

Querétaro, Mexico: Pedagogy – IAPCHE-FEP Presentation

A. Introduction:

First, I thank the organizers for the invitation to make a presentation at this conference. I consider it a privilege and honor to be with my Latin American sisters and brothers here in this beautiful part of Mexico.

Second, I bring you greetings from my colleagues at Alta Vista. Alta Vista is an educational service organization based in Seattle, in the far northwest corner of the United States. Pedagogy is very much on our agenda. So I am pleased to have an opportunity to share with you, in an exploratory manner, some tentative remarks about this very important topic.

In accordance with the intentions of the program, my talk today is addressed primarily to Christian professors and teachers in universities, seminaries, colleges, and secondary schools.

I begin by reporting a puzzling reality: For many years pedagogy has been a neglected topic in both secular and Christian universities. Professors typically restricted their interests to specialized research in esoteric topics, to be published in journals or books that nobody reads. Well, almost nobody. My own doctoral dissertation was in medieval philosophy and some of my subsequent journal articles were patently esoteric, and read, I fear, by only a very few people at best.

The preoccupation with specialized, publishable research fueled the widespread assumption that teaching is automatically effective when the professor is an expert in his or her field. In fact, it was assumed that the more the professors know about a subject, the better they can teach it. Those of us who have studied in graduate schools know that this claim is plainly false. Personally, I have sat at the feet of several world renowned scholars from whom I learned practically nothing. They knew a lot, but didn't know how to teach.

A shift occurred in the early 90's. The famous Boyers report argued that teaching practice itself should become a legitimate field of investigation. Many universities accepted this proposal and allowed professors to

obtain tenure by studying their own teaching methods and their effectiveness.

Christian higher education, generally speaking, has not followed suit. There is very little high-level Christian research into educational topics like pedagogy, curriculum, and learning theory. For example, in the last 50 years of publication of the Christian academic journal *Philosophia Reformata*, which covers pretty well all disciplines, I could find only two articles specifically devoted to pedagogical issues. To be fair, I must add that here and there I see encouraging signs that the picture is changing.

B. Pedagogy: What is it? Unpacking the concept.

There is much confusion and controversy about what pedagogy is and about what it includes and excludes. Literally, the original Greek term means “leading the child” (from *pais*, *paidos* and *ago*). Pedagogy, then, has to do with educating students. In certain countries, e.g., in South Africa and in a number of places in Europe, the preferred term is “didactics.” This term is derived from *didasko*, the Greek word for teaching, and hence is more precise. So when we talk about pedagogy, what are we talking about?

In the current literature pedagogy exhibits a wide range of meanings. On the one extreme, the concept includes not only teaching, but also how students learn, curricular content to be taught, educational psychology, classroom management, and evaluation of student learning. At the other extreme, pedagogy is limited to a narrow focus on technical teaching methods. Different definitions obviously lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding.

In order to understand pedagogy we must back up to a larger context and describe four interrelated areas, beginning with a broad picture and moving to a more specific focus, moving from worldview through philosophical reflections to pedagogy.

C. The larger context: Four areas

1. **Worldview:** The first and most fundamental of these areas is the worldview. As the term suggests, worldview is shorthand for the

perspective on how we see and interpret the world, including who we believe God is, how the world is put together, who we are as humans, and what we are supposed to be doing and not doing. Worldviews are composed of beliefs, assumptions, and commitments, often unarticulated. Worldviews control and direct how we understand and order our lives. They determine our priorities and what we value. Suicide bombers, for example, may appear to be crazy, but actually commit their evil deeds in an obedient response to their worldview.

