Individual Reading Option for Cycle Two

The goal of the "inquiry" phase within Cycle Two is to explore some of the vast literature of teaching and learning in higher education. In order to complete the individual reading option for Cycle Two, participants simply follow the reading list that was used in the past Cycle Two reading groups. Once you have completed the reading, you will need to write a response document integrating insights from the various readings with reflection on your own teaching practices. More information about each of these components is provided below.

Reading portion:

The readings list begins with a focus on core texts with broad, cross-disciplinary relevance. The final reading assignment allows participants to focus on specific pedagogical topics, techniques, or methods related to their individual needs and interests.

In order to keep track of your thoughts as you read, you may want to consider making the following notes for each text:

1) a brief written summary/thesis of the book or article
2) your responses to the following questions
   - What are some insights you gained about your teaching practices from your encounters with literature on teaching and learning?
   - What are some steps you might take to enact what you've learned?
3) any additional questions or critiques of the book or article that come to mind as you read.

There are 3 sets of readings for Cycle Two; resources for Readings 1 & 2 are accessible on a Google Docs site through the following link:

https://docs.google.com/#folders/0B40bsGzNaWnbNzBmOGQxOWUtY2Q1MS00N2I3LTg1M2EtYWFlODc0MDkyYzE3

Reading 1 – Teacher Best Practices focused

Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Introduction, Chapters 2 & 4, & one chapter of your choice)

Reading 2 – Student/Learner focused

Please choose one of the following to read as the second "core text":

- *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* by Gerald Graff (Introduction & Chapters 1-3)

- *Understanding by Design (Second Edition)* by Grant Wiggins & Jay McTighe (Chapters 1, 2, & 4)

Reading 3 - Discipline-specific

A. Each participant should choose two discipline-specific articles as part of the third set of readings. For a list of higher education journals and discipline-specific journals, visit the following University of Washington site, which lists a host of disciplinary journals that include articles about teaching: http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/resources/journals.html#Disciplinary
B. Also read "*Teaching as Community Property*" article by Lee Shulman, *Change;* Nov 1993; 25, 6; Research Library Core, page 6 – accessible through the following link: http://proquest.umi.com/pqdlink?index=0&did=1566273&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1194288708&clientId=2335

Writing portion

Once you have completed the readings, you will need to write a response document (roughly 3 pages long, at least) integrating insights from the texts with reflection on your own teaching practices. The goal is not simply to summarize everything you read (you don't really have space to do that in 3 pages anyway), but rather to pull out the elements of each text that you found most helpful and/or most challenging in your own thinking about teaching. The best response documents are the ones that reflect very specifically on the writer's own teaching, and explain how the writer plans to change or enhance his or her teaching following an encounter with this material. To take a look at sample response documents, click here (**link to 2 response documents – one from biology and one from religion**.)

Once you have drafted your response document, post it on the Cycle Two page of your wiki. You can either paste the full text directly onto the page, or you can post it as an attachment – simply go to the bottom of the page and click on the "Add Files" icon. This will allow you to upload a document directly from your computer.

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Sample Response Document: Biological Sciences

Reading some of the literature on teaching and learning was fascinating, and I realize that we have barely scratched the surface. The first of the main threads I picked up on from each of our readings

was how complicated and intensive it is to plan lessons that actually facilitate understanding. Based primarily on selected chapters from *Understanding by Design* by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, I am now convinced that the best way to design courses, units, and lessons is to start with the end goal(s) in mind and base absolutely everything that you do in class on reaching those goals. This idea also necessitates definition of appropriate goals and, therefore, of what true understanding of the subject is (and thus how understanding can be assessed). In *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain says that the best teachers strive to "teach the student, not the subject," which also emphasizes the need to focus on student understanding, rather than information dissemination. In terms of applying these ideas to my own teaching, I need to take three primary actions. First, I need to decide what understanding of a particular concept means in the context of each lesson. Second, I will decide how to assess that understanding. Third, I will try to get continuous feedback from my students in order to help them make connections between things they have already understood (either in the current class or in previous classes and experiences) and what they are currently learning. The best classes that I have had and the times where I feel as though I have the best grasp on a subject, I can relate the details that I learn back to a big picture, and I think this is true for most people and highly relevant to designing effective coursework.

