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Approaches to teaching

It is a weekday morning and a group of students in a local secondary school are in a foreign language lesson. Today they are practising the use of adjectives to describe people. The activity is taken from a manual of teaching techniques by Gertrude Moskowitz.¹ The teacher explains that often we feel shy of talking about all of our fine qualities, because others may think we are boasting. There are, however, occasions when we can legitimately praise ourselves. Each student is asked to imagine that he or she is going to give a speech before a group of people. The stranger who is to chair the event would like the speaker to draft a glowingly positive self-description which can be used for the introduction. Students are told that “they don’t have to be modest but should point out all of the terrific things about themselves and be honest”.² The

¹ Moskowitz, 1978.

² Moskowitz, 1978:82.

prepared introductions are brought to class, exchanged and read aloud.

Just down the road, students in a second classroom are also learning a foreign language, and are studying the very same parts of speech. They are working from a textbook called *Charis Deutsch*.³ Their teacher presents on an overhead transparency various adjectives which could be used to describe character – honest, determined, foolish, serious etc. They practise these words in various ways and then are given a paper copy of the transparency. They are asked to draw a circle round words which they have heard others use to describe them, a rectangle round those which they would use to describe themselves, and a triangle round any which represent future aspirations. Once the vocabulary has been sorted, students are given the outline of a poem into which they can insert their words: “Other people say, ‘You’re ...’”, and so on. Finally, they read *Wer bin ich?*, a poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor imprisoned in Germany during World War 2. In the poem Bonhoeffer describes the discrepancy between others’ praise of his courage and calm and his own inner sense of distress and exhaustion. He finally leaves the question of who he really is in God’s hands.

Beliefs in the classroom

These two classrooms illustrate Anthony’s point, discussed in chapter 4, that different designs for learning are shaped by different approaches, with their different networks of belief. In both of these classrooms students are being offered particular models or scripts for their speaking in the new language. Each model is shaped by particular beliefs about human nature. Gertrude Moskowitz, the author of the first activity, emphasises that learners should focus only on their positive qualities, and that dwelling on the negative or adopting an attitude of self-denial are unacceptable.⁴ The purpose of learning is for learners to explore their own selves and discover their inner goodness.⁵ This particular activity (titled “Me Power”) aims to achieve this by asking them to see themselves through the eyes of enthusiastic public praise.

³ Baker et al., 1998.

⁴ Moskowitz, 1978:2.

⁵ Cf. Moskowitz, 1982; Stevick, 1990.

The poem used in the second classroom is explicitly suspicious of such praise, and encourages learners to dwell on the discrepancies between what others say about them and their own experience of weakness and struggle. Its roots in Christian spirituality show through in its emphasis on self-examination, humility and our inability to understand ourselves clearly on our own. The activity is drawn from a Christian curriculum project designed to promote moral and spiritual development across the curriculum.⁶

The ways in which learning activities have been designed in the two classrooms show the influence of contrasting approaches informed by particular beliefs. It would, however, be too strong to say that the activities are logically required by those beliefs. Christian belief may imply that education should foster humility and self-examination, but it does not say exactly how this should be done, let alone prescribe the use of a poem by Bonhoeffer in a foreign language lesson. The same loose relationship holds between humanistic belief in human goodness and potential and the activities designed by Moskowitz. In each case a discernible approach has shaped the educational design, but not in a tightly deterministic manner. This chapter will explore some attempts to describe in more detail how this loose relationship between conviction and practice works. We will look first at some attempts to describe the role of beliefs in teaching, then at the creativity involved in applying beliefs, and finally at the tendency of beliefs to form connected patterns.

What's in an approach?

If we think of an approach as the whole collection of beliefs and assumptions which influence the teacher's designs for learning, then clearly an approach will include a variety of things. It will not only contain consciously held and articulated beliefs, but also a range of assumptions, often unconscious and simply taken for granted, drawn from past educational experience, cultural conditioning or the spirit of the age. In later chapters we will argue that it will also include images, narratives and models. For the present, however, we are interested in

⁶ The Charis Project. See www.stapleford-centre.org; Shortt, 2000; Smith, 1999.

the role of beliefs expressed propositionally as claims about reality.