In Christian educational circles, two diverging worldviews are readily identified. One is a dualistic worldview, which draws a line of separation between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious. From this point of view, our Christian faith is boxed in and has little to do with pedagogy, curricular subject areas, and university-level research. Teaching practice and much of what we teach, the dualists say, comprise a neutral, technical sort of thing, the same for Christians and non-Christians alike. The other worldview is one that I and the IAPCHE membership endorse: Jesus is Lord of all. "All" means literally everything, *todas las cosas* -- Greek *ta panta* -- including my pedagogy, my teaching of subjects like math and science, and the way I organize my classroom. Just as the forces of sin and distortion touch the entire creation, so the Gospel of redemption and restoration speaks to every area of life, to every aspect of education, and to every part of pedagogy, nothing excluded. Christ died on the cross, according to Colossians 1, to reconcile all things – *ta panta* -- to God the Father. So, brothers and sisters, ask yourselves: Are you willing to address the difficult question of how to bring Christ's redemption into your pedagogy? Are you willing to join me – and the IAPCHE membership – in urging that we, Christian teachers and professors, must do our utmost to combat and eliminate dualism, and to make every thought captive to the Lord?

2. General philosophy: When we reflect on our worldview and articulate our basic beliefs, we enter the realm of general philosophy. Philosophy analyzes, more or less, what we see and believe, a procedure that often leads to systems of philosophy. Through such reflection we begin to distinguish domains (sometimes called "spheres") in the world: a realm of politics and government, of economics, family life, the church, art, science, medicine, education, and others. General philosophy tries to understand, in a more or less systematic way, how these areas hang

together. It provides an overarching framework, allowing us to see how the parts fit into a whole. Sometimes, in common parlance, worldview and general philosophy are interchanged, as, e.g., when we speak of a “general philosophy of life.” In essence, however, even though they are closely intertwined, worldviews are primarily pre-analytic, while general philosophy tends to be analytic and reflective.

3 . Philosophy of education: When we focus on any of these specific, delineated domains or spheres, we soon encounter questions. What characterizes this or that domain? Why, for example, is the family not simply a business enterprise? What are the fundamental principles, patterns, and practices operative in the various spheres? Might there be a will of God – divine normativity, we might say -- for each one of the many domains? In Romans 12 the Apostle Paul commands us not to conform any longer to the patterns of this world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. What does this mean for education? For university teaching? In short, when we reflect on and analyze our perspective on a given domain, we are busy developing a philosophy of that domain. Take science as an example. What is science? What does it study? My son is a science professor at a large secular state university. In his department he encounters diverse conceptions of what science is, what it studies, how research in this area proceeds, and what the professors should be doing. These are all questions that constitute a philosophy of science. Curiously and sadly, careful philosophical reflection in this area tends to suffer.

In the same way we can speak of a variety of specialized philosophies. Some examples: philosophy of mathematics (which asks questions such as “Is math invented or discovered?” “Are numbers real or only mental concepts?”), philosophy of art (providing the underpinnings for the study of aesthetics), economic and political philosophy (regularly prompting emotional debate), philosophy of medicine (often referred to as “medical ethics”), and, yes, philosophy of education. These specialized philosophies always develop in the context of a more encompassing general philosophy, which, in turn, is driven and guided by prior worldviews.

Our concern today is one of these many domains: philosophy of education. Philosophy of education is an indispensable link between

worldview and pedagogy. If we jump from worldview directly to pedagogy, we remain unaware of the non-Christian spirits that creep, like hidden invaders, into our educational practice. We then easily fall victim to unrecognized secular philosophies. I can testify to this reality. For example, I have observed teachers and schools blessed with an entirely acceptable worldview but engaged in questionable teaching practices. I know of Christian schools whose vision is right on target, yet uncritically use curriculum material that actually contradicts their stated mission. Ignoring philosophy of education easily creates the very dualism we are so eager to combat.

What are the components of an adequate philosophy of education? In my work of training teachers in many places -- I've been privileged to work with teachers in more than 20 different countries -- I have found it helpful to distinguish the following six components. The first five form the basis for the sixth. I put the components in the form of questions. I believe that every Christian professor and teacher must be able to give thoughtful answers to these questions.

- i. What is a school or university or seminary (i.e., the place where formal education takes place)? How is it to be distinguished from church, the home, state, and the business enterprise? Is it a part of the church? The answers to these questions will address important issues of governance, authority relations, and leadership (whether in or out of the classroom). E.g., when a school functions as a part of a church, the pastor will likely have overarching authority.
- ii. What is the purpose of the school, university, or seminary? Is there any connection between the purpose of education and the biblical command to love and serve one another and to do all things to the glory of God? Or do we restrict, in dualistic fashion, such biblical talk to our life in the church and keep it out of our classrooms?
- iii. What is our view of children and students? Animals to be tamed? Flowers that bloom? Empty vessels? Important questions of anthropology emerge. E.g., what does it mean to see the image of God in your students? Here especially philosophy of education is

critical. I have observed, for example, classroom disciplinary practices that flatly contradict much of what we claim to be essential to our worldview.

