



Formational Learning

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The following is an abridged extract from the new book published by Christian Education National, *Transformation by Design: Crafting Formational Learning*. This resource can be obtained from the CEN eStore and is part two to the previously published *Transformation by Design: The Big Picture*.

Formational learning is at the heart of the purpose of Christian schooling. Formational learning stands in contrast with other more limited statements of purpose such as academic success, skills acquisition, vocational preparation, socialisation, and citizenship.

Whilst these purposes are all valid, a much richer and deeper vision is essential to capture the big picture purpose of Christian education. This deeper purpose is suggested in the etymology of the word education. The word is built from the two Latin root words: *ex*, meaning out, and *ducere*, meaning to lead or to form or draw out. Van Brummelen (1998) helpfully expands this by stating:

To educate means to lead forth, shaping attitudes and dispositions, and giving form to ideas ... It can never be neutral, for when we attend with people our interaction is based on our view of the person and the purpose and meaning of life. Education is always religious in the sense that it cannot but lead forth according to our faith commitments and ideals. (p. 5)

Every teacher, every school, every form of teaching practice (pedagogy), embodies within itself (whether consciously or not) a particular type of forming. The destination of this drawing out and the shape of the forming depends on the vision of what it means to be human. Plantinga (2002) suggests that, “Nobody pursues purely ‘objective’ learning. Everybody pursues ‘committed’ and ‘socially located’ learning. In fact, everybody’s learning is ‘faith-based’” (p. 67).

The purpose of Christian education is to seek a particular type of student formation. Students are invited to be people who not only understand the world God has made—through the lens of His big story—but are inspired to be engaged in His world as they live out what it is to be truly human as an image-bearer of the Creator. Formational learning is that which shapes and forms the whole person (character, head, heart, and hand) to reflect the image of God. Smith (2009) suggests:

Education is not primarily ... concerned with providing information; rather, education most fundamentally is a matter of formation, a task of shaping and creating a certain kind of people. These people are distinct because of what they love and desire – the kingdom of God. (p. 26)

Who Is Involved in Formation?

While teachers are actively and importantly involved in the formation of who students are becoming, students are being formed from the moment they are born and their influence circle becomes wider as they grow. Parents partner with schools to assist them in educational formation, but it would be wrong to assume that schools are the main formers and shapers, or that other agencies belong only at the margins of influence.

Indeed, there is a battle for influence happening, more so today than in the past. Students are being influenced by everything and everyone around them—in particular their families, of course, but also their traditions as well as the societal context in which they find themselves. Students’ desires and attitudes are being ‘formed’ all the time. Some of those influences are good and wholesome, others may be negative: even destructive.

While Christian teachers are actively involved in the formation of their students’ faith, wisdom, character, and education in the fullest sense, teachers do not form students as if they were entities that can be manipulated to the desires of the shaper. Student agency, student decision-making, and student responsibility are recognised as part of the forming process. Fowler says, “Students are created in the image of God and called to serve in creative responsibility. Students are not objects to be shaped and moulded but persons to be nurtured” (Hanscamp, 2018, p. 40).

Formation Learning Is Vision-Guided

All schools are involved in some kind of formation, consciously or unconsciously. In Christian schools, we acknowledge that we have a vision to provide much more than simple knowledge and skills. We have a vision that students will become the fullest version of who God wants them to be. In recognising that there are no neutral spheres in life, however, we don’t leave students without teacher guidance. Schooling and education are not faith-free or value-free. This non-neutrality is helpfully explained by Smith (2017) when he says:

Every school has a value system. Every school subject is taught in a way that implies a certain kind of value system that implies a vision of what this subject is – what is its place in the world and what kinds of things we should be doing. For example,

if I go to a Maths class and all the work problems are to do with spending money – that’s a value system. I once went through a Maths text and every problem was to do with using or spending money on consumer goods. There was not a single example of charitable giving.

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That's formation, right? Do that for a year in a Maths class—that's formation! You are learning what numbers are for and what they're not for.

Whilst respecting student agency, parent authority, and choice—and acknowledging the backgrounds students come from—we need to be clear and confident with parents and students about the specific formation we are attempting. We seek to tell them clearly about our vision for formational learning. Following are some of the characteristics of formational learning that we will communicate:

- We seek to nurture our students to walk in the way of the Lord.
- We want our students to understand and deeply know who they are as designed, loved, and created children of God—with a calling that is full of hope.
- We desire our students to be invited, inspired, and equipped to participate in the redeeming of a broken and fallen world.
- We urge our students to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind and their neighbours as themselves.
- We desire to work in partnership with parents in the formational learning of their children.
- We hope to influence and nurture the direction that our students are growing in and the people they are becoming.

Sometimes teachers think that they are simply the Grade 4 teacher or the English teacher or the science teacher. You might hear phrases like, "I just teach food technology. It is what they appointed me to do. It's what I'm good at. Don't ask me to do things that are not my strong suit!" For Christian educators, this attitude is misplaced. Christian teachers are unavoidably involved in formational learning—whether they acknowledge it or not. They must ask themselves, "What kind of belief, hope, view of humanity, definition of success, etc. am I forming in my students?"

Formational Learning Is Holistic

In Chapter 2 of Luke, we see a fabulous summary of well-rounded, holistic formation. The gospel writer describes Jesus' growth as a young man, saying that He became strong and grew in stature (physical), was filled with, and grew in, wisdom (intellectual, mental), that the grace of God was on Him (spiritual), and that He gained favour with God and man (spiritual and social).

