



Understanding Teaching and Learning as Inseparable Processes¹

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Introduction

Principles of teaching and learning are essentially the same regardless of the educational setting. To better serve the variety of situations in which Christian educators work, this paper is concerned primarily with principles more than methods, and it is not limited one particular setting or form of Christian education. The well-prepared educator should aspire to an understanding of the whole of teaching and learning in its many settings.

Further, the principles of teaching and learning are not unique because the setting is Christian. Good education is good education. Effective teaching is effective teaching. Learning is learning. However, it is important to respect the way the Creator established the human being and the principles of human society.

The author intends not only to provide information about the relationship between teaching and learning, but to offer examples and practical suggestions about how to use teaching to bring about learning.

Foundational Declaration. Whether intentional or unintentional, every human interaction represents a series of experiences through which all partners learn and, in less balanced ways, all partners teach.

Teaching Is A Creative Art. It is grounded in spiritual purposes and scientific understanding of human development.

Teaching Is Inseparable From Learning. The two processes exist in nature in the same way as two viewpoints of one reality.

The ordinary understanding of teaching is over-simplified because *teaching is a commonplace activity*: Everyone teaches—in one way or another, intentionally or unintentionally, skillfully or brutally, in a professional style or as an amateur.

Teaching Does Not Depend on Human Intervention. Teaching occurs in every interaction of a person with the natural environment. Teachers can help—or sometimes hinder.

Teaching is a worthy calling. Professional teaching requires thorough and responsible development of a knowledge-based set of abilities. Professional teaching requires skills, understandings, wisdom, and creativity. Even in the hands of a well-motivated non-professional, teaching effectively is a mark of distinction; the ministry that follows from it is worthy of praise.

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Through teaching we participate in God's created universe. We accept responsibility for leadership and guidance of human beings and thus we facilitate the potential for godliness in human society. We work toward the fulfillment of the image and likeness of God in the person and in the community. Accepting a partnership in God's redemptive work in his creation, we live with learners in such a way as to give testimony to the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. As our lives reflect the work of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, our behavior, our motives, and our compassionate regard for the dignity of each created person, we build relationships of integrity, respect, and wholeness through which God can bring the learner into deeper relationship with Himself.

Toward a Better Understanding of Teaching and Learning

Teaching and learning go hand in hand. Without the one, the other doesn't happen. This claim is commonly heard, and, in general, it is reasonable. At least it provides a good starting place to build an understanding of *teaching* and *learning*. But a well-prepared educator also needs something else: an understanding of how teaching and learning relate to each other. How do the processes of teaching interact with the processes of learning?

The Christian who has accepted responsibility for an educational task should bring to the task more than amateurism. Knowing something about educational processes will assist in the effective achievement of competency in this ministry. For a Christian, there is no excuse for leaving to haphazard chance and guesswork matters which are basic to human development and spiritual maturation. These matters are well described in journals and books. The vast army of researchers working on matters of teaching and learning should not be ignored!

The Processes: Learning

Do we really know what learning is and what makes it happen? Research studies of the human brain have been reported with increasing frequency in the past fifty years. The functions of brain cells, neurons, synapses, and myriad specialized bits and pieces of the magnificent organ and how it supports learning are widely discussed. The human brain, perhaps the most persuasive artifact in nature which argues for an intelligent Creator, is yielding little by little to the inquiries of neurologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, surgeons, and educators. Listening to these various sectors and studying their journals reveal that each is looking at a part of a much larger and more mysterious whole.

Perhaps the most apparent gap in the understanding of learning is the role of social experience. Learning is clearly more than a cause-effect process in the mechanisms of the brain. Learning is a natural phenomenon, capable of being increased or decreased, brought intentionally to the center of purposive activity, or allowed to recede into a default mode. But learning cannot be turned off and on by choice any more than can breathing or the beating of one's heart. The competent educator needs to understand learning but cannot expect to be a specialist in the physiological or psychological details.

Learning involves a series of interrelated complex processes. While these processes can be listed and even suggested in a sort of sequence, any such attempt is certain to be incomplete and to some extent misleading. The simple list following illustrates the immensity of the task of learning and suggests some of the ways that the human mind is engaged in its functions. Note that far more than remembering information is at stake in these processes!

Perceiving. Turning sound and sight into meanings and feelings. Connecting the meanings and feelings into previous experiences and feelings.

