

Purposeful Teaching¹

The effectiveness of Outcomes Based Education has been debated, as has the way it should be implemented, and considerations such as whether students should be told what the outcomes for each lesson are. In many ways, however, the emphasis on outcomes has been limited to short-term goals. There is also the need to think of the big picture. What are the outcomes, or what is the goal, of our education if it is to be undertaken Christianly? As Christians wanting to engage with education in a biblical or Godly way, we should not be surprised that the stated purposes for education given by secular government bodies differ from what God sees as the purposes of education.

Why do we do what we do: *Telos* (Purpose)

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said, very gravely, “and go on till you come to the end: then stop.” (From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll)

The above quote from Lewis Carroll is a straightforward piece of logic, and, naturally, ironic given the preceding and following passages in the book! It should be obvious to us that the Christian life should not be lived in an aimless manner. Our teaching, as a part of an overall program of schooling should take into account the big picture of goals for our students. An important starting point for the understanding of our task therefore means considering the end point.

In educational terms, we speak of student outcomes or graduate profiles—the things we value that we desire that our students will have gained. These are well understood in secular education and much has been written about them. Many of the profile items listed by secular educators are worthy attributes at which to aim our teaching but there is also a need to engage Christianly with them without accepting the lists unthinkingly. Such lists can be quite extensive and often include items such as:

- Possess foundational knowledge and skills
- Be able to apply new knowledge
- Be able to think creatively to solve problems
- Be open to new learning challenges
- Be a lifelong learner
- Be self-assured, motivated and responsible
- Be IT competent
- Have a well-rounded life
- Have a strong work ethic

We may consider these to be admirable characteristics—though only when decoded using a biblical framework. It would be true to say also that very effective educational institutions that were able to meet their goals with lists such as the one above, could produce very effective Hitlers, Stalins or Pol Pots. C. S. Lewis is supposed to have written: “Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a more clever devil.” This quote has proliferated on the Internet and is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, the references given often for the quote are from his book, *The Abolition of Man*,

¹ Much of this article comes from part of Chapter 2 of my book, “Christians as teachers: What might it look like?”

and yet it does not appear in that book. It may, instead, have its origin in the quote from Field Marshall Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington: “Educate people without religion and you make them but clever devils.” The second problem with the quote is that there is no such thing as “education without values” and Lewis (1947) himself mentions values many times through *The Abolition of Man*. In the section entitled, *Men Without Chests*, Lewis is critical of a textbook written by authors to whom he refers as Gaius and Titius, and states that: “They may be intending to make a clean sweep of traditional values and start with a new set.” That could well have been the case because all education will flow from a value base of some sort. The question is, which value base?

Professor of education, Richard Pring (2004) tells of a principal in a school in Boston who sent the following letter to the teachers on her staff:

Dear Teacher,

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by learned engineers.

Children poisoned by educated physicians.

Infants killed by trained nurses.

Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So, I am suspicious of education. My request is: Help your students become human.

Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmans.

Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children human. (p. 24)

Pring goes on to say,

I wish to argue that what makes sense of the curriculum in educational terms is that it is the forum or the vehicle through which young people are enabled to explore seriously (in the light of evidence and argument) what it is to be human. (p. 25)

While the methodology (evidence and argument) may be problematic, the conclusion drawn by Pring is a very valid and important one and as Christians we would say that is it actually a biblical perspective as it does highlight the importance of being human—and for us that means being made in the image of God and for his purposes.

What, then, are God’s purposes for our “God’s image bearer” students? This question may be asked at the beginning of the education journey to set the direction and again at the end to assess the effectiveness, or efficacy, of our work. Jesus said that it is by the fruit that human beings produce that we will be able to recognize the work of God in their lives (e.g., as in Mat 7:16). It is this fruit, the final product, to use an industrial term, which should be of primary concern to us. So often, the teaching of a subject or syllabus begins with an

examination of the material to be taught and then we think about the methods and resources that will be used to best teach the material. When we do this we are automatically accepting the original author's intended purposes for the syllabus or curriculum—an author whose purposes, perhaps, were not defined by a biblical understanding of being or knowledge.

Beginning at the end means that we first consider our perspectives on the purpose of the course we are teaching. We may ask ourselves: What should our students look like when they have completed my course? We may also ask: What will our students be able to *do* when they have completed my course? A better question, however, would be: What should our students *be* when they have completed my course and why?

The *purpose* of Christian educations refers to the *end* to which we strive—the purpose, or *telos*, to use a New Testament Greek term. *Telos* comes originally from a Greek word meaning to set out intentionally with a clear goal in mind. Biblically aligned goals, in this sense, are not the mere achievement of high scores in standardized test, or places in good universities, or employment with high income prospects, or even the obtaining of knowledge and wisdom for their own sake. This may be a problem for us as these are the goals so often held dear by governments, society in general, our students, and their parents.

