

# CULTURE

## in the classroom:

Christian community and deeper learning

By Chris Parker

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A promotional video from a major university shares testimonies from Year 12 students reflecting on their previous two years of learning. A discerning listener hears two clear themes unfolding: the amount of competition framing their learning, and a significant angst, pain, and stress that seem to run in parallel. These sub-narratives were being used in the video to promote the message that you, therefore, should go to the best university—you deserve it because you are a winner and you have out-classed the competition!

As Christian educators we critique this cultural storytelling, which has a limited place within the vision of gospel-shaped Christian education. It ought to cause us to ask, “Even though there are external structural realities that we can’t avoid—particularly in the senior years of schooling—in what ways can we re-imagine learning structures, learning liturgies, and learning language, to be transforming and counter-forming, so to minimise and redeem these messages?”

A key starting place for this may be the learning culture in our classrooms.

For authentic, deep, and gospel-shaped learning to occur, we create learning cultures in our classrooms that nurture community over comparison, cooperation over competition, and covenantal commitment to a shared learning vision over and above a mere learning contract. We need to question the assumptions, and consider the implications, for how we motivate learning as well as the narrative that we ‘tell’ through our pedagogies of how fixed our students’ abilities are, and question how we deal with learners who are wilfully placing themselves at odds with the communal vision.

The liturgies and language that frame and shape the learning culture in our classroom communities need to be bending at all times towards the gospel, as if magnetically drawn to its beauty, riches, and potential for authentic deep learning. It is a hollow and shallow community of learners that is encouraged to learn for individual reward, pride, and success; where the relational culture is contractual, mechanistic, and dominated by authority.

### What is community?

Hanscamp (2017), when reflecting on the ideas and insights of Stuart Fowler, defines community as, “A unified human organism with a distinct identity characterised by a shared life in which all its members participate” (p. 18). The community is unified by the individual members having a personal interest and vision that is in harmony with the communal interest and vision. If there is a malalignment with the vision held by the individuals and the vision of the community, then the life of the community becomes unstable and the potential for the community, and its individuals, to flourish is threatened.

Hanscamp suggests, “Most schools typically function as social organisations rather than communities” (p. 17). This can also be reflected in the classroom where rather than it being a community with a shared vision for

learning, it’s a collection of individuals shaped by external structures (standardised tests, national ranking) and external narratives (competition, individual success)—an organisation rather than community. Members may all be learning, but for pragmatics they are gathered together in one place. This then brings an inherent instability into the classroom community, the effects of which can be seen in many classrooms on most days.

The notion of seeing the classroom as a community, should not conjure images of homogeneity where everyone achieves at the same level, and no individual achievements or gifts are recognised or celebrated. Paul, when describing the church community (1 Cor 12), paints the image of a community with beautiful diversity; a community where members are distinct individuals but they share together in a common purpose that has them sharing in the successes of some, and, at times, sharing in the disappointments and frustrations of others. This shared life of wonder and worry is wrapped up in, and has its understanding and expression within, the shared communal vision.

### Shared vision to learn

So what should be the shared vision for a class community? What is the unifying purpose that should both drive and characterise the class culture? To answer these questions in the broad sense, we might turn to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “What is the chief end of man?”. In the context of Christian education we would hope that our classroom communities are tending towards an assumed answer of, “. . . to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”