Remembering. Attaching the newly perceived meanings and feelings with the collected “files” of previous learnings. Attaching the recall index of symbols and cues that will allow the new experience to be accessed appropriately in the future.

Using. (Applying—whether in concrete reality or by imagining or hypothesizing.) Projecting ways to use the meanings and feelings. Applying ideas and information in physical reality or in conjectural anticipations of uses and applications.

Valuing. Assessing the worth of the meanings and feelings; discerning their merit in terms of previous habits of thought and decisions about what is good. Altering (strengthening or otherwise changing) one’s values and convictions as a consequence of the worth and merit of the meanings and feelings.

The Processes: Teaching

Contrasted with the complexity of the mental processes associated with learning, the apparent simplicity of the social process of teaching seems welcome. In fact, teaching is not one process but many. It is more than a skill; it is an art. Many teach well even if they have no technical knowledge of the process. By contrast, many who have read widely and well in the scientific literature on the teaching process have difficulty putting their knowledge into the actions of effective teaching. What is the problem?

Teaching requires that a person not only know but feel. Any teaching, even teaching through mediated means such as television or computer programs, involves a human relationship of some sort. The relationship between teacher and learner is both intellectual and emotional. Perhaps it would be better to say that teaching is more dependent on the human relationships within the learning context than upon the intellectual or informational components of the knowledge being taught.

The art of teaching is reflected in a competent teacher’s excellence in balancing the complementary though often conflicting attributes of the teaching task. The teacher, as artist, is constantly working out the right combination of exhorting and complimenting, warning, reassuring and supporting, fulfilled by the teacher’s avoidance of the desire to control or to remake another person in one’s own image. Integrity demands that an artist-teacher should take very seriously the responsibilities of the career. Any marks of insincerity, especially the caricatured frothy, gushy, happy-face manner, are thus displaced by a more thoughtful style marked by realistic judgment calls and underlined by warmth and gentle humor. This sort of sincerity can become warmly appreciated, even eagerly anticipated. Ultimately then it will come to reside in the learner’s own capabilities for self-direction.

Following is a series of the processes of teaching. They are presented here as a sequence, though in practice the various processes occur as needed by the learners’ situations.

Affirming. Nurturing through the warmth of human support; encouraging a positive view of the learner’s prospects.

Encouraging. Urging into initiating thought; taking responsibility, and developing wisdom for appropriate risk-taking.

Guiding. Helping to identify and sort out alternative choices. Helping learners gain access to information and experience needed for self-correction. Alerting learners to identify and overcome weaknesses and counter-productive habits.

Correcting. Showing dissatisfaction with anything less than the learner's best, especially in matters of judgment.

Protecting. Providing a safety net for errors and failures; to soften the blow and to protect from harmful failures.

Informing. Showing, demonstrating, telling the learner; explaining, describing; encouraging the learner to discover for oneself, to find out, to seek out sources.

Structuring. Orienting the whole teaching-learning processes to explicit purposes; setting the pace and determining the agenda of learning.

Launching. Transferring the responsibilities for purpose, pace, agenda, and standards to the learner.

The Social Roles: Learner

Understanding the word “teacher” and its companion word, “learner,” sounds like a simple task. Surely everyone knows what teacher is and what a teacher does, and just as surely everyone knows what a learner is and what a learner does. The teacher teaches. The learner learns. Over-simplified? Indeed, yes. It is not much better to say that the teacher causes learning. Learning, in fact, occurs quite commonly without the benefit of a teacher! Across a lifetime, most learning results from one's encounters with the flow of ordinary experience

In many ways, the social role of the learner is a continuous role for almost everyone. The learner role is a part of the personal development process. One can resist the role, deny the worth of the role, and strive to get oneself out of the role whenever possible, but one of the consequences of being alive is the interaction with ideas and the other results of experience. All of these lead to learning, and in the process they put the person in a variety of positions as a learner. Thus the role is persistent and, in general, inescapable.

The social role of the learner may be lonely or surrounded by colleagues—again, a matter of motivation and choice. Learning can be a solitary experience or an intensely community-oriented experience. Professional opinion and especially educational research in recent years increasingly recognize the value of interactive learning and thus are biased toward valuing and encouraging of communities centered on shared learning experiences.

The Social Roles: Teacher

If the emphasis on the social nature of learning is growing, what then is the importance of the *teacher*? Cleaning up some of the casual thinking about teaching and learning is absolutely necessary for effective educational understanding and planning. To approach this matter logically and critically, consider the following questions. They may serve to deepen your understanding of teaching and learning and the how the two processes relate.

