

# **EMPOWERING STUDENTS FOR LEARNING AND MINISTRY**

**Monday, July 17**

**Dean G. Blevins**

We're going to begin class by joining me in a greeting. We'll go through this twice. Once as an exercise and the second time as a formal greeting. I've asked my good friend Ramon to help me with this. This is a responsive greeting. It will be familiar to some of you. Ramon and I as leaders will greet you with a statement and you will respond back. They will be on the PowerPoint in order.

The Lord be with you

*And also with you*

Lift up your hearts

*We lift them up oh Lord*

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God

*It is right to give our thanks to the Lord*

That is my greeting in each class. Also one thing you will notice is a candle burning. At the beginning of every class session I light a candle sometimes much to the angst of Trevecca Nazarene University. The candle for me, as I tell my students, is a symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit. I believe that any education that occurs, occurs by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. That is not just a repetitive action for the sake of repetitive action. That is who I am and hopefully, what I try to communicate as well.

I thought about how to begin this presentation and I thought I would begin by noting a problem that has surfaced during this conference both implicitly and explicitly. That problem might best be understood as the myth, false understanding, of the “neutral” or “generic” culture.

I cannot create or generate a document that will be totally sensitive to the nuances of all cultures. No paper or presentation can be so totally culture-neutral (or generic) as to negotiate all the pitfalls in a diverse cultural setting. I cannot do this. Nor you. But we must continue to work together as we have this week with a gracious attitude and a practice of hospitality.

There must be a way to present our work so that there will be enough commonality between us, that we can embrace and discuss our ideas while altering them to our context. One goal for distributing my paper in advance is to allow you time to read and process the information. The background to this material is my study of John Wesley’s understanding of the means of grace as a framework for Christian Education. Why this is important to me will be explained in a moment.

While acknowledging that my presentation is influenced by my culture, I hope to find a point of commonality for us. I am also hopeful that the paper is thoughtful enough as not to intentionally offend others. For me the point of commonality is our common heritage; the Wesleyan Holiness heritage embodied in the life and work of John Wesley. This tradition brings us together today and provides a focal point for our passion and ongoing building of tradition or what I call traditioning. Tradition is not static. It is not stable. It is something we continue to do by drawing from the past into the present with a vision for the future. That was behind what I tried to write.

There are some assumptions behind the paper.

1. The practices in the Means of Grace, such as prayer, fasting, worship, the preaching and study of Scripture and gathering in Christian community are in many ways transcultural, much like the gospel is transcultural. There are other practices, however, that are equally powerful that are more contextual. Also, there are cultural expressions of the practices mentioned above that are equally valid.
2. Wesley's emphasis on Holiness is shaped as much by what he did as by what he said.
3. Please note that the three approaches of formation/discernment/transformation are interactive and interdependent.
4. There are elements of this paper that may appear basic so that they may be used both with and by your students.
5. The paper is a "work in progress" in that you have before you a document with cultural illustrations that you can replace to suit your context.

I know that many of you have had an opportunity to read the paper and you may have questions. The best way to give you an overview, is to note the big point. I do believe that content is important. We empower our students by the very Gospel that we teach. I think we all agree to that. Often in an environment like this we keep in mind that the method of learning is woven in with the content that we teach. I believe that our goal for empowering students is anchored in our calling which has been talked about, in our student's calling, and in the fact that most good educational theory advocates empowering our students. By this point in the conference you have heard this again and again. Finally, what I hope this paper helps you to do, and what I really believe my conviction is, is when we weave together the various practices under these big categories of formation, discernment and transformation, when we are creating community through formation, when we are guiding our students both to critically and creatively discern in the world around themselves, when we empower them to transform the world through ministry,

when we weave those together we create a mosaic, a picture if you will that is true to our context. That's the paper in a nutshell. It's a gamble. I hope it's a good one for you.

I would like you to meet in your world regions with two tasks (not necessarily in this order)

1. Discuss what issues are raised by your cultural context in implementing the three approaches of formation/discernment/transformation.
2. Discuss different ways that you are already encouraging these three approaches or new ways that you could use these approaches in your context.

(Participant moved to small group activity)

Let's come back together. If your spokesperson could share one issue or one application you wish to address.