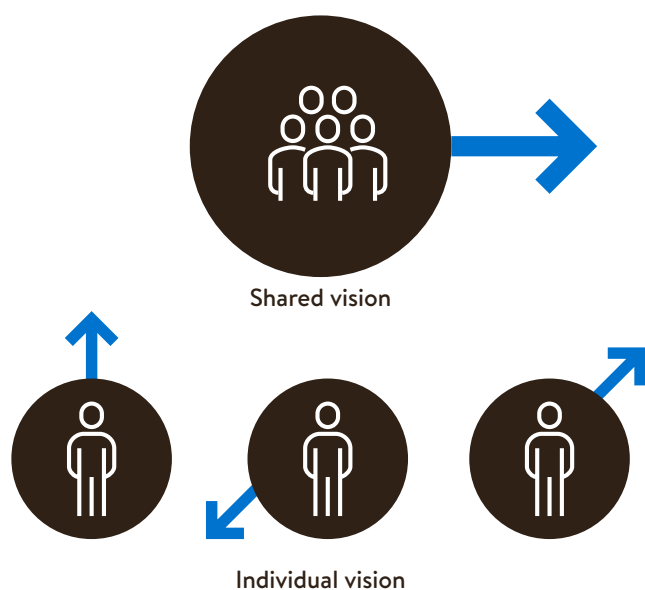
However, at a more actionable and articulated level, the Christian classroom community might have a vision that desires the whole class community to be learning together, unified in a common learning purpose (see Diagram 1); a unified community where learning is defined not only by all members learning together and progressing in understanding as a whole, but where learning is shared relationally by all members. This is then a community where an individual’s learning is subservient to the learning of others—to the learning of the least capable at a task, or to the least able to participate in a task, or even, to the least willing to engage in a task.

The shaping of a shared vision within a class community (or stage group, subject department, etc.) will not simply be achieved by a classroom poster or similar. It will require specific and frequent framing by the teacher, as well as ongoing liturgy, language, and pedagogy that is in harmony with the vision. However, two examples follow that capture a shared vision in a rhetorical statement that could be a poster (or similar):

#### Infants class

*To help each other to learn about God’s world.*

It is a widespread practice in Western society to motivate people using unrelated, artificial rewards.



**Diagram 1.** A common shared vision for learning in the Christian classroom still recognises the unique individual differences of students, however the communal vision of learning together about God's world will celebrate difference while minimising competition and comparison.

### Middle school maths

*As we together ponder the wonder and beauty of numbers and maths, and as we explore opportunities for using maths skills to serve others and bring God glory, we will look for ways to encourage each other to remain curious and challenged. We will celebrate together when we all improve in our mathematical thinking.\**

The notion of a class seeing itself—consciously and unconsciously—as a learning community over and above a collection of competing individual learners, becomes the cornerstone of classroom culture and pedagogy in the Christian school. Issues of student engagement, student motivation, student self-perception of ability and capacity, can all be helpfully framed and understood when considered in the context of a unified community with a shared vision. This article will now briefly explore a selection of these implications.

### Motivation to learn

When a classroom is merely a collection of individual learners, gathered together in one place for pragmatic efficiency, it might seem natural to draw upon techniques, and to create cultures, that motivate the individuals to learn for self-interest and reward. In this context it might also seem appropriate to create a culture of competition among the learners so that the drive to out-rank fellow individuals—and the subsequent pride and kudos that results—becomes another, and perhaps prime, reward for learning.

From the seminal work by Kohn (1993), *Punished by Rewards*, up to more recent collations of psychological and education research, like *Drive* by Pink (2011), teachers have cause to question the educational efficacy of extrinsic, decontextualized motivators. The potential to divert students from developing sustainable intrinsic motivation, to divert from developing a deep joy for the particular learning, and to divert from developing curiosity and drive to explore other learning that is not rewarded by the de-contextualised motivators, must cause all educators to pause. This can be demonstrated in this account by Parker and Wheaton (2007) from a previous edition of this journal:

An American fast food chain entered into an arrangement with a school district in the US with the publicised aim of improving student reading. Fast food vouchers were offered to students for each book they read. You might not be surprised to learn that reading rates soared. It was suggested that this non related, contrived reward was a successful motivator and there was much patting of backs and warm feelings of success. However, a more thorough analysis showed that children were choosing shorter and shorter books and testing indicated that comprehension scores substantially decreased during this period. It was also found that student reading outside of school, which was not rewarded, also decreased (Grille, 2002). Would the provision of more interesting books coupled with a promotion of the value and richness of reading have been a more effective motivator? (p. 15)