The second thread that I felt connected the readings was that of leaving content out to increase understanding. In one really striking example in *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Jeannette Norden (at VUMC!) adjusted her neuroanatomy course in order to make it more relevant to the actual practice of medicine by including sections about relating to patients and understanding the steps of grief. In spite of having to remove content from the course to make room for the new "real world" type things, the students still did as well on their national board exams. Though this example highlights changes made in an entire course, it could be applied to each class. For example, it is not necessary to cover each chapter of the book in detail in a lecture, but it is necessary to make sure that students understand the big picture and make the connections between all the facts that they have presumably taught themselves via readings (this idea also came up in the specific example of the nutrition unit from *Understanding by Design*). This style

of lesson planning works better to facilitate synthesis and analysis of information than a course where the professor essentially summarizes the textbook for the students. I really like the idea of making connections in biology to what students know from other classes, but especially to real world topics. One really interesting example of a biology connection to the real world is the debate over human stem cell research. Numerous opportunities in many biology classes exist to discuss this issue from both an ethical perspective and a current events perspective, which I believe would lead to greater student ownership of the topic and a greater investment in biology as a discipline (not just something that you learn to get into medical school).

Finally, the very best part of the reading group is finding a set of people who believe in the value of teaching as much as I do. I spent the week before last at a scientific meeting, and though some of it was interesting and I did get some good feedback on my poster, I spent a lot of the time feeling inadequate and frustrated. To come back, get to go to my reading group on Tuesday, and have a discussion (based upon Lee S. Shulman's "Teaching as Community Property") about how universities seldom make hiring or tenure decisions based on quality of teaching and almost always make them on research performance felt amazing. We may not know how to change things right now, but we can keep working on it. Shulman's piece in 1993 is still relevant today, which is at once heartening and somewhat depressing. I appreciate that people have been thinking about how to make teaching valuable for nearly 20 years, and at the same time, it is difficult to detect any change that has been made in academia that reflects the really valuable research that is available. Certainly the connections that I have made so far through the Center for Teaching are valuable and continue to remind me that I am not alone at Vanderbilt or in academia as a whole in trying to be a great teacher.

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Sample Response Document: Religion

By Kelly Whitcomb

In *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain discusses four categories of learning proposed by Perry and Clinchy who studied undergraduate student education. In the first category, students think there are right answers to be memorized; in the second, they think all knowledge is subjective; in the third they become procedural knowers who can play the game of the discipline; and in the fourth they are independent critical thinkers. Important to this scheme is the fact that all students move back and forth through the categories and may work within more than one category simultaneously.[1] I find this scheme helpful for incorporating a number of important issues with regard to teaching Hebrew Bible and Hebrew, so I will use it as a structure for critical reflection.

It is important for me to think about this as I teach Hebrew because I have a tendency to emphasize the critical thinking, but especially with language to a certain extent there are correct answers, and memorization of vocabulary and grammar is important in order to work as a critical thinker. Bain in fact proposes that excellent teachers help students to operate at all levels.[2] I have begun to help students with memorization more than I did at the beginning of the semester. We now spend time each week going through the vocabulary for the week and I help them to find memory devices. I am also considering a group activity in which students work in small groups to find memory devices for a group of words and then share those ideas with others, perhaps by then pairing off with somebody with a different set of words. In addition, as a number of educators have pointed out, building on prior knowledge is important.[3] I have tried to do this with English as a shared base of grammatical knowledge as much as possible. However, now that students know more Hebrew, I am trying to help them find ways to memorize grammar using their Hebrew knowledge as a basis. For example, they recently learned a set of suffixes which attach to prepositions and which are very similar to suffixes they have learned with verbs. We had a comparative activity in which students found the similarities in order to help them

[1] Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, d004), 42-43.
[2] Bain, 43.
[3] See Susan Willhauck, "God's Stuff: The constructive Powers of Chaos for Teaching Religion," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 13,1 (Jan 2010), 66.

remember the new grammar more easily and in which I drew the information from the students because they already had some knowledge of the material to work with. I am going to continue to couple this kind of work with practice reading and translating the grammatical forms students are learning in the hope that the two in tandem will help students more fully acquire the forms and work with them.