Even if we narrow the focus to such beliefs, it would be mistaken to assume that they will all be of the same kind as Christian beliefs. A teacher may believe that trying to do discussion work last thing on a Friday is a waste of time, or that it is rude for students to speak without first raising a hand. Such beliefs, arising from experience or from institutional and cultural expectations, do not have the same scope and gravity as belief in the Trinity. What role might religious convictions play in this diverse mix of beliefs?

Nicholas Wolterstorff points out that while our thinking is influenced by various kinds of belief, that influence works at different levels. He distinguishes three roles which belief plays in our thinking in any given area.⁷ First, we have a collection of beliefs about the world which we simply accept as relevant information. An example might be a teacher's belief that children prefer books with colour pictures to those without. We all have a large and varied collection of such beliefs about what is the case which we simply take as data to inform our thinking. Second, these are underpinned by what Wolterstorff terms "data-background beliefs".⁸ These are beliefs which are a precondition of our accepting other beliefs as data. In the case of the teacher's belief about picture books, a connected data background belief might be the belief that the children observed by that teacher over the years are typical of children in general, or the belief that what the teacher has interpreted as signs of enjoyment were real and not feigned to win the teacher's approval. Such beliefs provide the context within which the belief that children prefer colour pictures is accepted as true.

The third role which Wolterstorff describes is the most important for our present discussion. When we try to think coherently about the

⁷ Wolterstorff, 1984, 1989, 1999. It is important to note that Wolterstorff is not claiming that particular beliefs always fulfil particular roles. A certain belief may on one occasion simply be taken as data, on another occasion it may function as a data-background belief, on a third occasion it may play a guiding role as a control belief, and on yet another occasion it may be that which we are submitting to critical scrutiny in the light of other beliefs (Wolterstorff, 1984:69). In other words, the fact that certain of our beliefs serve at various times as control beliefs does not mean that they cannot be subjected to critical examination on other occasions.

⁸ Wolterstorff, 1984:67.

world – or, more specifically, about what goes on in our classrooms – we face the task of trying to bring all of the information at our disposal into some kind of meaningful order. We typically find that there are a range of competing theories and viewpoints bidding for our allegiance, and we must weigh different possibilities. This is where some of our beliefs can come to play a guiding role, functioning, in Wolterstorff's terms, as "control beliefs". Control beliefs lead us to regard certain kinds of theory as acceptable or unacceptable. They may lead us to reject certain theories because they are in conflict with beliefs which play a guiding role in our thinking. Conversely, they may lead us to try to devise new theories which harmonise with them more successfully.

Take, for instance, beliefs about human nature, which have both varied widely and influenced education significantly. Are learners primarily intellectual beings or primarily emotional beings or neither? Are they complex biological machines who will respond predictably to the correct technology of teaching or spirited beings swayed by good and evil? Are they environmentally determined or individually responsible? Are they basically good, basically bad or some kind of mixture of the two? Is the ideal for the learner to achieve maximum autonomy, bowing to no outside authority, or is he or she fundamentally responsible to overarching truths and standards? Do we best find fulfilment in work, wealth, thinking or something else? Clearly, becoming committed to particular views here is likely to make certain approaches to teaching plausible or implausible. We have seen beliefs about human nature and human growth playing a guiding role in the examples described at the start of this chapter. Given that the nature of human persons is a matter about which the Bible and biblical theology have had much to say, this would seem to be one area where Christian belief will affect educational choices. Moreover, it is not the only area; other areas where Christian belief can play a guiding role include beliefs about morality, personal relationships, truth and meaning, the purpose of learning, the meaning of work, and so on.⁹

Talk of control beliefs can give rise to the mistaken impression that they tightly determine the thinking of those who hold them. This is not what Wolterstorff intends – they exert a guiding influence, but do not do all the work. Wolterstorff states that:

⁹ Marsden, 1997.

theories are not already there in the belief-content, just waiting to be extracted...For the most part the Christian scholar has to obtain his theories by using the same capacities of imagination that scholars in general use... the Bible cannot function as a black book of theories for the Christian scholar.¹⁰

Basic beliefs, including Christian beliefs drawn from the Bible, can and do influence our thinking about an activity such as education, but they will do so by providing direction rather than by showing us exactly what to do.