It is a widespread practice in Western society to motivate people using unrelated, artificial rewards. Employers, parents, and teachers in many classrooms are using them daily. When we moved from a largely agrarian society as a response to the Industrial Revolution, we needed a way of motivating a workforce to persist in the demeaning monotony of production lines; hence incentives for output speed and quality. This need coincided with influential work in the science of behaviourism. By studying the response of animals to stimulus, and assuming that humans were simply evolved animals, a view of motivating by artificial, extrinsic rewards (usually money) was injected into industrial relations. This cultural narrative soon flowed over into the fabric of society and into a variety of spheres of life—including school classrooms.

It might be fair to claim that this account suffers from significant oversimplification. However, it is surely reasonable to suggest that an amount of discernment toward behaviourism as a 'pattern of this world' (Rom 12:2) be embraced by Christian educators.

When the Christian educator weighs up the educational and psychological research that questions the merit of motivating by rewards, alongside the lack of resonance with the notion of Christian community and its inherent appeals to the individual, there is surely cause to pause and evaluate the ways in which we motivate learners. For example,



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do we speak of giftedness in ways that result in learners approaching learning tasks with the principal motivation to gain the teacher's affirmation and approval? Are rewards in the form of stickers, stamps, and positions on charts, offered for learning tasks (or behaviour)? Are the results in assessment tasks returned to the class in ranked order with public affirmation to the achievers and a challenge to others to have the same reward next time if they choose to be motivated by the successes of the 'winners' this time? Is an 'early mark' offered for high achievement, or for working quickly? Might it be that an unchallenged mindset of individualism and behaviourism is framing such practices?

In some of our classes, these, and similar practices (and language), might be unintentionally tainting classroom culture and the flourishing of the class as a community of learners.

### Mindset towards ability to learn

The amount, and nature, of communal shared vision within a class, will impact on how failures and struggles are engaged and understood—both being inevitable, and at times required, for deeper learning. Counter-intuitively, a culture of comparison can lead students to develop a fixed mindset of their ability as defined by their perceived rank within the competitive hierarchy. Professor of Psychology, Carol Dweck, through her research in educational psychology, suggests that a healthy appreciation of failure is crucial for deep and sustained learning. In advice to parents towards shaping attitudes to learning in their children, she suggests:

If parents want to give their children a gift, the best thing they can do is to teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort, and keep on learning. That way, their children don't have to be slaves of praise. They will have a lifelong way to build and repair their own confidence. (Dweck, 2012, pp. 179-180)

Dweck (2012) describes the importance of a growth mindset where learners don't see their learning capacity as fixed but rather as dynamic. A growth mindset is therefore one that sees failure as simply an opportunity to learn, or to at least be an aid to highlighting where attention needs to be given for learning growth. It is a mindset that is characterised by seeing struggle and failure positively. It is a mindset that can say, "this is hard; this is fun". The culture of a collection of competing individuals fears failure and is hesitant to take learning risks—for those at the 'bottom' and at the 'top'—as their worth depends on not having their positions downgraded or the flow of rewards jeopardised.

The classroom community with a shared vision for growth—with its associated failures, struggles, perseverance, and grit—has not only a greater resonance with the gospel, but is more conducive to deeper learning.

### Student engagement to learn

Australian researchers Gross and Sonnemann (2017) from the Grattan Institute, surveyed the research literature on levels of student engagement towards learning in Australian schools. Not surprisingly, they found that the research indicates that higher levels of engagement result in deeper learning. A conclusion from their meta-analysis suggests the importance that 'classroom climate' plays in enhancing student engagement and therefore learning. To quote the report:

It is vital that teachers create the right classroom climate for learning: raising student expectations; developing a rapport with students; establishing routines; challenging students to participate and take risks. These all affect how much their students engage and learn. (p. 3)

These findings resonate with the biblical notion that our students have been made in the image and likeness of a triune God who is relational and communal by nature. Humans are more engaged when in relational contexts—communities with a shared vision. Constant comparison and competition is the antithesis to relational community, especially when it discourages students to take risks and participate in communal learning. More engaging pedagogy will be required, however, a classroom community shaped by the Christian vision for communal life is the ultimate safe place to engage, take risks, and be challenged to grow.