The second category in which knowledge is subjective is both the easiest and most difficult for me to work with in teaching Hebrew. Students who love language often thrive, especially early on, with the certainty of the parameters established by vocabulary and grammar. A verb form is first person, not third, or a word means "queen" not "earth." I have even heard students and colleagues proclaim this very thing about language learning in the context of a graduate program that teaches subjectivity. "I'm looking forward to taking a class where I know there are correct answers," or "It's a relief to have class where there is some certainty" are things I've heard around the Divinity school. To a certain extent this is true, but there are also many complexities about language and perhaps about Hebrew in particular. In fact, the famous philosopher of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, engages many of his deconstructive moves with biblical Hebrew and its ambiguities. In any language words can have many meanings, but there is something about Hebrew which the rabbis of antiquity to the scholars of the twenty-first century find particularly playful and ambiguous about the Hebrew language.

On the one hand, this means that students will inevitably move through this category multiple times as they learn the language. I need not necessarily work hard to make it happen, but I can wait for it to happen as we engage the biblical text from week to week. On the other hand, knowing that such subjectivity and instability is problematic for students at different times, I will need to be prepared to help students move constructively through this category. Rather than feeling as if they cannot know what the Bible says or that they are simply always imposing their own ideas on the text and therefore their work is futile, I want the students to find the beauty in the ambiguity, to realize that the biblical text reflects life even in the nitty-gritty ambiguities of the grammar.

Being able to live in the ambiguities, something Willhauck claims all good teachers should help their students do,[4] can help students who want to become ministers to be better prepared for the unending possibilities life can throw at them and their parishioners. For example, in the book of Job, Job's final response to God in 42:1-6 is highly ambiguous, as an examination of the Hebrew or even of the ancient translations and commentaries reveals. Does Job reject God's response? Does Job submit to God's response? Does Job feel consoled by God's response or does he have to console himself? All of these are possibilities in the biblical text. Considering that Christianity has traditionally read Job as the ever-pious and submissive servant of God, such possibilities can challenge students' ideas not only of what the text itself means, but also of how they can know what is true and what is not. Thinking about a difficult issue such as Hurricane Katrina where there is suffering and it is difficult to explain why such suffering happens can help students to realize that the biblical text of Job 42 is in fact quite prophetic, and so despite the ambiguity of Job's response itself, the overall message of the response can have a lot of theological significance for our lives. Job's response to his suffering and to God in the midst of his suffering is ambiguous at best, but so is suffering and people's responses in general. Pastoral care classes in Master of Divinity programs tend to challenge and train students to be prepared for a multitude of situations and responses on the part of those involved, and the ambiguity of Job does the same. Thus, if done properly and with the correct amount of care, students can be challenged to engage subjectivity even with something as deeply personal as religion and the Bible.[5]

Procedural knowledge is the third category in which students learn the ways of the discipline. Gerald Graff in *Clueless in Academe* has proposed that university and college instructors need to teach students the ways of academics, in particular the ways of arguing. We tend to take the jargon and the ways we argue for granted, expecting students to just figure it out.[6] Graff proposes that we need to build

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[4] Willhauck, 64.

[5] See again Willhauck who notes the importance of helping students to deal with such chaos in order to grow in the midst of it. Willhauck, 65ff.

[6] Gerald Graff, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 26.

from what students already know because all students learn to have conversation when they acquire language as children.[7] For Graff there are numerous ramifications to the disconnect between academia and the rest of the world, one of which is that students may find their courses pointless. Rather than being shown how the material is relevant to their lives, students are simply expected to analyze others' opinions in academic fashion.[8]

There are actually at least two problems Graff is getting at, and one is the issue of procedural knowledge itself. Students are often simply expected to figure out how academics operates, and this can vary from discipline to discipline. Even in the Divinity school at Vanderbilt where all students are working toward a professional degree in the field, there is disconnect among the disciplines. Biblical studies has a certain set of expectations, methods and jargon, while homiletics has another. Although some of the jargon may be shared, often what is expected in a sermon is not what is expected in a biblical studies paper. This is an issue which has caused me consternation for some time, and I have been continually reflecting on how the curriculum in general and how Hebrew Bible classes in particular may be more integrative. If students are taught procedural knowledge such as the jargon of biblical interpretation and the biblical languages and the methods of biblical interpretation, and if they are taught these things in a context that makes the work of biblical studies relevant for their own lives, they will not only be better able to maneuver through the program, but they will hopefully also want to continue the kinds of skills and work they learn in biblical studies.