- iv. What do we mean by curriculum? How is it constructed? What kind of knowledge does the curriculum produce? Purely factual, objective, often irrelevant information? And why do we fragment the curriculum into separate subjects? What might be some other options? Finally, very important, what is a Christian perspective on subject matter? How does a Christian professor see math, science, history, art, and even theology differently from the way an atheist or Muslim would see it?
- v. What learning theory do we espouse? In fact, how do we think students learn? What are the philosophies influencing research on how the brain works and on how students process information? Often professors have no idea.

These first five components of a philosophy of education can be considered as “pre-pedagogical.” That is, the questions in these components must be answered before we can move fruitfully into the final and, for our purposes today, the central component: pedagogy, the last of the four contextual areas. To recap: We have moved from worldview through general philosophy to a philosophy of education. We are now finally at the point where we can consider what ultimately my talk is all about.

4. Pedagogy: I understand pedagogy to refer to the instructional (teaching) process, to be carefully planned and reflectively executed. The process itself consists of three interwoven dimensions: by way of (a) unfolding and disclosing curricular content the Christian teacher (b) guides the students and (c) equips them for knowledgeable and competent discipleship. Pedagogy depicts a journey: teacher and students travel together through a curricular terrain, headed for a destination. The teacher is the guide. In the classroom the guiding function is expressed through modeling, exercising appropriate discipline, encouragement, and building trust relationships. The destination of the journey represents the purpose of Christian teaching: to prepare for “works of service,” a Paul puts it in Ephesians 4.

Equipping for servanthood and discipleship is the ultimate goal of all Christian teaching, no matter at what level or in what area.

Guiding, unfolding and equipping requires planning, for a good teacher does not walk into the classroom, mumbling to himself “Let’s see now, what can I teach today?” Some teachers, I’m sure, do that, but in so doing show themselves to be pragmatic and unreflective practitioners.

Pedagogical planning comprises six elements, perhaps identifiable as the whom, what, why, where, how and who of teaching. As I go through these, think about one of your recent class sessions, or picture yourself in the class you will teach next week. Ask yourself what role these elements play in your teaching.

- i. The “whom” of teaching, i.e., the students. I have already referred to the anthropological questions and to the way we see our students. Some key assumptions are the following: All students are gifted, and all of them have needs. They do not all learn in the same way, hence as their teacher I will need to vary my teaching styles and methods. Some of my students will require more attention than others. In order to make appropriate pedagogical decisions, I must make every effort to get to know my students as persons.
- ii. The “what” of teaching. I mean here the content and skills to be taught. The “what” of teaching presupposes and requires answers to the curriculum questions I posed above. But more is needed. I mention several points. First, pedagogy requires ability to design “pedagogical content knowledge” (Shulman’s term), that is, arranging and organizing content so that it becomes accessible to students. Teaching is not simply transferring information. Second, the “what” element of pedagogy requires ability to relate content to other subject areas. Third, we must be able to convey a distinctly Christian perspective. The important question: How will I, as a Christian professor, teach this or that subject in a distinctively Christian way? If we claim that Jesus is Lord of all, how is He Lord of math, science, historical studies, theology, and all subjects in the curriculum? Fourth, what exactly do we want our students

to learn from our teaching and how will we assess/evaluate the extent to which the students have indeed learned it? And finally, what resources do we select (textbooks, technology, etc.), and what criteria will we use to make good choices?

- iii. The “why” of teaching. Critical questions confront us. Why are you teaching what you are teaching? Are you teaching the lessons largely in order to meet institutional or government requirements? Or what? How will what you teach make a Christian difference in the lives of your students? If what you teach makes no difference, are you and your students not wasting an immense amount of valuable time?

