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OPINION EDUCATION

SIX CLASSROOM TIPS FOR INTEGRATING CHRISTIAN FAITH WITH OTHER SUBJECTS

Preparing the new generation of Christians to live fruitful and faithful lives

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JUNE 18TH, 2021 12:11 PM

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Christian schools are the way most Australian will engage with the gospel in the coming decades, closely followed by Christian social services, with Christian congregations well behind. So the quality of Christian witness in word and deed in these settings matters a great deal, but nurturing this does not seem to be a priority in many Christian denominations. And theological colleges where I have spent 30 years writing and teaching on the relationship between Christian

theology and economics – most recently, as part of Alphacrucis College – push to create a Christian research university for Australia and beyond.

Along the way I have learned a few lessons about what works and what does not, when trying to integrate Christian faith with other subjects in the classroom, and offer the following reflections:

1. Integration is only going to work if students have some understanding of both Christianity and the subject in question

If students lack background in one of the subjects, it is worth spending time filling this in before attempting integration.

It goes without saying that the teacher must be competent in both fields. I've tried to take this seriously in a university setting by studying for doctorates in both economics and theology, but this may not be necessary nor even the best preparation for the Christian school teacher who aspires to be an excellent integrator. An alternative is to co-teach an integrative class with an expert in the other field. While bean-counters in our schools and universities tend to hate team teaching because of the extra staff costs, some of the very best experiences of integrative teaching have come through teaching with others.

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2. History is a wonderful way of teaching a subject

In my own field of economics I lament the disappearance of the history of economics from the curriculum. This can lead students to often believe that the currently dominant theories have descended from the sky on stone tablets, rather than emerging in a particular context from the interplay of ideas and

interests, in response to real problems. Teaching economics historically is harder than taking the standard textbook tour through contemporary theory, and requires a much deeper understanding of the subject – but students love stories and controversy, and so much theory can be woven into the story of the development of economics as a discipline.



The most common way integrative endeavours go wrong is for them to degenerate into monologue – for instance, theologians ignorantly pronouncing on how economists should go about their work, or indignant economists responding in kind.

Theologians much more commonly teach their subject historically than economists, though the stone tablet approach is not unknown.

Even when teaching biblical studies, some attention to the history of interpretation deepens students understanding of the subject.

The great advantage for integration of teaching historically is that the connections between Christian faith and the subject in question emerge much more naturally. History is neutral terrain for other subjects, and my experience has been that students, especially students who are not Christian, are much more willing to engage with Christianity this way than if it is approached propositionally.

3. Humility helps

Integration is a dialogue, and dialogue requires listening and a willingness to learn from the other. The most common way integrative endeavours go wrong is for them to degenerate into monologue – for instance, theologians ignorantly pronouncing on how economists should go about their work, or indignant economists responding in kind. Usually the audience for such monologues ends up being their own tribe, and nobody learns anything.

4. Integration is relational and takes time

This should be obvious from the above points. Please don't insult young people by pretending that a quick and superficial description of another discipline, plus a pronouncement of the Christian approach to it, is integration. This is no

benefit to our students. It is of similar value to our young people as the caricature of Christianity, combined with a pronouncement of its falsity or irrelevance, that passes for debate about Christianity in some other educational circles.

5. Check your school's marketing, financial, and HR practices

I remember teaching an integrative unit on economics and theology and then going to a meeting with our marketing department which had produced a brochure for the business degree. The brochure featured a Porsche and suggested this was the reason a student should study business at our Christian college.

The disconnect between the classroom discussion and the message the college's marketing department was conveying to prospective students was huge. As much as we like to think students are shaped by our classroom teaching, there is no contest between what they see operating in the school and what they are told in the classroom. Similarly important in shaping students attitude to Christianity is the way the school runs its finances and treats its staff. So as a teacher, you need to be aware of these institutional influences on students, and if you see a disconnect, talk with your principal because it is an educational issue.



... Educators must engage with the world that young people actually inhabit.

Reflect too on your own pedagogical practice because this, even more than school practices, can undermine the most carefully thought-out content.

6. Integrative education is hard but worthwhile

Our world is one where monologue, simple answers, and deference to authorities (especially religious authorities) are dead as the dinosaurs. Young people like to discover for themselves, need answers which work in a much more complicated world than their elders grew up in, and will not be persuaded by monologue backed by a claim to authority.

It is no use complaining that we would like the world to be other than this; educators must engage with the world that young people actually inhabit. This is why so many Christian schools and universities struggle to make integrative education work, but it is also why it is the sort of education that most effectively presents Christian faith to our young people, and will equip young Christians to live out their faith fruitfully in the world.

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