In my Hebrew class this means that students need to learn the linguistic jargon and how to make use of resources for working with the language, such as critical editions of the Bible, lexicons and concordances, as well as commentaries. If students are to delve deeply into the language and the Bible, they will need to understand what resources are available, what kind of information they provide, and when it is best to make use of this information. Furthermore, they need to learn the linguistic jargon in

[7] Graff, 60.
[8] Graff, 55-60.

order to understand what these resources are telling them. These are things which take time, which is why we are spending the entire year working slowly on such matters. A step by step process will hopefully cause less frustration than the often preferred approach of throwing students in the deep end and telling them to swim.

However, there is an additional problem in a Hebrew class related to this procedural knowledge. On the one hand students need to be able to speak the lingo of Hebrew and biblical studies, but on the other hand most of them also will need to "translate" this lingo into every day street talk. I cannot assume, nor should I, that in a divinity classroom I am training students to be doctoral students in the field. Rather, more often than not I am training them to go out into a job where they encounter people who have never had a class in religious studies, let alone a class in Hebrew. This means students need to learn to rewrite or rethink the language they use in Hebrew class in order to prepare a sermon, write a blog or contribute to a dialogue in which the biblical interpretation they learn is applicable. Some students may have a natural ability to do this, and some may have already had some practice if they have taken Greek and used it outside the divinity school or perhaps in a preaching class. However, some students are in their first year in the program, so I cannot assume this is the case. Therefore, I need to find ways to help students take the work that they are doing, to make it relevant for wider audiences and to do so in language and genres that their audiences will understand. This is very ambitious and with only one year to develop a reading knowledge of the language, finding the right balance between focusing on the language itself and working on these critical-thinking skills is difficult, but I think that we can pause and do these things as we read, and students can have homework assignments and projects, especially in the second semester, which ask them to do these things. Such activities would ask them to practice the grammar and vocabulary they are learning while taking it to another level of interpretation and application.

The final category is one in which students become independent critical thinkers. To a large extent much of what I have discussed for my own teaching with regard to procedural knowledge also

helps students become independent critical thinkers since I want students not only to be able to understand the procedures of biblical studies, but also to make use of them in their own lives. In "Learning Through Shared Christian Praxis: Reflective Practice in the Classroom," Arch Chee Keen Wong and a group of instructors who explored reflective praxis as a process students need to be taught propose that journals are a helpful way for students to learn to think critically about their own practices. They claim that experience itself does not amount to wisdom, but critical reflection on knowledge and experience does. However, students cannot be expected to have the tools and skills required for such critical thinking, but instead they need to be taught to do this through guided practice.[9] For those who used the journal process to help students develop self-reflective critical thinking, they found that giving students guided questions helped students to develop the required skills for becoming responsible ministers and responsible citizens.[10]

This is something I could implement next semester as we do more reading. Students could have guided questions asking them to reflect on a particular aspect or detail of the text. They could be asked to think first about the language itself, using the linguistic jargon they're learning, then they could have a question which asks them either to think about how the text relates to their own experience and/or how they might apply the text for a wider audience. It would have to be a step by step process, with early journal entries being very guided in the questions, but later as students develop the skills and are asked more probing questions, students could have much more open-ended questions such as, "What do you think is a/the theological import of the passage?" Students could receive points for doing the journal rather than an actual grade, and this would allow me to ask challenging questions in a kind of written dialogue with the students that is non-threatening because they are not being assessed, but instead I am joining in their written conversation. At times, we may use the journals for classroom discussions as well, but at times they may simply be a conversation between the student and the instructor.

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[9] Arch Chee Keen Wong, et al, "Learning Through Shared Christian Praxis: Reflective Practice in the Classroom," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 12,4 (Oct 2009), 311.

[10] Wong, 310ff.

In conclusion, the scheme that Perry and Clinchy propose is helpful for critical reflection on my teaching. In a language classroom, it is important for students to be able to work well in and move back and forth among the various categories. For the learning process to be most effective, I need to help students learn to operate in all categories and to move back and forth, and I need to do so in ways that help students find relevance for their own lives and work. If I am able to do this, students can not only become effective interpreters of the Hebrew Bible and language, but they will also hopefully develop intrinsic desire to keep working with the Hebrew Bible and language.