Is the teacher's superior knowledge of what is being taught the key to competency? No one should minimize the importance of a teacher's *cognitive* knowledge and understanding. But equally important are the *affective* matters of warmth, empathy, encouragement, support, stimulus, and judgment.

Does the teacher create the learning? The teacher's “bag of tricks” is not magical. The teacher brings a capability of being pleasant and encouraging. The teacher brings skills of organizing the learning materials so that the learner can more easily comprehend. Not every teacher has conscientiously developed these skills, nor does every teacher recognize their value. The teacher can bring a partnership to the learner so that interaction and reflection can occur. This mutual trust relationship is

the basis of the teacher's value to the learner. But the teacher does not bring learning. Learning must occur within the learner. It is to be built of things to which the learner already has access through experience and within the learner's capacity for comprehension.

Does the learner's capacity to learn limit or determine the teacher's capacity to teach? Surely the capacity of the learner is important. A well-grounded knowledgeable learner will make any teacher look better. But the learner's capacity to learn is always an unknown factor. Therefore the teacher should approach each situation with an open mind. If the teacher assumes that the learner is not competent, perhaps the teacher has heard stories from previous teachers of this person. Thus the learner indeed will not be expected to do well. *Not be expected to do well* usually translates into *not encouraged to do well*, and from there it is all downhill. Now and then an effective and skilled teacher can "get through" even to a person who is not in the habit of learning well, and the teacher gains the reputation of being a "miracle worker."

Misunderstandings about the Teaching-Learning Processes

The field of education suffers from the fact that teaching and learning are such commonplace matters about which everyone knows something. Nuclear physics is much more exotic because few people really understand it. Complicating matters is the fact that there are so many half-truths that have entered into the common lore of teaching and learning. Some of these bits of wisdom are misleading. Others are over-simplifications. And others are dead wrong.

"Teachers teach. Learners learn."

Too simple. It suggests a neat distinction, but it is hardly worth discussing. In many cases it is not even true. As any parent has learned to recognize, children, regardless of age, are learning and teaching all the time. The parent, especially the parent of very young children, is teaching attitudes, behaviors, ways of using language and communicating by using posture and emotional tone. The parent is also learning a keen sense of priorities and at the same time learning how better to teach such things. Children are learning almost constantly; for example: Who is most important? Who is more likely to give me what I want? What can I do to get attention? It doesn't take a teacher to bring about such learnings; the child doesn't need to adopt some sort of special role to become a learner.

"Learners learn because teachers teach."

This claim suggests the importance of the teacher. But the cause-effect assertion it suggests should be checked out. Most of the time learners are learning—with or without teachers. Why are they learning? Learning is a normal human behavior. It is almost as common as breathing. Surely Individuals vary in the extent of their motivation to learn, but even the least interested person will come away from any experience with some sort of accumulation of knowledge and skill. Indeed, it may be useless knowledge, somewhat true at best. But everyone learns, with or without a person showing the way or providing information.

Just as surely, the teacher may relate well to a learner or may alienate the learner. The teacher may be fervently striving to inform, to raise good questions, and to guide the learning process, but in the final analysis the teacher may be contributing nothing to the learner's understanding. Since most competent teachers rarely miss the mark so badly, it can be said that a teacher *usually* teaches. The question about *how* the teacher teaches is still unanswered.

“Teachers learn while they are teaching.”

There is not much wrong with this statement, except that once again the generalization often is not true. While “teaching,” some teachers aren’t learning much more than they would be while spinning a prayer wheel. The very idea that teachers can learn anything from someone younger or less educated is hard for some teachers and some parents to accept. Formal educators who are impressed by the excellence of their own education can be unwilling to consider the “unwashed” student as a teacher. This dichotomized view of teaching and learning sees the educational environment divided into teachers and learners. Such a view usually prevents the teaching experience from being accepted as a source of further learning for the teacher.

It is better to assume that every teaching experience provides learning opportunities, for teachers as well as learners. Although it is likely that now and then an insight into the curricular content will come to the teacher, it is even more likely that any new insights will relate to the teaching task itself. Teachers can improve their own understandings simply by listening closely to learners. Where are their difficulties? What could be done to clear things up? Why is a certain idea so difficult for some? Is there some way to bring the understandings of those who do “get it” into the consciousness of those who do not?

