

Christian Faith in the Classroom

Learning from Teachers' Questions



**A Professional Development Resource for Teachers Seeking
to Understand how Faith Informs Teaching
by Ben Taming and Mark Vanderwerf**



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Foreword

In 2016, Trevor Cooling, Beth Green, and their colleagues Andrew Morris and Lynn Revell published the results of their research on how teachers in English church schools wrestled with ways of connecting their Christian faith with their approaches to teaching and learning. The book, titled *Christian Faith in English Church Schools: Research Conversations with Classroom Teachers*, is published by Peter Lang. At its heart, the book is a series of case studies of individual teachers in which we catch a glimpse of their learning process. When teachers in Michigan read these case studies, they immediately recognized parallels to their own conversations with colleagues in North American Christian Schools, and wondered if the material could be shared in a way that would foster learning within school departments.

For those with the time and commitment, I recommend reading the whole book from which these case studies are drawn. What Ben Tameling and Mark Vanderwerf, themselves able classroom teachers, have provided here is a way of using small snapshots from the case studies as a resource to provoke honest discussion among Christian teachers. This resource does not offer correct answers and prescribed solutions. Rather, it will be useful to individuals, school departments, and school leaders who want to move beyond quick slogans and explore together the puzzles, challenges, and joys of finding real connections between faith and teaching. It is intended to be used with others, and to build a community of pedagogical pilgrims seeking the way to wholeness in their teaching practices. You may end up in a place different from those arrived at by the case study teachers, but maybe their experience can help you get there.

David I. Smith
Director, Kuyers Institute for Christian Teaching and Learning
www.pedagogy.net

Leader's Guide

Background

The examples you are about to encounter are drawn from research in schools and arise from the real-life experiences of teachers. Their stories are published in more detail in the book *Christian Faith in English Church Schools: Research Conversations with Classroom Teachers* by Trevor Cooling, Beth Green, Andrew Morris, and Lynn Revell (Peter Lang, 2016), and we encourage you to explore them further there.

What if Learning

The teachers you will meet in this resource are using an approach to teaching and learning called “What if Learning.” This approach invites teachers to meaningfully connect Christian faith with the practices of teaching and learning. It seeks to accomplish this goal by focusing on three movements:

(1) Seeing Anew

How could a Christian understanding of God, people, and the world provide a different way of seeing a lesson or unit?

(2) Choosing Engagement

How can students engage with this new way of seeing?

(3) Reshaping Practice

What changes to my practice do I need to make as a teacher?

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To learn more about *What if Learning* and to see many more examples, please visit <http://www.whatiflearning.com/>. Further resources related to this approach can also be found at <http://www.teachfastly.com>.

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connecting teaching and learning to the Christian faith are more likely to lead to real growth than one-off events.

If time or schedule does not allow a series of weekly meetings, an alternative would be to choose one or two case studies to be used during a single

Does There Have to Be a “Christian” Version of Everything?

P.E. Teacher - James (Cooling et al. p. 56-59)

THE STORY:

The cultural popularity of athletics can lead high school students to adopt a hyper-competitive attitude toward opponents, a win-at-all-costs mentality. This kind of mindset leads us to idolize or demonize those athletes who are capable of gaining the celebrity status associated with their elite success.

James is a physical education teacher who wanted to combat this kind of mentality and cultural influence with his own teaching strategy. In particular, he wanted to challenge his students to adopt and practice the kinds of values that Christians should be modeling whenever they compete in athletic contests. Perhaps “winning” is empty, he thought, if one is not practicing things like friendship, respect, equality, perseverance, and grace when participating. And so it was these kinds of character traits that James wanted to incorporate into his curriculum, giving students opportunities to practice playing sports as Christians.

One particular lesson involved teaching students how to execute a proper “push-pass” in the game of field hockey. Can there be a Christian way of executing a push-pass? Is it just saying a prayer that the pass goes well? There is hardly time to discuss Christ with a teammate while passing. Could faith make a difference?

STOP AND REFLECT:

1. *Do you agree with James’ concerns? Should he try to integrate a response into his teaching?*
2. *What happens next? If you were in James’ shoes, what would you do?*

THE REST OF THE STORY:

Here is what James tried. First, he demonstrated the proper passing technique. Next, students took turns being “player” and “coach,” with the coaches providing feedback based on the player’s pass. Finally, they ended by discussing (in pairs and then as a whole class) the strategies used to encourage one another. Throughout, the emphasis was on coaching as a form of encouragement. James hoped this would stand in stark contrast to the “winning at all costs” mentality.

