



Lessons Learned Across the Back Fence: What 33 Years in Public Higher Education Taught Me¹

Ted Ward

Outlines for Sessions #1 and 2

Premise: *To understand my images of the future, one must see something of my view of the present damage that has accrued in the field of education at large.*

What follows in these two lectures is intended to be both WARNING and PATHFINDING—one more attempt to warn Christian education against the dangers in being a “me, too” field—accompanied by a optimistic view of the tasks ahead.

“Christian education is neither” was intended as a barbed challenge to re-consider (a) the essence of “educative,” and (b) the rudiments of “Christian.”

Those who really know me are aware that my *real* motto is not “Christian education is neither,” but . . . CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IS POSSIBLE.

Now that I am an “insider,”

- I resent the field being described as “Mickey Mouse,” just as much as any of the rest of you.
- I find that the high walls within the theological education establishment are even higher than they looked from the outside.
- I find the collegiality within Christian education more energizing than I had imagined.
- I see even more evidence that the field of Christian education has turned a corner toward service-oriented scholarship.
- I am thankful to Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and my colleagues there who have given me a warm welcome and have let me join them in the quest for a stronger field of Christian education for the glory of Jesus Christ.

SEVEN LESSONS

1. Preoccupation with Technology

Results:

- De-emphasis of human skills.
- Inadequate attention to interpersonal competencies.
- Measuring quality in terms of THINGS and NEWNESS.
- Fads, fads, fads . . . of technologies, techniques, gadgets, and schemes.

Cure: *Re-centering of humane values accompanied by simplification of technologies of education (in the manner of E.F. Schumacher’s “Small is Beautiful.”*

¹ Pre-conference expanded outline for National Association of Professors in Christian Education (NAPCE), October 30-November 2, 1986. Schaumburg Marriott, Chicago IL. Conference Theme: Agenda for the Future of Evangelical Christian Education. (See mp3 [audio files](#) and transcripts of these two addresses under the conference theme title.)

2. A Narrow Concept of Education

Results:

- Presumption that the “schooling” model IS education.
- Alliance of educational efforts with unchallenged tradition and habit.
- Teaching models designed as if learners were always children.
- “De nova” and “tabula rasa” presuppositions about the teacher’s tasks.
- Instructional devices as the solution for poor teaching.
(The whole world is, to some extent, blighted and trapped in narrow Hellenisms and the oriental equivalent, Confucianism—denying the vital function of praxis and the righteous rudiment of “obedience.”)

Cure: *Adoption of the three-faceted model of the social functions of education: informal (socialization), formal, and non-formal, allows the appropriate investments in change-oriented education.*

3. Limitations of Campus-based (“Four-wall”) Educational Settings

Results:

- Limiting educational experiences to those that “fit” in the classical setting.
- Hierarchical teacher/learner categories.
- Mimicking the formal classroom in virtually every human relationship (Illich’s thesis.)

Cure: *Re-discovery of the value of field-based community learning. (Consider the choices that Jesus made of learning contexts and environments.)*

4. Over-confidence in Scientific Values (in sum, the “testing movement”)

Results:

- Cold and mechanized processes invading the learning environment.
- Preoccupation with the outcome at the expense of the process and the participants.
(Tyler; Mager)
- Adoption of diagnosis/treatment paradigms and the power-postures they engender.
- Neglect of complex outcomes of education.

Cure: *Restoration of the DIGNITY and ART of teaching. (Havighurst; Eisner.)*

5. Failure to Emphasize both Analytic and Synthetic Processes

Results:

- Academicism focusing on the analytic (and ultimately quantitative) aspects of educational processes.)
- Tendency to evaluate the measurable.
- Resultant tendency to teach to the easily evaluable ends, ultimately, and educational technology in which ends justify means.

Cure: *Cultivating both reasoning and creativity hand-in-hand.*

6. Psychological Imagery and Presuppositions

Results:

- Reductionistic educational reasoning.
- Molecular and non-contextual curriculum.
- Individual differences are seen as the major explanation for all variances.
- Research as measurement.

- Neglect of the social and group dimensions of learning while focusing an individualistic self-centered image of learning.

