated the media's discussions of the United States presidential election process. One particular discussion, reflecting on the civil rights movement of the 1960s, sent me rummaging through the bottom drawer of my media cabinet to find what I remembered as the most valuable and exciting television program ever to be broadcast on that subject. It was a six-part documentary aired by PBS and titled *Eyes on the Prize: Part II*. It begins by focusing on the late fifties, when black Americans as a self-conscious body asserted their God-given dignity and challenged the American system of apartheid. Watching the episodes unfold once more, I remain amazed at how, in retrospect, the issues seem so clear; the heroes and villains so easily identifiable. In 1964 things were not so transparent.

Today I think of Martin Luther King as having been a brother in Christ and an American hero: a man committed to speaking and living the truth much as the Old Testament prophets had, and at the same time guided by the teachings of Christ — particularly those Sermon-on-the-Mount teachings dealing with non-violence. But in 1964 King was suspect. The FBI had already begun a campaign to discredit him, and the media often presented him as just another "Negro agitator."

Today I realize that the greatest villains were not only those who wore hooded bed sheets and went around lynching my black brothers. Equal in wickedness were national leaders like FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, Birmingham Sheriff Bull Connor, Georgia Governor Lester Maddox, and those savage police who with dogs, fire hoses, clubs and guns enforced the unjust laws. In 1964, however, my support for the civil rights movement was inhibited not only by my immaturity but also by my lack of clarity with regard to who were the "good guys" and who were the "bad guys."

Siding with power

Why is this? Why is it that Christians — particularly evangelical Christians — are so slow in responding to the call to exercise their prophetic office, to stand up and be counted on the side of justice and righteousness? Let me suggest that one of the main reasons for our lack of prophetic sensitivity and vigor is the distorted, almost idolatrous concept we have of obedience to law and obedience to governing authorities.

> "We will need to exercise our prophetic office by protesting injustice and pointing the way toward righteousness whenever possible."

Consider an example from a more recent era. In attempting to speak prophetically against the evil of "abortion on demand," many Christians have resorted to forms of civil disobedience. They have picketed abortion clinics even in the face of those occasional laws which declare such activity illegal. Now I do not wish to condone the unloving verbal, and sometimes physical abuse which some act out during such demonstrations. Surely that dishonors the name of our Lord. But I find it close to idolatrous that many Christians refrain from joining such acts of civil disobedience on the grounds that we should always obey the law, or, misquoting Paul, that we should always obey the governing authorities.

Various authorities

In Romans 13 Paul tells us that everyone must submit "to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except that which God has established." (Romans 13:1 NIV) But submitting to the governing authorities is not the same as always obeying the laws. In creating the world, the Lord called into being the potential for government institutions so that societies would be able to function properly. He also called into being the potential for schools, for art galleries, for churches, and for businesses. These institutions, when functioning according to God's norms, contribute to the health of society — just as normative government does.

The leaders of these various institutions are "governing authorities" in much the same way that the leaders of the state are. Paul calls us to submit to them just as much as to the lawmakers and police. In verse 4 of Romans 13 we learn why. They are servants of God for our good. In other words, by their work they — ideally — enable society to be what the Lord intends for it to be. So just as you obey the lawmakers who tell you that you must be age 18 to register to vote, you also obey the engineers who tell you that you must change the oil in your car regularly, or the educators who tell you that your child must learn mathematics as well as music and physical education, or the church leaders who tell you that you must be a professing Christian to participate in the Lord's Supper.

Selective obedience

Yet none of us seem to hold these other authorities in the same absolute esteem that

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The Consumer Education Model:
A Christian Response

by Mark Eckel

Mark Eckel is associate professor of educational ministries at the Moody Bible Institute, Chicago, Illinois.

Do we "love people and use things" or "love things and use people"? At times, even in Christian institutions, people can be corrupted by prevalent cultural viewpoints. The Bible teaches that children are made in God's image, to be treated as Spirit-gifted individuals, prompted to change according to biblical truth. Viewing education from the vantage point of a consumer directly contradicts the proper foundation for a Christian school.