How beliefs constrain practice

If control beliefs do not provide us with a set of guaranteed deductions, how else do they constrain our designs? In an article responding to Hirst's criticisms of the idea of Christian education, R. T. Allen suggests that there are three other possible relationships between belief and practice which are more frequently applicable than a relationship of strict requirement.¹¹ Christianity, he points out, is not a detailed cultural code in the manner of Islam – it does not prescribe a detailed way of life, but rather allows believers of various cultures to differ in many details of their day to day living. We should therefore, Allen argues, not expect Christianity to entail a single set of detailed prescriptions for education, but should look for other relationships between belief and practice.

The first of these is *debarment*: a given Christian belief may disallow certain views or practices without necessarily specifying in detail what is to take their place. We saw an example of this in the last chapter in Plantinga's argument that Christian belief makes Simon's theory of altruistic behaviour (and, we might add, an approach to teaching based upon it) unacceptable. Allen offers the example of

¹⁰ Wolterstorff, 1984:77-78. The term 'control' seems to be intended somewhat in the sense it has in the context of a scientific experiment, when a 'control' experiment provides a check on the results of the investigation.

¹¹ Allen, 1993; cf. Keller, 1989.

teaching the practice of astrology, which is included in some Indian curricula but would be excluded from a Christian curriculum.

The second relationship is *permission*: certain views of practices may be neither required nor debarred by Christian belief, but rather allowed. Teaching chess, arranging the desks in particular ways, asking students to work in pairs, or using videos would all, along with many other details of the school day, seem to fall under this heading.

The third relationship falls somewhere between requirement and permission. Allen calls it *commendation*: Christian belief requires that some of a set of practices be adopted, but does not specify exactly which ones should be chosen. Allen suggests that the Bible's affirmation of human bodily existence, as opposed to a gnostic rejection of the body, should lead us to expect schools to offer some form of physical education. The Bible does not, however, tell us whether to teach football, tennis or aerobics. A certain field of endeavour is commended to us, and within that field we are left to make wise choices in particular contexts. The New Testament injunction to think upon whatever is true, honest, just, pure, lovely or of good report seems to be a further example of commendation in something like Allen's sense.¹²

Allen thus widens the range of possible relationships between statements of Christian belief and educational practices beyond straightforward requirement. Like Wolterstorff, he allows for a looser pattern of relationships, but he also identifies some of the forms which these relationships can take. Christian belief does still play a role but it is one with fewer requirements and many permissions and commendations, a role comparable to that of a filter which lets clean fuel through into the engine while keeping out the dirt.¹³

Allen's filter image certainly loosens the deductive straitjacket which Hirst found so implausible. It is, however, in danger of suggesting that biblical beliefs are only relevant after the event. If Christian belief is a filter, not a pump, then it does not sound as if it actually contributes anything substantive; it simply allows good contributions from other sources to pass through unhindered and blocks that which is impure. Allen goes as far as to suggest that the filter will operate largely invisibly, and that a Christian curriculum and a "sensible secular curriculum" will "largely coincide". We do not gain any light on

¹² Philippians 4:8.

¹³ Allen, 1993:19.

Wolterstorff's suggestion that our guiding beliefs may lead us to actively design theories or practices in certain ways.¹⁴

Building or digging?

Another approach to understanding the role of belief in relation to practice is to think in terms of examining existing practice and trying to uncover its *presuppositions*, its underlying assumptions.¹⁵ This reverses the direction of inquiry. Instead of building up from premises to conclusions, it is more like the activity of an archaeologist, digging from the surface remains of an old building down to its foundations in search of its original floorplan.¹⁶ We might, for instance, look at a behaviouristic model of teaching with its emphasis on drill and habit formation. We might then identify and question its underlying assumption that learning is largely a matter of modifying outward behaviour by applying the right stimuli. Once such underlying assumptions are laid bare, their compatibility with Christian belief (for instance, the Christian belief that the 'heart', the person's spiritual centre, is the wellspring of behaviour) can be assessed.