- iv. The “where” of teaching. How will you create a space for learning? How will you organize your classroom? Classrooms can be arranged in different ways. For example, they can be structured in individualistic or competitive ways, usually by placing students in straight rows, with desks separate. Students in such classrooms are urged to compete with each other, to see who can be the best. But classrooms can also be organized in collaborative ways, where students are encouraged to work together, help each other succeed, bear each other’s burdens and share each other’s joys, where everyone can be his or her best. In such collaborative classrooms we see the body of Christ come to expression. Such classrooms respond to our calling to be a mutually serving community. Establishing a collaborative classroom requires getting to know your students, identifying their gifts and needs, building trust relationships, and guiding them on the journey. For further details and numerous suggestions, see my book *The Craft of Christian Teaching: A Classroom Journey* – in Spanish: *El Arte de Enseñar Cristianamente*.

- v. The “how” of teaching. The pedagogical “how” brings us to the selection of teaching strategies, in some ways to be considered as the heart of pedagogy. Time limitations prevent me from adequately addressing this very large topic. Just one point: Teaching methods fall into three broad categories: (a) direct (such as lecturing), (b) indirect (such as discovery learning,

stories and parables), and (c) participatory (such as cooperative learning strategies). Research shows that students, when actively involved, learn better, retain information longer, and do better on exams. Over the course of a semester or term, no strategy should be used more than 60% of the total class time available. Check your teaching practice! Do you lecture all the time? Remember, after they have taken dutiful notes and passed an exam, most students quickly forget the content of your lectures. If your teaching is limited to mostly one of the three categories, consider branching out. Your effectiveness will improve dramatically.

- vi. The “who” of teaching, possibly the most important of all. I am now speaking of you as a teacher or as a professor. What gifts, needs, and weaknesses do you bring into your classroom? Do you display enthusiasm, delight, and curiosity? Do you model the fruit of the Spirit? Do you love and care for your students? Do you see yourself as their servant rather than as their taskmaster? What is your “comfort zone”? Are you willing to receive input about your teaching from the students? Answering these questions requires critical self-evaluation and a willingness to lower defensive barriers, a process best done in community.

D. Concluding remarks:

I make three concluding points:

1. A Christian teacher education or professional training program must include every point made thus far in this presentation. A clearly articulated philosophy of education is absolutely essential. But there are additional factors to be considered. Teachers must be familiar not only with the issues internal to the school (leadership, curricular coherence, staff development, and the like), but also with external factors: society, culture, history, legal issues, and the like. And, of course, pedagogical development should always remain high on our agenda. For this reason I strongly endorse the IAPCHE-sponsored ProEd programs, such as the one in which we are participating as I speak.

2. Back to research: In Christian circles there has been a good deal of research expended on philosophy of education and curriculum, but not nearly enough investigation into the assumptions underlying current models of learning styles, multiple intelligences, and similar (generally useful) theories. As affirmed when we started out, very little attention has been paid to pedagogy and philosophy of pedagogy. Look, for example, at the three categories of teaching strategies I suggested: direct, indirect, and participatory. Direct instruction, such as lecturing, has been influenced by intellectualism, especially positivism, a philosophy which tells us that true knowledge is factual, observable, and verifiable. Much direct instruction, consequently, has focused on factual cognitive learning, to the exclusion of social and emotional aspects, creativity, and active student participation in their learning. Indirect instruction has been influenced by narrative and hermeneutical approaches. Participatory instruction has been affected by postmodern constructivism. The Bible itself seems to give conflicting messages on how to teach: The Old Testament favors direct instruction (“tell the children of Israel and imprint”), while Jesus appears given to indirect instruction (by telling parables that the students themselves need to interpret). Clearly, much work awaits the Christian pedagogical research community.
3. All of the above does not mean we have to start from scratch. Much good has been handed down to us, and there is plenty of fine, effective teaching in plenty of places. It does mean, however, that we never tire of reflection, of examining ourselves, our understanding of pedagogy, and the ways we seek to bring it into practice.

May the Lord bless you as you seek to do his will in your classrooms.

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IAPCHE ProEd Program -- Querétaro, Mexico

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