Worldview corruption

Belief systems have contributed to the belief that Christian education is a commodity to be purchased, teachers are resources to be funded, and students are consumers to be satisfied.

1. Individualism — "choice" is an assumed right in Western culture. While people do make school decisions, Christian education is distinctive, not an alternative.
2. Utilitarianism — if it cannot be "used" then it must not be useful. While instruction must be applied, Christian education is premised upon the personhood, not the production, of an individual.
3. Materialism — "matter is all that matters" to some people. While finances are necessary to pay teachers, Christian education stresses that children matter more than money.
4. Pragmatism — "immediate results" are commensurate with goodness. While goal-oriented training does take place, Christian education teaches the truth that seeds are planted and may take years to grow.

Monetary Phrases

Wall Street parlance is transferred from the trading floor to the school board room.

1. "User friendly" indicates a desire for both access and success. People are happy if time and effort are reduced in procuring any given item.
2. "Not the only game in town" represents the view that options exist. If a business fails to meet needs, needs will be met elsewhere.
3. "I want to get my money's worth" is a variation on the first theme. In this case, the person desires every possible profit based on some perceived cost-benefit ratio.

Deserving Questions

The "I'm paying for a product" mentality misinterprets education as factory production. Children become commodities. Teachers become salesmen. Parents buy and sell. Schools are in competition.

1. What is the biblical basis for the consumer model? If the model comes from outside the biblical paradigm, shouldn't it deserve strong critique?
2. Does this model force us to biblical change or to accommodation to society?
3. Who is the consumer: the child or the parent? The answer to this question forces a discussion of ownership.
4. A consumer model is based on a business view of life. If this is true, can what a Christian school does be called "ministry"?
5. Compare the amount of money spent per child in government schools versus Christian schools. Shouldn't we expect *more* from the government school in the consumer model since more money is spent for each child?
6. If "getting what one pays for" is taken to its obvious conclusion, shouldn't we expect *less* from teachers who are paid poorly?
7. If Christians lived in another country would this model be used? Would poverty force us to accommodate to resources? Are we allowing environmental factors (i.e., wealth) to drive our theology and philosophy?

Potential Contradictions

1. The teaching-learning process is unlike any other vocation. The consumer model fails to address elementary truths concerning education.
2. Everyone is different. Not only do students have variant learning modalities but each individual is affected by multitudinous environmental influences. According to the consumer model, no machine could be made to manufacture a bulk product that would accommodate the differences.
3. The process of learning changes constantly to fit the needs of the classroom situation.
4. According to the consumer model, no designs could be replicated consistently to meet the buyer's demand.
5. Results in teaching are not seen immediately: sometimes, not for years. According to the consumer model, the business would go under within days when production lines failed to meet inventory quotas.
6. Both teacher and student are responsible for education to take place. Transferring and receiving knowledge leading to transformation is necessary. According to the consumer model, the producer and purchaser would be responsible to provide a product — a self-defeating process.

The "Paying for a product" approach to education reduces the enterprise to a physical, visible, financial "bottom line." Christian school education — all subjects taught under the authority of Christ — rejects such a naturalistic explanation of a supernatural process. The Word of God permeating every discipline through the power of The Holy Spirit and biblically integrative teachers has the goal of internal, eternal transformation of each student.

Affluenza: Afflicting the Comfortable

by Peter Schuurman

Peter Schuurman (eternalstudent@aol.com) is educational mission specialist (campus ministries) for the Christian Reformed Church of North America. He lives in Guelph, Ontario.

I remember flying home from a college mission trip to Haiti many years ago and having a stopover in Miami. Our host decided that a good way to spend the few hours was to visit one of Miami's giant malls. We were all immediately struck by the stark contrast with Haiti. We felt sick in the midst of the opulence.

It was a moment of clarity. We are sick. Sick, not from some sort of deprivation, but rather from an excess, an over-abundance. This is an illness of the wealthy, a luxury unavailable to the poor of the earth. I'm talking about rampant consumerism.

My wife was at a medical conference where one of the experts declared that the children born in 2006 will be the first generation in recorded history to have a lower life expectancy than their parents. The cause: childhood obesity, and the diabetes and heart disease that result. The lecturer concluded his talk with a comparison between the opulence and decadence of the late Roman Empire and our society, suggesting we shall witness the waning of our own "empire."