Now note that this process is not straightforwardly reversible. Take a simple example. If you know that I have some German novels on my bookshelf, you also know that I have books on my bookshelf – the presence of some German novels presupposes (necessarily assumes) the presence of some books. But the reverse is not true – knowing that there are some books present is not enough to tell you whether any of them will be German or whether they will be novels. The inference only works in one direction.

The same appears to be true concerning the role of basic commitments and assumptions. Even where we cannot make deductions from a set of beliefs to a single necessary set of practices, we can work in the opposite direction. We can explore particular educational practices or theories and trace our way back to the underlying beliefs and assumptions which they seem to imply. We may eventually be able to see clearly how these beliefs and assumptions have played a shaping

¹⁴ See further Smith, 1995; Thiessen, 1997; Velten, 1995.

¹⁵ See e.g. Clouser, 1991.

¹⁶ Cf. Burrell, 1979.

role, and then begin to explore what changes might result if we started from different underlying beliefs. The Christian educator's task is on this account not simply one of starting with beliefs and working out their consequences, but rather a process of examining practices, uncovering assumptions, weighing them, and if necessary designing alternatives.

From logic to Shakespeare

This to and fro between belief and practice points us towards the significance of the middle layer in Anthony's model, the *design* of a stretch of teaching. In some cases we may be able to identify formal, logical relationships between statements of biblical belief and educational propositions. However, when beliefs inform a creative process of designing learning experiences, their role is often less formal and more supple and responsive to experience.

N. T. Wright has suggested an image which vividly captures this more creative role of belief.¹⁷ He suggests that we understand the authority of the Bible in the light of the following analogy. Imagine, he suggests, that we had discovered a long-lost Shakespeare play, but that the manuscript was incomplete, containing only the first four acts. We want to stage the play, but feel that it would be inappropriate to write a fifth act once and for all, for that would be too presumptuous. Instead, we decide to give the play as it stands to a group of highly trained Shakespearean actors. Their task is to immerse themselves in the first four acts and then improvise a fifth act. This, Wright suggests, is a helpful picture for our attempts to live now in the light of the Bible.

On the one hand, the first four acts do not provide the actors with a detailed set of instructions for their final act. As Wright puts it, "the initial task of the actors ... will be to immerse themselves with full sympathy in the first four acts, but not merely so as to parrot what has already been said. They cannot go back and look up the right answers. Nor can they simply imitate the kinds of things that their particular character did in the early acts. A good fifth act will show a proper final

¹⁷ Wright, 1991; Wright, 1992; see also Walsh, 1996. The analogy, like all analogies, is of course imperfect. It includes, for instance, no parallel to the role of the Holy Spirit in relationship to Scripture.

development, not merely a repetition, of what went before.”¹⁸ The actors must take responsibility for their final act; the work is not all done for them in advance, and there is more than one possible outcome which could prove successful and satisfying.

On the other hand, the actors are not without guidance. The existing acts set constraints upon the improvisation and provide impulses in certain directions. Wright points out that “anyone could properly object to the new improvisation on the grounds that this or that character was now behaving inconsistently, or that this or that sub-plot or theme, adumbrated earlier, had not reached its proper resolution”.¹⁹ In other words, the more formal constraints discussed earlier still play their role, and creativity does not remove the need for consistency and careful thinking. In terms of our model of teaching, an approach constrains and guides but does not forestall the creative design work needed if good teaching is to result.

From atoms to patterns

A final point which should be noted is that starting from Anthony’s three-layer model frees us from the idea that we must be searching for correlations between individual beliefs and individual practices in order to somehow end up with a set of Christian techniques. What we should be looking at instead is wider patterns of meaning.