Instead, we must look to the Scriptures to find the God-defined primary purposes for our educational practices. It should be seen, however, that many of the purposes of secular education that are not specifically directed at consumerism or individualistic secularism, and so on, are, in fact, secondary purposes, of a Christian education. Secularists have taken them as their own.

The *telos*, or purpose, of our education ultimately must be to glorify God. We live and work for him and his Kingdom purposes. While a range of other foundational concepts will be considered, we should have in mind always the biblical outcomes we expect from our teaching. In general terms these are to work with God to see the growth of Christ-like disciples who will glorify God by, for example:

- Loving God
- Loving their neighbors
- Walking in holiness and obedience to God
- Evidencing the fruit of the Spirit
- Pursuing good works

Such graduating students will have knowledge of:

- God,
- His purposes,
- His works,
- Their position in God's grand narrative, and
- The place in God's purposes of everything they learn in life

The lists we may develop for graduate profiles may include many other attributes of course. Australian academic Trevor Cairney (2012) has listed a number of things that we may seek as outcomes for our students and many are included in the list below. This extended list is still not an exclusive one and there are many other traits or attributes we may wish students to have. In effect, we are looking to see human beings who are growing to maturity in Christ, as

Paul says in Ephesians 2, and therefore demonstrating to others, through their lives, that their lives are founded on a biblical perspective on life. Once again, as with the lists developed by secularists, these need to be to be considered from a biblical point of view.

A sample list of graduate characteristics:

- A change agent
- A communicator
- Actively learning through all of life
- Attentive to others
- Celebrating
- Civil
- Committed to learning
- Delighted
- Discerning of truth
- Engaging with the culture
- Engaging with the school subject matter
- Faithful
- Flourishing
- Forgiving
- Giving
- Grateful
- Honest
- Hopeful
- Hospitable
- Humble
- Joyful
- Justice seeking
- Knowledge applying
- Knowledge owning
- Living in peace [Shalom]
- Loving
- Motivated
- Purposeful
- Relational
- Respectful
- Responsible
- Secure
- Self-controlled
- Serving
- Trusting
- Wise
- Wondering

The accomplishment of the many-hued purposes in this list will be a process through the entire schooling of the student—with each teacher playing their part.

But while the items in this list may be admirable qualities to seek for our graduates, they run parallel to the requirements of Boards of Studies or government Departments of Education. Obviously part of the teacher's role is to ensure that the curriculum material specified by the governing authorities has

been covered and that their students are able to engage with that material to the best of their ability. These processes, however, should be founded on, and contextualized within, the overarching framework that is a biblically grounded education for beings made in the image of God and for his *telos*. The government requirements are covered in the earlier statement repeated here: Graduating students will have knowledge of God, his purposes and his works, the students' positions in God's grand narrative, and the place of everything they learn in life in God's purposes. All of the curriculum content is covered by this—though, perhaps not in the same manner or with the same intent as those desired by the secularists.

And now a word from the students

Finally, what has been covered so far rests on an assumption that Christian teachers desire Kingdom-aligned outcomes for their students. We should note that in the teaching/learning interface, there is another side to the issue of *telos* and that is the perception of the individual student. In order for students to accept the truths that are presented to them, to understand them, to engage with them to make decisions and to act, the students must have some purpose of purposes driving them. It is not enough to merely accumulate facts without any understanding or application. This would be a soul-destroying exercise. So: What does the student want or desire from their class or education? What is their knowledge purpose? What do they see as their end game in the class or in school? What outcomes do they seek for which factual and other information will be useful in order for them to achieve their goals?

If there is no desire for understanding, no purpose for which they think the knowledge may be used, then, effectively, the learning process stops right here. Students may feel that the understanding of the facts may be useful for them so that they can understand enough to pass a difficult test, write a quality paper, for building a good foundation for their future profession, so that they can impress someone, or so that valued relationships (with the teacher or with peers) may be maintained.

Obviously students must see some purpose for really effective learning to take place but this also begs questions of the alignment of the purposes of education as seen by the student, the school the teacher, and the students' parents and peers. Further, there needs to be a strong desire toward those purposes on the part of both teachers and students and this, of course, is fundamentally a heart rather than a head issue. So, for any education that sees some level of transformation in the life of students, whether in terms of new quantities or qualities of knowledge and understanding, new wisdom and life choices, or transformed worldview assumptions, this is not accomplished by teaching the head but by training the heart. This is something that is not covered usually in secular learning theories but which is fundamental to biblically grounded education.

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