"Over-eating," of course, is not the heart of the issue. John De Graaf et al. in their book *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (BK, 2005) diagnose the disease as "affluenza," which he defines as "a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more." The book is full of interesting anecdotes and trivia. For example, it's a fact that more people have declared bankruptcy every year since 1996 (in the USA) than graduate from college. This is not just an addiction, it's an illness.

"Consumption" is a word with a double entendre; the word used to be synonymous with tuberculosis. When you have such consumption, it literally eats away at you. Not only do you become thin and waste away, but your lungs are literally eaten up. Couple that definition with our situation, and you could say that in our eating things up, we are being eaten up. We are eating not only ourselves up, but developing countries and the planet in our globalized frenzy of greed, debt and waste. We are being consumed by our consumption.

"Post-Material" World

Some groups who see that we are sick offer their remedies. Voluntary Simplicity, The Center for the New American Dream, and what has been called "The New Monasticism," all have on-line sites with a host of creative, practical, and healthy alternatives. If one of these groups were meeting in my neighborhood, I would probably join up.

The irony of this "new Puritanism," as some have called it, is that much of it is not necessarily Christian (as the Puritans were). A further irony of the anti-consumerist movement is that they offer the world another thing to consume: a new lifestyle. You not only can buy the idea, but also the books, the conferences, and the magazines (for example, *Real Simple*, *Organic Style*, or *Frugal Living for Dummies*). Perhaps these function like a vaccine: a little bit of the disease heightens your immune system and thereby enables you to counteract the full effects of the epidemic. One writer called it "an aesthetic for the counter-cultural privileged" — an aesthetic that may also produce self-satisfied feelings of moral superiority.

I do not want to be too cynical of these worthy attempts at transformation, but I am wary of some of the slogans these groups use. Mantras such as "because the best things in life are not things" and "we must not try to meet non-material needs materially" may have some good insights, but they come with two blind spots. The first is that it's easy to say that "the best

things in life are not things" if all your stuff is in danger of busting through the roof tiles. But imagine you are living hand-to-mouth from day to day. Drinking water, clothing, and shelter will seem pretty close to "best things."

Secondly, there is a dualism at work in those remarks. While I agree that having thousands of shoes will never fully satisfy the restlessness of our hearts, the assumption that material objects in and of themselves cannot possibly carry non-material goodness is mistaken. In a Christian worldview material things are not unspiritual. In fact, many are God-given gifts to cherish. For example, we know that a wedding gift can carry expressions of love and support, and crutches speak to us of hope and healing long after their use has expired. Things can incarnate significant "non-material" meanings. Things can help and heal.

Wanting to be deceived

Still, the simplicity movement has much to offer. If consumption is a disease, it is most certainly a contagious one. The virus is transmitted through 12,000 brand name ads per day, and church attendance does not make us immune. The promises of power, status, or happiness is an enormous lie that we all "buy into." The fact is, we want to be deceived. Consumption has become our preferred way of life in North America.

The issue is ultimately one of idolatry, stewardship, and care for the poor. Do we live to consume, or consume in order to live? Do we possess what we own, or does what we own possess us? How can we live with a frugality and generosity that doesn't strip the planet bare? How can we make a difference?

Many students today have not resigned themselves to the *status quo*. Torontonian Craig Kielburger is a child advocate in both senses. At age 12 he decided he wanted to help the poor children of the world by raising awareness and funds for poor children worldwide. Now, at age 23, he runs an organization called "Free the Children" which provides health care, safe drinking water, and education for over one million children in over 40 countries.

When he spoke to about 400 students at Guelph University recently, he said, "We are global in every way, except our compassion." He explained how the $18 billion we spend on make-up every year (or the $17 billion we spend on pet food) would be enough to eliminate world hunger. It's a sobering thought. We are sick from too much, while so many are sick from too little. The comfortable are afflicted, while the afflicted go without comfort. You have to wonder how long this can go on.