And far more than insights about how to reach difficult learners will come into the consciousness of the teacher. The diversity of learners provides a wealth of viewpoints and connections among ideas. Considering the different ways learners bring ideas into their reflections and experiences provides a deeper understanding of complex content. A competent educator accumulates all of this, sifts through it, and then develops deeper appreciation of the subject matter.

“If teachers don’t teach, learners won’t learn.”

This statement really confuses things because it seems to suggest that teachers can be held responsible for whether or not a learner learns. In some situations, especially when a teacher is irresponsible and incompetent, it will indeed look as if the reason that learners are not learning is incompetency of the teacher. But far more often some learners will learn while others will not, in the same situation, with the same teacher. It is far more likely that what is wrong is the relationship between particular students and the teacher. If the teacher plays favorites, fails to “draw out” certain learners, or fails to help them engage with the learning experiences, indeed the teacher is not teaching and the learners are not learning.

Now for the Good Stuff!

Teaching leads to learning. If teaching is competently done, it will lead to learning far more often than not. Note that *teaching* is far more than *telling*!

Teaching is necessary for learning. Yes, but it does not always require a teacher. The tendency to personalize *teaching* into *the teacher* creates the misunderstanding. Much of what a person learns in life is learned from the experience itself, perhaps assisted by some reading or reflective thought. Teachers are important, but life itself does a rather good job of teaching!

Teachers keep the excitement alive. The human side of the teaching-learning affair is well represented in the teacher who can breathe life into even the duller learning task. This is the point of challenge to

media: can computers and entertainment-style visualizations substitute effectively for the spontaneity and personalized warmth of the human touch of a teacher?

Teachers support, encourage, shape, and guide. Many things in life are learned without a teacher. Teaching may occur *because* of a teacher, *despite* a teacher, or *regardless of whether or not* there is a teacher. Teaching does not always depend on what a teacher does or says. In any given situation, the teacher may or may not be the *cause* of the learning. Teachers encourage, guide, and correct. At their best, teachers provide role models and skill examples. Teachers teach information, skills, habits, models, and values. They usually teach far more than they realize. They generally are teaching an intended curriculum plus an unintended curriculum.

The Intended Curriculum

What do you teach? The best answer is “I teach children (or adults, or teenagers).” But that probably will not satisfy the questioner, who really is asking, “What is the content or the name of the course or program that you teach?” It is generally understood that you cannot teach everything. Some things must get more attention than others. One of the major reasons that a curriculum must be planned is that the choices for inclusion and emphasis are so very important.

The other major value of a well-planned curriculum is the matter of *sequence*. Learning is made easier if the teaching strategy adds ideas upon ideas and principles upon principles in logical order. The organization of knowledge and skills into concepts which contribute most to long-term development depends largely on the way that learning experiences are put into step-upon-step increments.

The Unintended Curriculum

What do you teach? Try this reply: “I teach all sorts of things. Some things I have been assigned to teach but other things just come along in the bargain.” No teacher ever stays exclusively within the intended curriculum. Lots of other things are “slipped in,” and quite often the teacher is unaware of the entirety of this collection of extras or of the judgment that these choices represent. The way a teacher dresses, the moments of humor, the thoroughness of attention to some topics and the skimpy treatment of other matters—all of these tell the learners something about what is important and what is not important.

One of the clearest illustrations of the unintended curriculum is the way certain characters are developed thoroughly and others are barely mentioned. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and Solomon are important. We teach about them explicitly. But although there is a clear biblical basis for giving attention to Barak, Jephthah, and Rahab, we simply choose not to do so. Thus our unintended curriculum tells our learners that these people are less important.

The Learning Community

Learning environments at their best provide situations in which learning can occur in ideal conditions. Although the folklore and traditions about schools and schooling are so very strong, the emerging evidences of the past thirty to fifty years strongly support the following qualities and conditions.

Learning occurs most effectively . . .

- Where learners are encouraged rather than coerced.
- Where the natural motivations of curiosity and exploration are recognized.
- Where a community of peers provides easy opportunities for sharing insights and questions.
- Where a teacher carefully extends and expands the learners' interpretations.
- Where the spirit of cooperation toward discovery and exploration is stronger than the motivation to compete and surpass others.
- Where teaching one another is motivated by a spiritual unity toward eternal values.

Even in Sunday school, with its ill-advised tendency to mimic "schooling," the typical learning situation is called a "class," and the "classroom" is presumed to be where the important learning occurs. If Christian education were to build its images and models of teaching and learning around the biblical examples in the ministry of Jesus Christ and in the teachings of the Bible about the church as a community, a fellowship, and a mutual-support group, effective learning would be much more likely to result.

