Why focus on seeing anew, choosing engagement, and reshaping practice?

Some pointers to background research

Our aim in choosing the categories that we have used on this site has been to provide simple, easily usable reference points around which teachers and school leaders can build an understanding of Christian teaching and learning. We have therefore not tried to be exhaustive or overly precise. Rather than trying to detail every facet of the learning process, we have tried to point to a few helpful directions to follow, drawing on our cumulative experience of various curriculum projects. We have, however, also drawn from relevant research, and we will summarize here some of the key connections for those who would like to investigate further.

Communities of Practice

A major inspiration for the framework adopted in these pages was the work of Etienne Wenger. In particular his book Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity (which draws in turn upon a wide range of social, philosophical and educational research) offers a substantial account of how the shared practices of a community lead to learning. We will not attempt to describe all of Wenger's ideas here, but only those few that have directly helped to shape the framework used on this site.

When Wenger writes of a 'community of practice' he means any group that works together over time at some shared enterprise. Obviously, the kind of community of practice that we have in view here is a teacher (or teachers) and learners working together towards educational goals. Wenger sets out to describe in general terms how such a group functions, and how learning takes place through taking part in shared activity. We focus here on just three of his points.

Imagination – seeing anew

Wenger emphasizes the role of imagination in any such group – but when he says imagination, he does not mean fantasy, fiction, or creative thinking, and he does not mean the imaginary as opposed to what is true. He means something more like our worldview, the ways (true or false, factual or fictional) in which we picture the world around us and make sense of the activities we are involved in. What we see ourselves as doing and the way we read the meaning of our surroundings will affect what we learn from an activity. Wenger makes this clearer with an example:

"two stonecutters … are asked what they are doing. One responds: "I am cutting this stone in a

perfectly square shape." The other responds: "I am building a cathedral." Both answers are correct and meaningful, but they reflect different relations to the world. The difference between these answers does not imply that one is a better stonecutter than the other, as far as holding the chisel is concerned. At the level of engagement, they may well be doing exactly the same thing. But it does suggest that their experiences of what they are doing and their sense of self in doing it are rather different. This difference is a function of imagination." (Communities of Practice, p.176)

As Wenger notes, neither stonecutter is simply making things up, but each imagines his task in a different way. That difference in imagination is likely to significantly impact the relationship that each has to his work and what each learns while doing it. A shift in imagination – perhaps, for instance, the first stonecutter suddenly catches a vision of the majestic cathedral that will result in part from his labour, or the second stonecutter begins to feel exploited and resentful – could therefore make a big difference to how the task is experienced.

The same goes for classrooms. At a very simple level, if students imagine that answering questions in class is a sign of being uncool, while the teacher imagines that active participation is vital for learning to take place, frustrations will emerge from the mismatch in imagination. Bigger realms of meaning also come into play. What difference might it make to a modern language classroom, for instance, if teachers and learners could come to see learning another's language as a way of loving their neighbour? How would this compare with seeing the same task as a way of enhancing future economic prospects, enabling tourist travel, or just fulfilling a curriculum requirement for the sake of grades? Our focus on seeing anew has to do with exploring what these kinds of shifts in imagination might have to do with Christian faith and its relevance to teaching and learning. How might seeing anew through Christian eyes reframe our teaching and learning tasks?

Participation – choosing engagement

While the ways that we see what we do and the world in which we do it play an active role in shaping our practice, practice is about more than imagination, and Wenger also emphasizes the importance of participation. Practice takes shape as we engage together in activities aimed toward shared goals, and this engagement can take a variety of forms. In one classroom students are quite used to interrupting the teacher to ask questions and seek clarifications. In another they are used to sitting silently until the teacher asks them questions. In yet another students arrive and immediately take responsibility for planning their own learning from a list of possible tasks with resources available. These are all different forms of participation, ways of taking up one's role in the shared activity. In any given community, there are certain forms of participation that tend to dominate or to seem most plausible. The habits that become established in a particular group help to shape how members of that group come to imagine their tasks.

This aspect of practice also opens up questions in connection with exploring how education can be Christian. For instance: are the patterns of participation that are built up through classroom activities loving and just? Do they primarily foster individual pride and ambition or an awareness of the need to consider the well-being of others? What connections are students encouraged to make? Do the

practices of the science classroom, for instance, communicate to students that asking questions about the connection between science and faith or between science and ethics are proper and welcome ways of participating in science education? Are students used to seeing their own faith as relevant to their learning? In these and other ways, the specific kinds of participation that are felt to be available to students are a significant part of the ethos of a learning community. They help to shape how students imagine their education.