James was not changing the surface content of the lesson - a push-pass is still a push-pass! But he gave his class a new framework for practicing this pass: one of encouragement, of building others up instead of obsession with one’s own individual performance. This framework drew from his Christian convictions.

DISCUSS:

1. How did James *see anew* (allow a Christian imagination to affect how he saw his task), *choose engagement* (engage students with his vision), and *reshape his practice* (shape the details of teaching to support his vision)?
2. Additional questions:
 - a. In a follow-up lesson when James' students were playing a full game of field hockey, students actually put their hands up to indicate when they had committed a foul. Jim insists that this is common practice in his PE class, based on the character he's been enabling his students to inhabit and practice. The teachers in his department also sought to practice the same ethic in their own sporting activities. Is this realistic to expect in our schools? What about in actual athletic games? Is this even a good idea? Why/why not?
 - b. What positive or negative examples of athlete or spectator behavior in athletic contests have you witnessed recently? How should Christian faith help shape the sports experiences of our students?
 - c. How might James' story relate to teaching in other subject areas? Are there practices in or outside the classroom that should be questioned in light of Christian faith?

FOLLOW-UP:

To Preach or to Teach?

Religion Teacher - Ann (Cooling et al. p. 59-64)

THE STORY:

Even in Christian schools, students come from a wide range of religious backgrounds and come with varying levels of personal faith commitment. Teachers in these schools often find themselves balancing two desires: to be open about personal faith on the one hand, and on the other to create a safe and welcoming learning environment for all students regardless of their faith perspective. Ann is a religion teacher who shares these two desires.

Ann struggled to discern what was an appropriate way of teaching the Christian faith without forcing it upon her students. She felt that the roles of church and school were separate: her job as a teacher was to teach about the Christian faith, not to indoctrinate students in the faith. She struggled with how explicit she should be about her Christian faith and the school's Christian commitments in her daily lessons so that all students, regardless of religious persuasion, felt welcomed and safe.

As she grappled with how explicit to be about faith, she prepared to teach a lesson on people's diverse beliefs about life after death. How could she create a lesson that was faithful to her and her school's Christian commitments while at the same time creating space for students to express their own diverse religious beliefs?

STOP AND REFLECT:

1. *Are Ann's concerns legitimate?*
2. *How important is it to allow students to express their own religious beliefs about a given topic?*
3. *If you were in Ann's shoes, what would you do?*

THE REST OF THE STORY:

Though the lesson's explicit topic was "life after death," Ann decided to emphasize the Christian virtue of respect (treating others as having worth) throughout the lesson. She had students read and respond to nine written descriptions of unfamiliar beliefs about the afterlife and emphasized that these were the sincerely held beliefs of real people. After students had a chance to respond in writing to these beliefs, Ann led a discussion on the topic of respect and highlighted it as a focus for that day's lesson.

After the class discussion on respect, groups of students were each given a picture of a real person along with a written case study which emphasized the experiences of the person whose beliefs they were studying. Ann hoped that this would make abstract beliefs about the afterlife

Overcoming Tokenism?

Physics Teacher - Paul (Cooling et al. p. 64-68)

a THE STORY

DISCUSS:

1. How did Paul see *anew*

Academic Rigor or Christian Conviction?

Technology Teacher - John (Cooling et al. p. 69-72)

THE STORY:

John is a second-career teacher. Before becoming a technology teacher John was a pastor of a church, so it is not surprising that he has a passion for passing on the Christian faith to his students and training them in a life of discipleship to Jesus Christ. But as a technology teacher, his primary task is to ensure that his students are meeting the academic standards of the discipline.

Are his two loves in conflict? He felt a sense of tension between them. How could he encourage his students to grow in and practice their faith while focusing firmly on teaching his students the national requirements for technology?

John's upcoming lesson for his class of thirteen-year-olds was meant to teach them how to use a computer program to create a short promotional video. The educational standards that he was expected to teach included technology skills as well as communication techniques such as the use of color to captivate an audience. In the past, when John taught the lesson he had students create an advertisement for a business. He became concerned he might be promoting a culture of greed by focusing his teaching examples mainly on advertising for consumer products. How could he marry academic rigor and Christian conviction?

STOP AND REFLECT:

1.

DISCUSS:

1. How did John see *anew* (allow a Christian imagination to affect how he saw his task), choose *engagement* (engage students with his vision), and *reshape* EMC, P&L, B&G, T&S, D&D, T&D, C&C, 70.00

What if Non-Christians Do This Too?