Where Does the Teaching-Learning Experience Occur?

How teaching and learning are understood has changed substantially since medieval Europe when it was typical for the very few who were educated to be taught in tutorial and one-on-one situations. We are now experiencing a greater respect for peer relationships than for hierarchies and for equality rather than social systems based upon privilege and status.

The past two hundred years have brought about another dramatic transformation, especially with regard to *where* teaching and learning occur. Before educational opportunity became widely available, most of the world relied on basic and rudimentary institutions as the central sources for educational inputs. Thus home and church were particularly important. Whatever was learned in a systematic and formal way was the responsibility of these two institutions.

From these largely traditionally structured educational efforts (limited to reading, writing, religious catechism, and perhaps music and art, especially among the wealthy) grew the institutional forms that by the end of the twentieth century had come to dominate educational thought and practice. As we move into the twenty-first century, schools and schooling continue to dominate and largely control our understanding of education.

The transformation from the unstructured forms to the highly formalized and routinized arose from the reliance on "factories" of teaching and learning, in the styles of the industrial revolution. This mechanical perspective has realigned the language of teaching and learning. The word "education" as commonly used today reflects this mechanical perspective. "Education" is almost always interchangeable with "school" or some other institutional delivery of teaching. In order to make the uses of the term more precise, it helps to differentiate three major modes or types of education, as understood at the beginning of the twenty first century:

1. **Formal Education.** Taking the easiest first, this term identifies the many different forms of organized, planned, budgeted, staffed, and deliberate teaching and learning.

2. **Informal Education.** Perhaps even more common than schooling (formal education) is the wide range of situations and relationships that result in important socialization. Learning one's first language is not the result of deliberate teaching; much more likely, it is a natural process of learning from the surroundings, people, and experiences. Walking, running, singing, understanding and using humor, the multitude of commonplace things that we are not born with but are ready to be used long before we "go to school" are what *informal education* is about.
3. **Nonformal Education.** Every society provides a wide range of deliberate educational services, often free or at minimal cost, in order that the functional knowledge needed for contemporary life is more readily accessible. Swimming, automobile driving, job skills, outdoor and nature education, recreational sports, and religious education identify just a few of the specific educational needs that are met through *nonformal education*. Generally, nonformal education is deliberate, structured, planned, staffed, and in other ways it resembles formal education. But it is rarely linked to the credentialing system of credits, diplomas, and degrees represented in formal education.

Educational Technology—Where Did It Come From?

Teaching has changed because of changes in educational tools. Instructional techniques have moved from sticks of chalk to computers in less than a hundred years. As the twentieth century began, chalkboards were moving from the desks to the walls. Textbooks were becoming well established. Educational media (the term was coined much later) began very simply, mostly with better ways to use chalk and textbooks.

Educational technology from its earliest days was associated with expanding educational opportunities. Few people were in high school, and colleges served an even smaller proportion of the population. Teaching was mostly lecturing. Electronic amplifiers, and after a few years electronic recording, made it possible to dramatically increase the numbers of learners who could hear those lectures.

Education was gradually becoming accessible to the broader society, but schooling was still mostly a privilege for the wealthy. World War I stimulated interest in formal education. The diversity of American society meant that education was needed to enable more people to be able to effectively communicate with each other and to carry out basic computational skills. Many people were rushed into basic education in order to support a modern army.

The beginning of large-scale testing programs can be traced to "Army Alpha." The impact on society of this first use of large-population testing was dramatic. "IQ" became an accepted concept. The idea of differentiating learners by ability and the concept of remediation began as a consequence of the necessities finally recognized in the time of war.

The emphasis on the **technology of teaching** (media) followed twentieth century invention and social acceptance of entertainment and communication devices:

Workbooks. These were structured exercises in one-page or book formats.

Projected pictures. The development of film-based transparencies transformed the old entertainment form of photography, lantern slides, into a significant series of media.

Mechanical duplicators. “Handouts” for testing, exercises, and learning materials akin to workbooks required rapid duplication. Thus emerged the hectograph, the spirit duplicator, mimeograph, offset printer, photocopier, and computer-controlled printers.

Motion pictures. Instructional use of films became more popular after sound was added (technically called sound-on-film) in the 1930’s. When first popularized, the motion picture was assumed to be the twentieth century’s all-purpose teaching device.