Reification and repertoire – reshaping practice

Imagination and participation, says Wenger, are important parts of how a repertoire gets shaped. We bring to the classroom certain ways of envisioning the world, ourselves, and our tasks. We settle into certain ways of participating and we leave other ways on one side. We also begin to give concrete shape to the environment we share, engaging in a process of reification (taking ideas and turning them into objects). Perhaps we prefer group work, and so we arrange chairs around shared tables. Perhaps we want to convey approval or disapproval, and so we design symbols such as letter grades or scores or happy faces. Perhaps we want to underline our authority and so we stand behind an imposing desk and talk in a loud voice. Perhaps we want to focus on humility, and so we change our posture and kneel together on the floor. Perhaps we want to communicate respect for each individual's worth, and so we deliberately make eye contact with each one as he or she enters the classroom. If they are repeated over time, these moves turn into a repertoire, a pattern of concrete ways of being together that gives this classroom its particular rhythms and atmosphere. The repertoire is the way we come to expect things to run in this group. Certain words take on special shades of meaning, certain gestures become immediately recognizable, certain moves come to be expected.

Attending to our repertoire nudges us toward further questions about how teaching and learning and Christian faith might connect. The messages sent and learned in a classroom do not just have to do with the ideas that are explained by the teacher. They are also embedded in environments, in displays, in tones of voice and gestures, in the shared rhythms and practices of classroom life. Thinking about teaching and learning in ways informed by Christian faith will not just be about mentioning Christian ideas in course content. If teaching is to be genuinely informed by faith, hope and love, this will mean developing a fitting repertoire. That means reshaping our practices so that the way we teach and learn together reflects and fosters Christian ways of seeing.

Practices and growth in faith

Another significant influence on the thinking behind this site is the work of theologian Craig Dykstra, who, like Etienne Wenger, has reflected on how we grow and are formed by participating in shared practices. Dykstra's book Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices looks at how Christian faith is nurtured. Dykstra moves away from seeing growth in faith as just being about how beliefs develop (though beliefs remain an important part of the picture). He focuses on how people of faith are formed and nurtured by taking part in practices that express the shape of the Christian

life. Christians do not grow spiritually only by improving their understanding of Christian theology. They also grow by experiencing what it means to be part of a community that worships together with singing and prayer, that cares for the sick and welcomes the poor, that practises forgiveness when someone is wronged, that chooses to suffer with those in pain, that gathers around the Scriptures and works at interpreting them together, and so on. Such practices form the contours of a Christian community of faith, and by taking part in them Christians allow themselves to see and act in ways that resonate with Christian belief.

This means that faith and spirituality are about more than individual beliefs and personal inner feelings. They are not just a private matter – they are connected to a way of life. Education that seeks to be Christian will reflect not only Christian beliefs, but also a Christian way of living. Thus Dykstra writes that "Christian educators need to think about how to lead people beyond reliance on 'random acts of kindness' into shared patterns of life that are informed by the deepest insights of our tradition, and about how to lead people beyond privatized spiritualities into more thoughtful participation in God's activity in the world" (p.67). This need not mean that we are looking to educational techniques to replace the work of grace in transforming our lives. It means acknowledging our communal life together as one of the channels through which God's grace can work, and offering up our incomplete and fallen practices for God to remake and inhabit. God's activity in the world has to do with forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, justice, faith, hope, love. How can our educational practices foster 'thoughtful participation' in these things? That is a key question behind this site.

Further reading

The two books noted above are helpful starting points for anyone beginning to explore further the connection between faith and educational practices. Both are relatively accessible.

The work of Dykstra and Wenger is, of course, the tip of a larger iceberg of work on faith, practices, and education. A project closely connected with work on this site is represented in the volume of essays Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning, edited by David I. Smith and James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). Each of the chapters in this volume takes one or more aspects of historic Christian practices and explores its implications for present day teaching and learning, with a primary focus on higher education. The book also provides a more detailed account of how approaching education in terms of Christian practices could be fruitful. Further reading that includes various work that has fed into this project can be found here.