Cure: *Holism in educational concepts and instructional strategies research as description (ethnography.)*

7. Atrophy of Philosophy of Education

Results:

- Neglect of valuing as a rudimentary construct in educational decision-making.
- Whether cause or effect, the notoriously poor teaching of educational philosophy courses preceded the removal of philosophy from the curriculum of teacher education.
- Disregard for historical precedents, resulting in the [George] Santayana phenomenon.

Cure: *Emphasis on the accountability of the teacher for the philosophical and theological rudiments and implications in every consequential educational decision. (This must begin with the development of self-respect in teachers, especially a respect for their capacity to make moral choices and to conceptualize the values at stake in given learning tasks and contexts.)*

Warnings about fads that may settle in on Christian education very soon:

1. Preoccupation with “learning styles.”
2. Packaged video instruction.

One risky bit of fortune telling:

Interactive (two-way and three-way) video instructional hook-ups may be worth some investment. Dr. Charles Massey at Houghton’s Buffalo Campus seems to be the front-runner on this one so far.

The Bottom Line:

We must build a knowledge-based profession dedicated to the service of the church through specialized understanding and skills in the central matter of spiritual development.

Session 2: With Both Hands on the Plow

Squaring off against the issues that stare Christian education in the face:

1. DEFINING

The Term, Christian education:

Issues:

- “Christian” as qualitative descriptor.
- “Education” as choice among developmental, acquisitional, and behavioristic concepts.

The Field, Christian Education:

Issues:

Adopting the “orphans,” especially spiritual formation and development, Christian higher education, and pastoral education.

2. RELATING

Christian education to Theology:

Issues:

- Learning to reason theologically about educational questions.

- Bringing the hermeneutical implications of insights about personhood and human groups to bear on theological research.

Christian Education to Social Science:

Issues:

- Need for skills in critiquing and appropriately using social science literature and research sources.
- Need for skills in critiquing and appropriately using social science methodologies in Christian education research.

3. IDENTIFYING

Practitioner Roles and Tasks:

Issues:

Not nearly enough is known about the nature of interactions between practitioners of Christian education and the people they are serving.

Skills needed for Effectiveness:

Issues:

As in the field of education at large, the relative importance of specific skills and how they relate to effective ministry are largely undocumented.

4. RE-DISCOVERING

Ways to Contribute to Pastoral Education:

Issues:

Consequence of the rise of Christian education as a specialization has been the reduction of emphasis on interpersonal and spiritual formation understandings and skills in the basic preparation of pastors.

The Centrality of Spiritual Formation:

Issues:

Expertise and resources in the field of Christian education are largely untapped in reference to the preparation of the vast majority of pastors. When a Christian education course is included in pastoral education; it is usually a survey course (grudgingly included) dealing with programs, Christian education curricula, and program administration—not the more vital tasks of spiritual formation and discipleship-sharing.

5. BALANCING

Competent Management of Programs with Competent Discipleship-sharing:

Issues:

As important as well-planned and well-managed educational programs are in the church and in staff development within para-church organizations, they should not be seen as more important than the interpersonal skills and spiritual grounding of discipleship-sharing.

Scholarship Values and Service Values:

Issues:

The “quest for excellence” carries inherent threats to the key value of Christian discipleship: service. Educational institutions are particularly vulnerable to the

secularizing trend toward individual excellence of scholarly performance at the expense of commitment to serve in the society and in the body.

6. FOCUSING

Spiritual Development and its Social Context:

Issues:

The ecology of spiritual development is largely unexamined; instead spiritual development is still largely approached cognitively.

Learning as Interactive Social Process:

Issues:

Religious educators should be among the first to emphasize the fact that learning is essentially a social process.

7. ESTABLISHING

A Tradition for Research:

Issues:

- Need articulation with a larger realm of social science.
- Need a series of well-defined high-priority inquiries.

A Substantial Profession:

Issues:

- Openness of the field.
- Defined scope of knowledge.
- Standards of professional behavior and accountability processes.

The Bottom Line:

To serve the church, not to entrench institutions (Colossians 1:24-2:5).

If time allows, an outstanding example of educational research—undertaken as a doctoral dissertation—will be presented to specifically illustrate the potentialities for important breakthrough in Christian education by careful interlock with “secular” research. (Kathleen Roch. Conceptual Change Learning and Student Processing of Science Texts. Unpublished dissertation, Michigan State University, 1985. (Winner of the Faculty Award for outstanding dissertation of 1985.)