Simulation. As a teaching procedure, simulation was popularized by elaborate devices such as the Link Trainer used by the Army Air Corps in 1942 for more safely teaching instrument flight skills. Subsequent development of instructional simulation procedures has opened up the area of *social system simulations* in which learners encounter open-ended problem-solving situations and must discover the nature of the circumstance and the possible solutions. Near-reality devices and situations can confront learners with problems and tasks much like the “real thing.” When simulation of any sort is used, whether role playing, learning games, or social systems, prompt and situational feedback on the consequences of the learner’s decisions, strategies, and skills is important. This prompt and relevant feedback is basic to the learning. Without it, there is very little that justifies the time and cost of these procedures.

Role playing. Not to be confused with planned dramatizations, role playing is a form of simulation. It involves an open-ended discovery experience in which a learner can try out various approaches to decisions about a given problem. In the hands of a competent teacher, operating as a facilitator and leader of debriefing, role playing can be an effective teaching-learning procedure.

Programmed Instruction. A more sophisticated form of workbook, enlightened by the sequencing of learning through controlled presentation and prompt feedback, programmed instruction was promoted by the first wave of the organized educational technologists, largely based on the philosophies of B. F. Skinner.

Computer-based Instruction. This new technology became feasible in the 1960’s as demonstrated in IBM’s pioneering *Coursewriter* software. Early attempts to use the computer as a teaching-and-testing device provided the foundation for the end-of-the-century avalanche of innovations, generally called “computers in education,” which included e-mail protocols for distance learning, data-bases for instructional management, information bases for on-line access by learners, and advanced forms of educational protocols.

The Computer Revolution in Education. The late-century upsurge of inventions, instructional innovations, and significant rethinking of the learning process put the twentieth century well over the top as the period of the most dramatic changes in the history of educational practice.

From Few To Many: Changes In The Sociology Of Twentieth Century Education

As the twentieth century began, the educational scene was very different.

1. Most Americans had access to only about six years of formal schooling.
2. Rural populations were beginning to have access to “union” schools for several more years of schooling at regional centers.
3. Teachers in elementary and secondary schools were mostly women. “Normal Schools” sought to improve the quality of education for young children through providing a standard or norm-setting education (hence *normal* schooling) for primary school teachers. Teaching in the elementary schools was thus brought up to standards or *norms*.
4. Educational resources were racially separated and often unavailable at most levels in many regions of the country.
5. A clear distinction was drawn between the *classical* colleges and universities and the service-oriented *Land-Grant* and *A&M* (agricultural and mechanical) colleges and universities.
6. The fields of professional schooling, even medical education, were only slowly coming to accept the worth of practical experience as part of the educational process.

Marks of Professionality in the Educator

As always, *trustworthy integrity*, *truthfulness*, and *reliability* are basic to professionalism. (It was said of Jesus that he taught “as one having authority.”) Authority of this sort is evident in the educator’s clear command of the material and a comprehensive vision for its importance. Nothing can substitute for thorough preparation, but the educator should not emphasize personal overpowering knowledge and brilliant insight. The example provided by Jesus was that of a mature person whose self-confidence was evident. His claims to greatness depended on the credit he gave to the one who had sent him and whom he represented. The lesson for professional educators is clear. The teacher teaches “with authority” to the extent that proper credit is given to valid sources and to those who have prepared, commissioned, and sent the teacher into the fulfillment of the assigned responsibilities. Nothing is gained from emphasizing one’s own personal importance.

Expanding knowledge of the material being taught. In today’s world, first-hand *applied* experience with the content you are teaching is becoming more important. A truly competent teacher needs to seek out opportunities to put knowledge to work and to develop the skills that go along with the information communicated. Note that *knowledge* is not limited to the “facts and figures” that form the information base. The sort of knowledge that distinguishes a competent educator always shows a moral-ethical and practical side.

What is the information? This question is simply the starting place.

What does it mean? This question will reveal whether or not significant thinking is started.

What can we do with it? Now you can discover if the learner is making use of the information.

Is it important? If so, why? Here is the starting place for helping learners develop judgment.

Open responsiveness to interactions with the learners. Reciprocal teaching-learning is demonstrated in the teacher’s ability to use data from the learner as a part of the teaching experience.

The principles of *responsive listening* provide sound guidance for the effective teacher.