### When community gets stretched

Even when a classroom is tending towards a Christian community—with grace, self-sacrifice, and a shared vision for growth shaping its culture—it can never express community perfectly. Although its members are all image-bearers, they are also all sons-and-daughters-of-Adam (including the teacher) and bring their fallenness into communal life. The effects can be passive disengagement, wilful disobedience, or even a pride-driven, self-serving strive for academic success at the cost of others' learning.

Christian communities will, by definition, be gospel-shaped and grace-infused. This means that, as a first response, the community will bend and stretch at its edges to keep the member who is pushing against the vision within its loving boundaries. This does not at all mean that bad behaviour, and a-communal attitudes of the heart are condoned, but it will mean that the community, lead by the teacher, will bend towards redirecting the member back to the shared vision rather than reacting with simplistic, mechanistic, out of context punishments, that may actually serve to push the member further outside the community.

The Canadian Christian educator Alan Bandstra, when proposing a heart-centred classroom culture and discipline, helpfully defines the difference between redirecting and reacting when disciplining (or should we say discipling?) as follows:

... a classroom community shaped by the Christian vision for communal life, is the ultimate safe place to engage, take risks, and be challenged to grow.

reacting	redirecting
focuses on the past	focuses on the future
makes the student pay	encourages students to think
considers what students deserve	considers what students need
draws the teacher into contention	allows teacher to guide and disciple
often driven by emotions	driven by mind (ultimately heart)
limited to threats and punishments	employs a repertoire of strategies
scrutinizes only behaviour	reflects on deeper issues

(Bandstra, 2014, p. 76)

Bandstra adds:

Redirecting teachers do not content themselves with merely getting the wrong behaviour to desist. Instead they want to help wrong-doers to see things differently and behave differently as a result. Ultimately they seek a change of heart as they nudge students closer to the path of what is right or good. (p. 77)

We might also add that the redirecting, community-nurturing teacher seeks to nudge the student back into the class community and back in harmony with its shared vision for learning. It is not possible to make this happen by formula or technique as this is ultimately God's work—though neither is it possible to make change happen with punitive structures—but the Christian educator is committed to disciplining in this way as a first response.

### Conclusion

It is certainly true that the world our graduating students will enter—which is actually the world they already swim in when not with us—is charged with competition and comparison in ways that fragment community. There is greater potential for deeper learning in the classrooms of Christian schools when we seek a counter-formation of our classroom cultures to reflect gospel-shaped community. Teaching discernment towards the competitive narratives and 'patterns of the world' within a gospel formed community, will not only result in deeper learning but also a deeper equipping and preparation of our students for life and service in a competitive world that deep down craves the freedom from comparison that only the gospel can bring.

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\*Thankyou to the school where I got this shared vision from. I would love to cite you, but I unfortunately did not note its source.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you think about the Hanscamp/Fowler definition of community? How would you nuance it? Can it really be applied to a classroom context?
- Working individually (or in pairs), construct a draft shared vision for your class (or one of them). Now share this vision with your full staff team.
- Are there ever times or contexts in the Christian classroom where it is appropriate to motivate students by appeals to self-interest?
- Describe the relationship that Chris presents between fixed mindset and a culture of competition.
- What are some age-appropriate phrases or lines of argument that could be used with students to encourage them back into re-engagement with the shared vision of the class?
- Choose your favourite reacting/redirecting couplet and share with your colleagues what resonates about this for you in your teaching.



Chris is editor of the Christian Teachers Journal and CEN professional development coordinator. He is the author of *The Frog and the Fish: Reflections on Work, Technology, Sex, Stuff, Truth, and Happiness*. If you can't find Chris he is probably out running, playing ukulele, or hiding so that he can read.