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we do the government. We think nothing of questioning the church order, the school curriculum, or even the maintenance manual that comes with our new car — even if we do so in relative ignorance. And, in a way, that's good! We ought never to accept uncritically the instructions or laws set down by others. We need to remember that there are always two levels of authority higher than any we might find given by any institution: the authority of our own conscience, and, finally, God's authority as expressed in his Word. It is better to go to jail for disobeying a particular law than to obey it and in so doing violate either of these.

None of this, however, ought to be construed as advocating anarchy or lawlessness. Anarchy and lawlessness are one extreme. The opposite is the kind of passive and unquestioning obedience that many German citizens gave to their government during the Second World War, that many American citizens gave to their government during the civil rights movement, and that, I fear, many Christians give to the government today.

If we are going to be faithful to the Lord, we will need to exercise our prophetic office by protesting injustice and pointing the way toward righteousness whenever possible. To let that prophetic task be inhibited by passive and unquestioning obedience to civil laws — is sin.

Interactive CEJ website

The *Christian Educators Journal has a new web presence, even though our global address on the World Wide Web is still cejonline.com. We are working in partnership with* *culture is not optional, *an organziation that wants to equip Christians to redeem all of culture. Our new web presence means that the CEJ site has become an interactive site. Visit cejonline.com and drop us a line or an article.*

Query

A Multitude of Challenges

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.

A rainbow variety of changes

Question #1:

How can a teacher deal with changing classroom dynamics as new students are added or current students leave? What are some suggestions to prepare the students for the changes?

Response:

I believe a teacher has to acknowledge the changes that are going to be happening in the classroom as soon as the information is received so that the students can prepare for the change. In the case of the incoming student, give the class as much information as is permissible, such as name, grade, and the place from which the student is coming and arrival date. In the case of a student leaving, permission may be needed from the parents to reveal that a child is leaving. I had an experience in which the teacher knew that a child was leaving, but the child had no knowledge of the move. This can be a sensitive matter.

From the time information becomes available, pray for the child and for the student's adjustment to the new situation. Celebrate the changes. It may be as important to have a welcoming party for new students as it is to have a farewell party for students leaving. To familiarize the classmates with the new students and, as a welcome, feature them as "Student of the week." In this way the classmates learn about the new student's family, hobbies, and pets.

It has always been helpful to partner a new student with one who has the God-given gift of hospitality and is familiar with the school facility, the school and classroom routines for the first few days. As the teacher observes the new students, the partnership may have to be adjusted, depending on the receptivity and character of the partners.

The teacher needs to explain classroom routines as the day unfolds. As a review for all students, it might be helpful to have a fellow classmate explain the routines.

Cooperative learning strategies and games as well as team building exercises may help integrate the new student into the classroom culture. It is important to acknowledge that students may be grieving the fact that they or their classmates are leaving or are missing their former home and classmates. It is also helpful to make note of the different classroom dynamics and ask for the students' observations and suggestion of how to strengthen the classroom community. Observe the student, and occasionally ask the student how she or he is adjusting to the new situation. The loving attention the teacher gives the child will serve as a model for the class. These are only a few suggestions but could be the initiative needed for students to adjust to their own or their classmate's coming and going.

Bi-polar behavior

Question #2:

I have had the experience of working with a child who would often flip out and turn on people. This included threatening, throwing items, and even strangling others. Even though he was on medication for being bi-polar, it seemed as though he could turn this behavior on and off quite regularly. He did not trust many people and felt as though he was always being cornered or yelled at. Also, this child did not receive much discipline at home. My question for you is this, how do you help a child like this as well as prevent the outbursts and figure out the trigger to this behavior?

Response:

I have not had experience with a situation exactly as you describe, but I will offer what I might try. Medications must have been prescribed for a reason; therefore, assuring that the medications were taken may be the first thing to be checked. Although there may be many students in the classroom, an opportunity must be found to observe the child carefully for a prolonged period of time to see what prompts his actions or reactions. You may have to observe while someone else is teaching your class for music, art or physical education. If that is not possible, a substitute teacher or administrator could possibly teach the class so that you can observe the child and take notes. Another possibility could be having someone else observe while you continue to teach, since the child may be reacting specifically to you or the methods you are using.