- The primary task is to listen for *what the person means* rather than to become preoccupied with the technicality of what words are being used.
- The responsive listener responds as a mirror, allowing the speaker to know what messages are being received.
- While serving as a sort of thought-mirror, the responsive listener is careful not to “parrot” back the exact statements of the speaker. The responses are never mechanical or thoughtless.
- The responsive listener listens for total thought units, never taking one phrase or part of an idea and pouncing on it as if it were a major message.
- The responsive listener tries not to put ideas or feelings into the speaker’s mouth. Adding intensity or bias other than what has been heard leads easily to manipulation.
- The responsive listener leaves the momentum of the conversation with the speaker. “Pumping” a topic beyond what the speaker has chosen to describe or discuss is another open door to manipulation.
- Throughout the whole conversation, the responsive listener is trying carefully to understand what is being said and to find responsive ways to encourage the development of ideas that the speaker has chosen to develop.
- Open responsiveness is not merely an emotional posture; it is a set of valuable skills which a competent teacher learns to utilize.

Broad acquaintance with **a variety of related knowledge and experience**. Any competent teacher, whether volunteer or salaried, certified or experientially qualified, needs the habits of seeking out learning experiences and becoming more actively acquainted with the real-world contacts that can keep the teacher stretching and growing. This necessity for new learning should not only extend and deepen the knowledge and skills that are central to teaching assignments, but it should increase the teacher’s range and variety of general information and skills.

With a limited number of hours in the day, deliberate decision-making and setting conservative boundaries are important. But extending and broadening are the personal educational tasks second only to those matters that directly feed into the knowledge base for one’s primary teaching assignment. Many of the most competent teachers pursue three tracks of reading and discussion: 1) his or her personal frontier of spiritual and social development, 2) the latest in the knowledge base related to teaching the assigned fields, and 3) the deliberate exploration of disciplines chosen because they are *not* already part of one’s base of knowledge. Through this combination, the teacher’s world of awareness continues to grow and, especially because of the third track, will tend to develop into larger networks of connected knowledge. An alert and creative teacher reads to gain understanding of the specific biblical-theological information underlying current topics and reads to broaden and deepen his or her own spiritual frontiers and involvement with the things of God.

Provide prompt feedback to learners. When any project or assignment has been put on the schedule, pay close attention to the expectations that the learners will have. Has the teacher made the assignment quite clear? Have the learners been reminded and reassured? Has the teacher set aside the time needed to assess the paper or the project promptly after it is due? This habit endears a teacher to the learners. Nothing frustrates and disappoints them more than putting the effort into producing something valuable only to discover that their teacher is not ready to pay prompt attention to it.

Basic Evidences of Competency as a Teacher

The teacher must make time for social and professional **interaction with students**. Teachers do not gain prestige or create a reputation for fairness by remaining aloof and cold. The teacher should be considered to be a member of the learner group. Yes, the teacher has special responsibilities and must behave as a responsible leader and example. But relating effectively with each student, though it will take time and effort, brings a sense of unity and warmth to the learners. The teacher can be intentional about learning from the students, just as students are expected to be intentional about their learning from the teacher.

The teacher must seek out, learn about, and try out **alternative approaches to teaching** for various purposes and different bodies of content. Creativity as a teacher depends largely upon a steady and sure search for better ways to encourage and nurture learning. Predictable repetition is a sure sign of a teacher's incompetency. In today's world, and especially in the consciousness of younger learners, things are changing too fast to allow teachers to stand still. Freshness and creativity go a long way toward keeping learners interested. There are many ways to vary the teaching. For example, a competent teacher can use role-playing, trying to dramatize events or relationships that need to be illustrated.

The competent teacher asks questions that stimulate fresh thinking, not just repetition of facts. "How would you feel if . . . ?" "What could have caused that to happen?" "How does this event (or idea, or fact) relate to what happened before?"

The key to **course improvement** for many competent college teachers is to deliberately trim away at least a fifth of the least effective procedures and material each year and replace them with new and different teaching materials. Considering the rapidly changing and expanding substance of human knowledge, the teacher who does the same things with the same materials year after year is likely to be moving toward becoming outdated and under-educated before age forty! Learners get damaged in this scenario.

A competent teacher will need to give plenty of time and attention to getting and using data for evaluating learners' progress. Teachers should be encouraged to commit themselves to a schedule of **assessment procedures of the time-consuming sort**. Even if the institution requires short-answer tests, the assessment menu can be supplemented with at least a few open-ended test items that will stimulate reasoning and effective communication. Careful evaluation takes time!