Formational learning focuses on the whole person—physical, intellectual, spiritual, social, and emotional. It involves and impacts a student's head, heart, and hands. It is well-rounded. It impacts the whole of life. It generates wisdom and it shapes character. This was acknowledged, and helpfully articulated, in a government declaration made by all Australian state education ministers in 2008:

Schools play a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion. Schools share this responsibility with students, parents, carers, families, the community, business and other education and training providers. (Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australian, 2008)

Formational learning impacts the whole of life. It could be referred to as, 'all of life learning', or 'holistic learning'. This definition of formational learning is grounded in a theology which acknowledges that all things in the world belong to, and are upheld by, Christ. Paul the apostle explains:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17)

We acknowledge that God is in all things—ever present and interested. We understand that Christ is at the centre of all things. It is because He is the pivot-point at the centre, that we seek to explore and connect all aspects of the creation in terms of their proper relationship to Him.

However, in the context of secular education, a government document suggests, "holistic approaches to teaching and learning recognize the connectedness of mind, body and spirit ... Educators take a holistic approach [when] they pay attention to children's physical, personal, social, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing as well as cognitive aspects of learning" (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009, p. 14).

While appreciating this definition, formational learning has a broader understanding that incorporates the breadth of what it means to be human and the full orb of the schooling endeavour. Formational learning is holistic learning that

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relates to all of the child, it embraces all the dimensions of what it means to be human, it covers all subjects fields, it appreciates and honours the interconnectedness of all things in God's world, it involves all partners in the school community, it applies to all of life, and it is all for the glory of God.

The Forming of Head, Heart, and Hand

The reference to head, heart, and hand helpfully captures the holistic engagement with the student; their minds and learning; their hearts and faith; and their hands and character all being influenced and nurtured during the highly influential time of their schooling. It might be suggested that Christian education can be summed up in one simple mantra, "Head, Heart, and Hand".

Head

Formational learning seeks to develop a student's mind. The writer of Proverbs pleads, "Though it cost you all you have, get understanding. Cherish her and she will exalt you; embrace her and she will honour you" (Proverbs 4:7-8). The apostle Paul encourages us to have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16) and to take every thought captive to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). As Burggraaf (2014) suggests, "Students come to understand the interrelatedness of all aspects of life and their relationship to Christ. They bring Biblical discernment and critique to the ideas, theories and insights to which they are exposed" (p. 59).

Many educational approaches see the student primarily as a thinker, with learning being focused around cognitive functioning, intellectual contemplation, and conceptual mastery. Christian educators, however, understand that the formation of the mind also nurtures wisdom and godliness. Dow (2013) encourages us to realise that a Christian's mission is not only to pursue moral character but also "intellectual character" (p. 24). He states that:

The development of intellectual character is one of the most important and life changing quests anyone can embark on. But as the very heart of Jesus' command is to love God with all your minds, the pursuit of intellectual character is particularly important to Christians. (p. 24)

Paul again points to the importance of transforming our minds, noting in Romans, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2).

Heart

Formational learning aims to nurture the desire of a student's heart. Burggraaf (2014) suggests, "Biblically, it is the heart (kardia), metaphorically, that is the seat of learning and formation" (p. 59). At times it is difficult to separate heart, mind, and will, but generally, the heart is seen as the root of the spiritual life, the focus of the emotions, and the seat of human thought. Burggraaf (2014) describes the heart as reflecting the fabric of a person's life and shaping the formation of their character.

Hand

Formational learning equips a student's hands and captures the idea of a positive and embodied response. We note that the formation of head and heart, when allowed the freedom to respond, cannot help but be demonstrated in a response and in actions of the hands. Formation generates responsiveness because deep knowing is always embedded in action and engagement.

It follows then that our teaching and learning will provide multiple and diverse opportunities for students to respond, whether that be practically, or in other appropriate ways, within the learning context.

Integrating Head, Heart, and Hand

Even though we tend to associate thoughts with the head, emotions with the heart, and actions with our hands, these are, in reality, inseparable. Even though we've sought to unpack their separate emphases above, they cannot be split up in a simplistic way.

The Scriptures intermix these terms and others (soul, being, mind, and will) when seeking to capture the essence of a person, or when a particular emphasis is desired. This is helpfully explained by Mason (2017):

Strength and maturity produces wisdom and discernment, which in turn provokes and enables right action. The hands give practical expression to what we think and feel. Our hands thus reflect what is going on in our hearts and head, an output of faith. On the other hand, (pun intended) our actions can be an input to faith as well. Children mostly begin with action, and as problems arise they need to think and problem solve, which in turn involves the heart, feelings and emotions. Therefore, actions can be precursor and catalyst to understanding and feeling, as well as a response to it. Understanding the potential of hands as both

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output and input in the head, heart and hand trinity is transformative. (para. 8)

In using head, heart, and hand as a part of our core definition of formation, it is important to see that God calls us to a 'boots and all' response—one that emphasises the full breadth of a person's understanding, desires, and response. Hence, we can say that He calls Christian educators to critique the distortions that arise in education when the rational head is elevated and given primacy over heart and hand.

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Discussion Questions

Read, reflect, and discuss with your colleagues the following:

- Is it possible to have learning that is not formational? What would this look like?
- Formational learning considers both curriculum design and classroom practice. In what ways might our classroom practices—both in teaching and learning and in classroom culture—impact on student formation?
- Martin, Dan, Alice, and Chris suggest that it is important to consider both who and what is being formed when we teach. How might this impact on our planning as Christian educators?
- Smith (2009) is quoted, "... education most fundamentally is a matter of formation, a task of shaping and creating a certain kind of people. These people are distinct because of what they love and desire—the kingdom of God." Do you agree that you as an educator are shaping your students' loves and desires?
- What do your students understand is happening to them through their time at school? Should we be transparent about our intentions? Is your answer age dependent? Why?

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