Observe what prompts outbursts or reactions. Is it always the same? Are there similarities in the situations? Is it the same person or a different person involved each time the outburst occurs? Is the person involved of the same or of the opposite gender? At

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what time of day do the incidents occur? Do they occur before or after lunch, snack or physical exercise? Categorize your evidence, looking for patterns, and then determine what can be done to relieve the situation. The help of a colleague or administrator might assist in working through the observations.

Depending on the age of the child, make the student or the parents aware of the finding and together decide on an action plan. Set appropriate boundaries and consequences if the boundaries are crossed. Use both verbal and non-verbal cues for encouragement. Work on one situation at a time and, once success has been experienced consistently, build on the success and together tackle another area. Reward the child in tangible and intangible ways. Above all show the child by your actions and words that he is loved.

You indicate that the child does not receive much discipline at home. As you make progress in the classroom, inform the parents of the success and kindly suggest that they might want to try the new strategy at home. Hopefully there can be success in both environments, but should it not carry over into the home, continue the consistency in the classroom so the child knows that the expectations apply once he is there. May you be blessed with wisdom, great observation and accompanying analytic skills, determination, perseverance, and consistency, and a rich measure of grace and love as you deal with this special child.

Cultural sensitivity

Question #3:

I am inquiring about what you think is an effective way to teach elementary students to be culturally competent. In other words, how can I, as a future teacher, appropriately embrace different student's cultures and break down stereotypes that society teaches them.

Response:

The classroom in a Christian school is one of the best places to approach this situation because of the foundational values of the school. It is important to show in word and deed that each person is special, created in God's image, and belongs to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. As teachers, we are role models and are to show the same respect and willingness to converse with each parent, regardless of societal background. Sometimes it takes a bit longer to understand someone from a different cultural or language background than ones own, but it is important to take the time necessary. Having been involved in a school community which consisted of students and parents from many different cultural, societal and ethnic backgrounds, I know that these barriers can be broken down.

Young children do not seem to "see" differences in color of skin or culture. Children speaking different languages even play together, communicating without language. If young students do show a bias, it is important to determine the origin. Often this influence comes from someone older than themselves. Seek to understand rather than condemn, and discuss the specific situation of bias with the students involved. Sometimes the students do not even realize the meaning or impact of what they are saying or doing which may offend someone else. If there is hurt or malice intended, it is important to get to the root of the situation and then once again return to the foundational Christian values. As children grow older and derogatory remarks toward one another become evident, the situation has to be confronted immediately and consistently from a biblical basis to show the value of each person (Matthew 18).

What usually occurs is that by learning informally and formally about the various cultures in their class and school, students gain a greater appreciation of their fellow students. An evening for the whole school community which features the food, costumes, and cultural activities of the various cultural communities which comprise the school breaks down barriers between peoples of all ages and can build wholesome fellowship and appreciation of one another.

David L. Smith, John Short, and John Sullivan, editors, *Teaching Spiritually Engaged Reading*. The Journal of Education and Christian Belief, Vol. 11:2 (Autumn 2007). Published by the Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning, and the Stapleford Centre, 107 pages.
Reviewed by Steve J. Van Der Weele (Calvin College, Retired)