David McEwan: We looked at the issue of helping our students being at home in a learning environment. Some of our cultures, that's easier than others. We all agreed together that one way is for us to be, I use the term relatively, honest about our faults and failings and mistakes. The amount of honesty does vary enormously in the Asia Pacific Region as to what you can share openly. But we all felt that we need to break the barrier between the lecturer as the "god" icon who has it all and the student who then is unwilling to be honest in case the professor criticizes or laughs at their begin exploration.

T.K. Shadakshari: The life that is being this is far more important than what they teach. The skill of the educator in the material is important. A person may know a lot of things but they fail to translate those ideas into the minds of the students they are a failure. The sense of worship in the educational centers also makes an impact with regards to application.

Dean Blevins: In your extension centers you also have worship as well as the teaching itself?

T.K. Shadakshari: It is not a formal worship but a sense of worship or worship as a lifestyle.

Jim Burns: There was a lot of appreciation in our group for the soundness of these three elements and how they hold each other. There is a center of gravity and they revolve around it. For example, if discernment, critical thinking, is taught without the breaking element of formation and transformation it is not education as it should be. A comment was made in our group, and I think this helps me see our mission as private educators in a world that is inundated with public university education, which cannot provide this balance. This comes naturally to us in our context. Partly because our context our small but fueled by our Christian mission. It was nice to see this laid out in this way. I think it happens naturally in a small Christian school.

Dean Blevins: I would agree. I think a lot of what I described occurs it's just the ability of naming it and seeing the interdependency. The real desire to see those things come together.

Ted Esselstyn: We like this kind of thing but we find a tremendous difficulty in empowering students which perhaps can be illustrated best in the concept of transformation. We receive students who primary school and high school have been taught to accept the textbook or the teacher's word as the law and where it is almost punishable if you start thinking, exploring, questioning whether what you are receiving is valid or not. You can be totally rejected. It creates all kinds of problems for you. We are faced with students who come in from this kind of tradition, and we are endeavoring them to constantly be reflective. The concept of evaluation, of reflection, of questioning, just isn't there. The biggest problem is our teachers don't know how to teach them to do this. To find a package that can help us help the teachers to teach the students to

be reflective. In our discussions, most of us who came through this kind of a system, said the barrier was broken through on the one-to-one basis with someone who took the time to talk with us. It's just not possible to do that with 100 students in your class. This is an area where we feel we need a tremendous amount of help to be able to empower our students.

Dean Blevins: I think in other cultures that will be a major challenge. There were some resources mentioned in the back of the paper that have been helpful in guiding in critical thinking particularly, not always creativity. I do believe that even if you say, "I can't do 100 students but across a year I can spend time with 5" and begin to model that.

The other thing that I think is important, that came out of the Burns presentation, was the idea of being uncomfortable but have an area of safety so we can lovingly challenge students to be reflective.

Ted Esselstyn: It would really help us if this could be looked at and a broader and more effective program be developed for it.

John Haines: We were looking at this from the perspective of its challenge within an extension education model, or a de-centralized education model. I think we were in agreement that we must not allow it to fail because of the distance or the fact that students are not together in a residential community. The point of community is what we wanted to focus on. What we found in a number of situations is that there may be students in an extension situation and are together for a brief time, but when they return to their various places they should still sense the community of which they are a part, which is education and formational even through there is distance between the parties. That has to be very intentional. I agree with Ted that to find ways

of providing us with instruction and aids in how to make that happen would be a very useful thing.

Another thing that wars against that is that in some of the cultures we have encountered, if you have pastors that you are trying to get up to a level of completing a course of study and you are also trying to introduce students into those courses who are people from their churches, there is outright rejection that the pastor and parishioners should student together. I think this is the flaw that we have built in by making people feel there is a second class degree of education that is offered and that the pastors need to be seen as the superior educators/deliverers of truth and the parishioners just need to sit there and be told. Somehow to get them formed together to make strong churches.

Dean Blevins: The best way to close the session is to read the passage that frames the paper itself.

*<sup>14</sup>For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup>from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. <sup>16</sup>I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, <sup>17</sup>and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. <sup>18</sup>I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup>and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. <sup>20</sup>Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. (Ephesians 3.14-20, NRSV)*