Good teachers avoid the tendency to emphasize their superiority to their learners. While the teacher may be larger, older, wiser, and better informed, it is a good idea to avoid making oneself appear to be something special. Gaining the learners' respect and confidence will occur more readily and surely by

demonstrating basic humanity, not power. Emphasizing status, accomplishment, and prestige may isolate the teacher, create suspicion, and thus result in more and more distance from the learners.

Good teachers develop a positive relationship with students. They make an effort to **learn about and identify with the learners' own goals, purposes, and approaches to learning.** Whether the concern is for teaching children, young people, or adults of any age, this suggestion may be the key to competence in handling the teaching-learning process.

Developing the All-Purpose Skill of Storytelling

Within the arts of teaching, nothing is more engaging than effective storytelling. Surely, some people do it better than others; but just as surely, anyone can learn to do it better. Several guidelines are worth considering.

Feel the events of the story. Much of what we read in a Bible story, for example, describes **real events of real people.** Yes, Jesus told some made-up stories (parables) but even in such cases he showed a careful concern for reality.

Understand these matters to become a better teller of stories:

1. Real people have real feelings (emotions), not just disembodied information systems called brains. Thus thinking always occurs within some combination of emotional colorations.

2. Various people's reactions and feelings about a certain situation are reasonably similar. Few differences occur simply because of the passage of time. Thus the disciples' reactions to the declaration of Jesus that "one of you will betray me" must have produced the same sort of shock, dismay, and suspicion among the disciples in Jesus' time that it would cause in such a situation in our times.

To Gain Skill in "Telling the Story." Learn to find the central purposes in any basic story. Telling Bible stories gives excellent practice and appropriate illustrations of this skill. The entertainment value is secondary to the purpose revealed in the content. Imagine the reality of the story by personalizing it. Adopt the voice and the "lines" of one or more characters in the story. How does it feel to be there?

Learn to tell the story simply and clearly. Make it your own experience as you tell it. For example, in the central story of John 4, one apparent conclusion is that the Samaritan woman of Sychar became the first large-scale community evangelist. Discover and draw out the emotions and feelings of the situations described.

Learn to interpret a story well. This ability depends on being able to relate faithfully to both the information and the feelings.

The Basis for a New Century of Educational Innovation

At the risk of sounding regressive, we must be aware that the beginning of the twenty-first century is based upon the experiences and innovations of the dramatically innovative twentieth century. Consider the following realities of our time that were unthinkable a hundred years ago:

Substantial expansion of educational opportunity to all. Almost everyone in this country—and in most of the world—has the opportunity for formal education. How long a person stays in school is

well over double what it was before World War II. Dealing with racial and gender bias as well as changed policies of access to higher education have substantially widened the doors.

Expansion of opportunities for higher education resulted from the *GI Bill* after World War II. Thus began the most significant change in higher education in our time: expanded access. No longer is there prejudice against older students. Curricular diversity, open enrollment, and “part-time” enrollment status have increased access.

New forms of teaching situations and experiences resulted from a combination of factors leading up to and following mid-century. Resulting from the increase in educational research, the importance of applied learning within the academic curriculum has been generally accepted. Professional fields, especially through their accrediting associations, have brought pressure to bear on institutions which over-balance their degree programs with theoretical emphasis. The expansion of knowledge has demanded a more judicious and thoughtful curricular planning process. Thus field experience and internship, as well as in-service continuing education, have become more widely recognized as valid concerns of the institution.

The **explosion of knowledge** and its long-term implications for the sustaining value of higher education have stimulated the demand for post-baccalaureate degrees and continuing education. The twenty first century promises to bring strong demand for formal education although not just for the ordinary forms of school and college. By the end of the century, most of the institutions that are locked into nineteenth and twentieth century practices will be gone, replaced by new models of instructional delivery and new standards of effectiveness in learning.

The **higher expectations of more experienced students** have forced institutions to give more attention to the quality of instruction and to the relevancy of curricular content. Already the corner is being turned. Educators are taking a fresh look at ways to intensify the relationship between things theoretical and things practical. Teaching and learning will continue to move closer together in the years ahead.

But then, everyone knows what teaching is and what learning is. What’s new? This sort of oversimplification would say that everyone knows what “darkness” is and what “light” is. And since everyone “knows” about these things there is nothing more to be understood. Oh, really? Have you tried lately to explain “light?”