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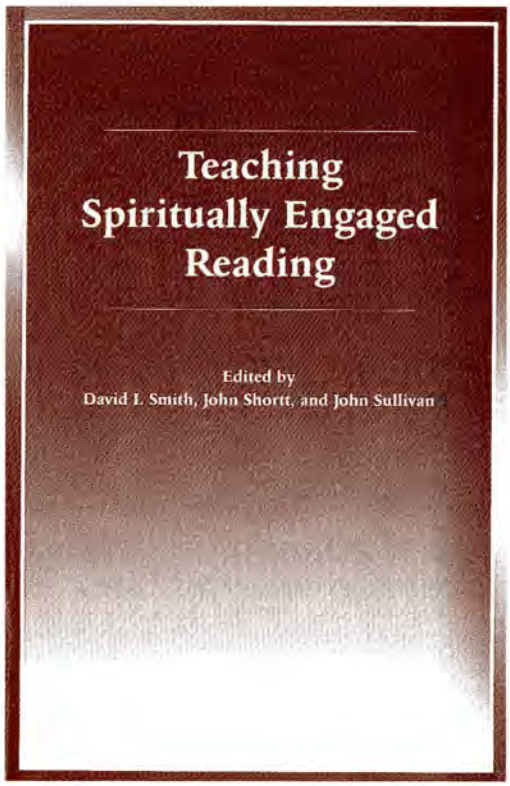
As one reads this collection of seven essays about the art of reading it is good to have in mind that episode in the Book of Acts where Philip, the disciple, encounters the eunuch headed for Ethiopia — the queen's official with his head in a scroll and bewildered by what he is reading. When Philip asks the eunuch whether he understands what he is reading, he is not asking whether he is capable of decoding the words on the page. The eunuch is obviously literate and has no trouble spelling out the words. His perplexity involves the deep meaning of the passage he is reading. He understands that what he is reading has profound implications. His faith may be at stake. He desires to understand in a comprehensive sense the words he is encountering. Philip is an able tutor, and the lesson leads to a baptism.



The authors of these essays speak with one voice as they remind us of the great gift of reading and as they inform teachers how they can inculcate in their students a deeper respect for the significance and high potential of what reading can do. Serious reading must be more than gathering of information, or scanning for general ideas. Ultimately, the authors contend, wrestling with the printed text overlaps significantly with the larger quest for maturity in the life of the believer. No progress in one's spiritual pilgrimage can take place without the arduous kind of effort in which the eunuch was engaged.

Alan Jacobs starts off the collection. He points out that for a student to be able to achieve the higher reaches of the cultural materials, he needs an environment which permits leisure, playfulness — freedom from the practical necessities of everyday life. The classical world distinguished between the liberal arts and the useful arts and understood that the first would yield an education which truly liberates, and the second an education with more pragmatic results. John Netland addresses the givens of the world's diversity — multiculturalism, globalization — reminding us that rather than interpreting this diversity as part of the brokenness of the world, students should regard the opportunities available to them to go beyond mere tolerance of other languages and cultures and develop instead a spirit of caritas that will acknowledge God's creational goodness and generosity. We are hosts when we read these other literatures, and we need to acknowledge the demands of the hospitality we owe to strangers.

Mark Pike's "Transactional Reading as Spiritual Investment" makes the point as robustly as any that reading is not only an enormous gift and treasure but that the injunction to think and live Christianly cannot be attained without reading. Reading is not optional, nor is it neutral. We need to read secular texts as well — giving to Caesar what is Caesar's. And we need to acknowledge the dynamic relationship between writer and reader when we guide our children in their reading. We must be both generous and critical in our evaluation of serious works. Pike's final word? "...Christians' reading belongs to God." (p. 90) C. Rebecca Rine points out how Augustine — especially in his Confessions — teaches us not only philosophy, theology, and psychology, but also the art, the genius of reading itself. His grappling with classical literature, with the Manichean writings, with Ambrose — and, of course, with Scripture itself — serves his larger purpose of charting the stages of one's spiritual pilgrimage. Augustine describes reading as a circuitous activity; it meanders, digresses, delays, and is fraught with trial and error.

Augustine would have us know that if one's heart is right, one's reading will result in growth in grace and wisdom. Rine quotes Soskice here, "Our teaching of one another is one of the divinely intended ligatures of love." (48) Such an approach to reading is closely akin to the struggle inherent in the Christian life itself.

Cynthia Slager pleads for a recognition of the power of oral reading to disclose the deep meanings of a poem or story. Texts are there to produce words, and sounds —experienced internally or spoken aloud. Oral reading reveals otherwise hidden nuances, and can, in fact, significantly affect the interpretation of a

given work.