Geography - Charlotte (Cooling et al. p. 72-77)

THE STORY:

DISCUSS:

1. How did Charlotte see *anew* (allow a Christian imagination to affect how she saw her task), *choose engagement* (engage students with her vision), and *reshape her practice* (shape the details of teaching to support her vision)?
2. What do you think about Charlotte's lingering question after her revised lesson? Should a Christian approach to teaching involve explicitly Christian statements and "directive teaching, which tells students what to think" (76)?
3. Charlotte wanted to teach about gratitude. What risks are there in her plan, in terms of what students might learn about poverty? Is a focus on gratitude the only Christian

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From this self-reflection, she realized that her previous lesson had stripped one of the most pastorally difficult topics of any sense of compassion for human suffering and had turned it into an exercise of abstract and yet heated debate. Though she was asking her students to think critically, she was also asking them to act in a way that she believed was lacking in basic Christian virtues of compassion and love.

Fueled by these new convictions, Angela redesigned her lesson by abandoning the in-class debate and creating a case study about the story of Tony Nicklinson, a famous British advocate for the “right to die” who suffered a massive stroke at the age of fifty and was left paralyzed with locked-in syndrome. Angela framed the new lesson around the question of “What makes life worth living?” In the first part of the lesson, the class was introduced to Nicklinson before his stroke through YouTube clips and students were asked to discuss his quality of life. They were then told the story of his stroke and shown another YouTube clip of him explaining his post-stroke situation. The class then worked in groups to develop five questions they would like to ask arising from the videos and class discussion. The homework was to take those questions home and ask a family member or another wise adult. Finally Angela discussed the biblical

DISCUSS:

1. How did Julie *see anew* (allow a Christian imagination to affect how she saw her task), *choose engagement* (engage students with her vision), and *reshape her practice* (shape the details of teaching to support her vision)?
2. Where in your subject area could you challenge your students to master the skills and critical reflection needed to speak truth more effectively?
3. Where in your subject area is it sometimes difficult to envision a way for your students to engage the material in an authentically Christian way? Is it helpful to think about the implied goals and values that are expressed in the examples used, rather than looking for spaces to insert faith examples?

FOLLOW-UP:

1. Do you think your students associate the activities that take place in your class with larger questions of integrity? Choose an upcoming lesson plan during the next week and ask yourself (and your students!) where there might be an opportunity to focus on valuing truth and see this as connected to everyday learning activities.

Some Key Challenges

(Chapter 5, Cooling et al.)

RECAP: THREE CHALLENGES

As we have heard the stories of various teachers struggling to connect faith with their teaching, three broad challenges have emerged:

1. “This is Weird!”

Some teachers made an initial assumption that the Christian element of teaching needed to involve “fitting into” already existing material a series of faith references, or reworking existing lessons to “accommodate” a chunk of explicitly Christian content. Then the uneasy question was raised: is doing this a violation of professional integrity or academic quality? Is it a case of “strong-arming” Christianity into different subjects whether it really fits or not? The result was sometimes that forcing Christian content into class felt “weird.”

STOP AND REFLECT:

1. *Let’s acknowledge that strong-arming explicit religious language unnaturally into contexts where it fits poorly can be, in fact, “weird.” When have your students actually noticed this or expressed dissatisfaction with it?*
2. *Is the sense of “weirdness” because the faith references really don’t fit, or because of the way the lesson is designed, or because the way students’ and teachers’ mental habits have been formed make them seem irrelevant?*
3. *In what ways have teachers in the previous examples sought to integrate Christian practices and a Christian focus more naturally into their lessons? How have you attempted to do this?*

2. “Christian Enough?”

As almost the flip-side to the first challenge that emerged, there was also a concern that students don’t always recognize a given lesson as “distinctively Christian enough.” This, in turn, raised the question: what makes a lesson “distinctively Christian” anyway? Is it the content, informed by a Christian perspective or worldview? Is it the pedagogy, shaped by Christian practices? Is it both? In short, what makes studying a given subject in a Christian setting any different than a non-Christian one?

STOP AND REFLECT:

- 1) *Have your students ever wondered aloud what makes studying your subject in a Christian school any different than in a non-Christian setting? Have you?*
- 2) *How would you answer the question: what makes a lesson “distinctively Christian”?*

3. “A Problem with Practices”

As an outgrowth of the second challenge, the final challenge that many teachers shared was moving from an initial concern only for what students were *thinking* as a result of content delivery to awareness of what they were *experiencing* as a result of effective pedagogy. Education’s appropriate focus on developing critical thinking skills can encourage a focus on thinking alone. As Christian worship services often center on the