This is true at both ends of the belief-practice relationship. When we engage in the kind of creative design work described by Wright we do not typically apply our beliefs one by one. Instead we come with a complex pattern of beliefs.²⁰ Many writers have come to talk about this broader web of beliefs as a worldview, a more or less coherent way of seeing and understanding the world.²¹ Our worldview provides us

¹⁸ Wright, 1992:141.

¹⁹ Wright, 1991:18-19.

²⁰ Cf. Quine & Ullian, 1970; Quine, 1963; Thiessen, 1990.

²¹ The term is not without its problems, and not everyone who is convinced of the influence of Christian belief in our theoretical thinking is ready to describe that influence in the language of worldviews (see e.g. Wolterstorff, 1989). Sometimes the term ‘worldview’ is used to refer to a circumscribed body of conscious beliefs, with the consequent idea

with an overall sense of what is plausible, of what we should reject and what we should take seriously. When we weigh educational alternatives we do not typically test whether a single practice is consistent with a single belief; rather we seek to make more complex judgements about whether certain practices ‘fit’ or ‘comport’ well with our a wider set of beliefs.²²

Similarly, techniques are not best understood in individual isolation. Anthony argued that techniques, taken individually, have very little meaning; the casual visitor to a classroom who sees only a collection of individual techniques does not yet understand the meaning of what is happening. Meaning emerges when techniques are grouped and patterned in the light of particular convictions. The beliefs at work in the two classrooms described at the start of this chapter do not become evident in isolated acts such as asking students to prepare a speech or read a poem, for these acts could be given different contexts – the poem or the speech could, for instance, be held up for criticism or ridicule by the teacher. It is the overall patterning of individual techniques which adds belief-laden meaning.

Imagine a third classroom in which the teacher teaches the “Me Power” activity on Monday, follows it with the Bonhoeffer tasks on Tuesday, and on Wednesday asks the students to reflect critically on Monday’s work in the light of what they read on Tuesday. An observer who only saw Monday’s lesson might reasonably conclude that this

that a Christian worldview is a kind of basic summary of Christian doctrine concerning the nature of reality. Other writers see a worldview as something more instinctive, our underlying, unconscious ways of seeing and interacting with the world. In this case, a worldview is not simply a collection of beliefs or doctrines and it is less possible to state exactly what a Christian worldview would be in doctrinal terms. A worldview in this broader sense will include the metaphors, images, narratives and models which we explore in later chapters as well as a range of perceptions rooted in culture, history and upbringing, raising the question of whether, instead of a single Christian worldview, we should think in terms of the enculturation of Christian faith in a variety of culturally influenced worldviews. See further e.g. Griffioen, 1998; Klapwijk, 1989, 1991; Olthuis, 1985; Walsh, 2000; Wolters, 1989; Wolterstorff, 1989.

²² The latter is Wolterstorff’s term. Wolterstorff, 1984:68.

teacher espoused humanistic beliefs concerning celebration of human potential and rejection of the category of sin. But observation of the pattern of teaching over the whole week would lead to a different picture. It is not the atomistic components of teaching which reflect the guiding role of beliefs, but the overall meaning-giving patterns which emerge over time.

Finally, if we consider the beliefs which we bring to teaching to be important, then we will not simply implement them blindly, without listening and learning from experience. To do so would be to exclude the possibility of learning that our teaching does not actually achieve what we think it does. Beliefs are not a blueprint to be stamped mechanically onto classroom reality. Suppose we design an activity such as the one involving the Bonhoeffer poem with the idea that we want students to engage in sober self-examination. If that goal is important to us, we will want to observe and listen to students to find out if that is in fact what happens. If it is not, we will have to go back to the drawing board and may have to reconsider our existing understanding of how our Christian beliefs impinge upon our teaching practices. Allowing faith to guide education does not mean that our beliefs have to be a rigid straitjacket; they can function as a living element in an ongoing process of responsive design, learning and redesign. This may be harder to pin down with clinical clarity than a narrower process of logical deduction, and it may seem more vulnerable than the idea of a blueprint fixed and guaranteed in advance, but it strikes much closer to the heart of teaching and learning.