David Smith incorporates many of the emphases of the contributors of this collection. He takes us into his classroom in German literature where his students have provided awkward interpretations of two contemporary poems. He analyzes what has gone wrong in the process of their reading. Well, they breached the requirement of neighborly love by failing to put forth the effort to work their way into the author's intent. Instead, they brought to bear on their reading the furniture of their own minds — their appropriation of their belief systems and sense of religious wisdom. But not all was lost. Smith used these flawed readings as launching pads to higher, more valid readings and, thus, enlarged the students' world, sensibility, and their capacity to serve God and to love the neighbor.

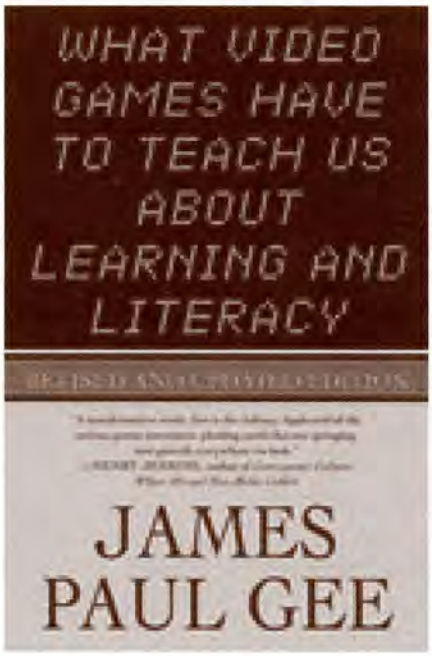
John Sullivan reminds us that reading in medieval times was closely related to liturgy — especially when large segments of the population were illiterate. They acknowledged the authority of the materials they were reading, placing themselves under the text rather than above it — so much the practice nowadays. Reading is like a journey. It should go beyond information-gathering. It challenges the reader to achieve new levels of spiritual maturity. We cannot replicate the medieval milieu, but we can induce an attitude of reverence for the great gift of reading and lead the student to achieve sapientia rather than mere scientia.

These essays make much discourse about the reading process — such as the phonics versus whole-language debate — appear quite trivial. They highlight how the art of reading goes far beyond decoding and calls on teachers to recognize reading as the complex activity that it is and to challenge the students to enter into the fullness of the reading experience — to its difficulties but also to its unique joys and rewards.

From My Bookshelf....

We at CEJ have come up with a new book column. We are asking various groups of educators to recommend books they have read and find worthwhile for other educators to read. In this issue we feature book recommendations by three professors from the Education Department at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan. In the next issue we hope to have book recommendations from professors at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Illinois.

Gee, James Paul (2003). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy.* Palgrave MacMillan.



An astonishing 97% of children between 12 and 17 play video games. Fully 79% of all school-age children over four years of age give their undivided attention to such interactive games as *Guitar Hero* and *Little Big Planet* for about eight hours a week. These games are teachers of reading. On playgrounds, at home, in malls and other places where people gather, children learn why they should read, what to read and how to work with print. Today, the list of sites where literacy is learned must include the console, screen and game disk. After just 35 years of development, video games have become a profoundly powerful educative force.

As we in our Calvin College classrooms learn about literacy practices increasingly shaped by visual technology and interactions, we are turning to cultural-theorist James Paul Gee's recent work. At 53 years of age, he watched his three-year old son play video games with a facility that escaped him. He decided to learn. Then he went on to consider what the games taught him. Gee found that "good games," the popular ones, are designed to teach principles. "Good learning principles are built into the very design..."(2). A child needs to be able to pick up a new game, be quickly and deeply engaged with its problem, learn the rules, grow a specialist language, and adopt the games' strategies and organizational methods.

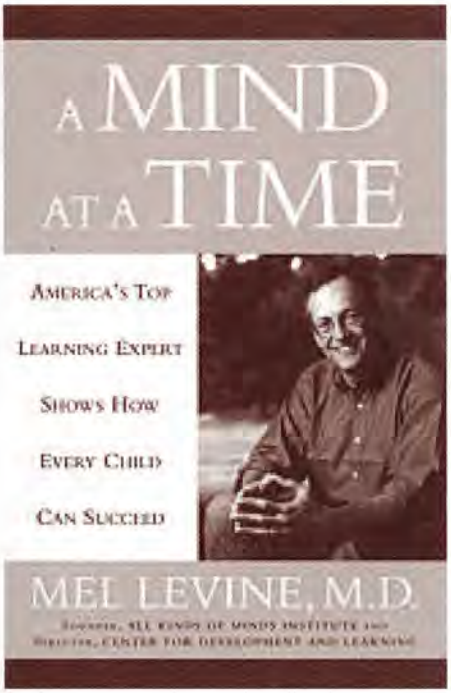
Games are designed to absorb interest that is satisfied with complexity and challenge. The rewards of accomplishment are intrinsic, and the game is designed to provide increments of learning that perfectly "scaffold" the player to the next step.

Gee advises teachers to consider the efficient and absorbing nature of learning sparked by games; in contrast, school learning is led by pedantic manuals, stripped of authentic, invigorating contexts.

Johanna Kuyvenhoven,

Levin, Mel (2002). *A Mind at a Time*. Simon and Schuster.

In his book entitled *A Mind at a Time*, pediatrician and learning expert Dr. Mel Levine describes in helpful detail, using common language, the diverse ways that a mind learns. Levine explains how eight neuro-developmental systems function to make learning happen, and he offers insight into how difficulties in the function of one or more systems contribute to struggles in school.

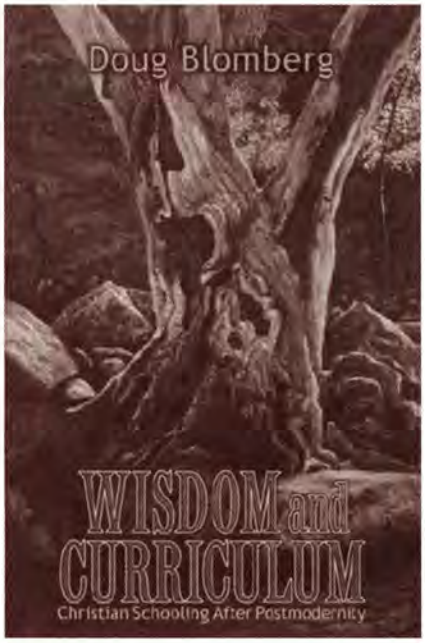


In this book, Levine helps educators and parents identify patterns of learning and offers assistance in deciding how to overcome weaknesses or accept challenges while enhancing abilities. This book, which forms the text for numerous college courses and teacher training programs, is a "must read" for teachers, administrators and parents who are interested in understanding learning patterns of their students, their children and themselves. As Levine writes, "To build a mind requires that you understand it. We can use our awareness of the diversity of minds ... to ... educate ... all kinds of minds" (p. 307).

Phil Stegink

Blomberg, Doug (2007). *Wisdom and Curriculum: Christian Schooling After Postmodernity*. Dordt College Press.

One of the books that quite a few of us in the education department at Calvin have been reading this fall is Doug Blomberg's recently published book, *Wisdom and Curriculum*. The Calvin Education Department and the Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning sponsored book club discussions and invited Blomberg to give a lecture.



Blomberg's book is truly a book full of wisdom. Blomberg is a philosopher of education who is committed to listening to teachers and grappling with the present day realities of schooling. Many times I found Blomberg articulating and clarifying ideas that were half-formed in my thinking as he poses challenges to the ways modernity has (mis)shaped our Christian schools: "We should subject ourselves to God's world as well.... We should allow the world to retain its puzzling character. Instead of subjecting itself to our schemes of domination, we should lay ourselves open before it, making ourselves vulnerable. We become its subjects, inviting it to correct us, rather than vice versa.... There is nothing in life that is not experience ... thinking is also experiential, as are believing, trusting, hoping."

Blomberg uses a variety of strategies. He conducts an interview with a principal, constructs a dialogue between Solomon, Sophie and Socrates, and offers poetry to examine different perspectives. This book is also a bit tough going at points and has some complicated prose from time to time that require a second reading, as in: "But this selecting of a finite focus is of a different order from theoretical analysis of intellection, where one is attending from the concrete entities in interrelationship in one's field to the properties of these entities in abstraction from them." However, *Wisdom and Curriculum* is also very readable much of the time and definitely worth the effort.

Jim Rooks