

INTEGRATION OF FAITH IN COMPOSITION CLASSROOMS:

A CONVERSATION WITH TRADITIONAL AND ONLINE ENGLISH FACULTY

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The academic world, and especially the world of composition studies, has struggled with the place of faith in our classrooms. While critical pedagogies (e.g., gender theory or race theory) are an enormous focus of composition studies, religious identity is generally not regarded as a social construct worthy of examination in the study of rhetoric and composition (Goodburn, 1998; Rand, 2001). When faith is mentioned in the discussion of critical constructs such as race, gender, and culture, it is often perceived negatively (Goodburn, 1998). As composition instructors at a Christian university, the researchers felt compelled to examine the concrete ways in which our colleagues integrated their faith in a discipline that generally disregards it.

Over the course of the past few years, our school has undertaken an initiative to explicitly integrate faith into the curriculum. This push has resulted in an abundance of cross-disciplinary faculty collaboration, including seminars, lectures, round table discussions, research studies, and guest speakers. While all these events provided opportunities for thinking about our faith and how it is integrated within our classrooms, there was little opportunity for a discussion of faith in the classroom among colleagues within each discipline. Since much of the literature on faith and composition studies focuses on whether faith should be considered in the discipline, we wanted to create a resource that focused on the how. The purpose of the present research is to examine how online and ground English faculty, both full-time and adjunct, at a Christian school incorporate faith into their classrooms. The results of this study are meant to capture the integration work being done within composition classrooms across modalities (classroom, online, and blended) at the university. This study is both a record of the work that is being

done and a resource for future instructors looking to integrate faith into their composition classrooms.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Though many scholars have examined how higher learning institutions of faith navigate integration at the institutional level, the road to faith integration at a Christian school is not a clearly defined path. To add complexity, religion and academics do not always fit tidily together at the disciplinary level. Some scholars have questioned and criticized the over-use of the phrase “faith-learning integration” because it does not have a singular agreed-upon meaning (Badley, 2009); our use of this term for the purposes of this study is to discuss the different ways in which faculty describe bringing faith into their classrooms.

Faith Integration and Christian Higher Education

The drive toward faith integration often begins at the institutional level. In the last decades of the twentieth century, scholars like Burtchaell (1998) leveled criticism at faith-based institutions that he claimed were becoming increasingly secular. In response, literature has flourished on how faith-based institutions can effectively and overtly bring back an active discussion of faith on campus and in classrooms. Models of faith integration are often discussed on the basis of various continuums that range from faith and learning being totally separate to a complete integration; in between are nuances of the continuum reflecting integration of both expressions of personal faith and curricular implementation (Lyon, Beaty, Parker, & Mencken, 2005; Ream, Beaty, and Lion, 2004; Sherr, Huff, & Curran, 2007). There has been an examination of the views of multiple stakeholders in the process (e.g., administration, students, and faculty) in deriving the mechanisms for integration. Though

faith integration may begin as a top-down process at some institutions, it is ultimately the faculty who are key to the direction and delivery of curriculum that reflects and integrates faith.

Faculty Role in Faith Integration

The administration may determine that faith should be integrated within the institution, but it is generally the faculty who carry out that vision. Sites, Garzon, Milacci, and Boothe (2009) argue that integration begins not so much with scholarship and conscious effort but by instructors simply living out the Christian ideal within their classroom; the authors posit that this “ontological foundation” is the key to faith integration (p. 32). When asked about what matters most in the process, students surveyed about faith integration place great value on an instructor’s “caring attitude” and “exemplary life” (Burton & Nwosu, 2002, p. 17). While this personal faith integration is individual and an important part of the ambience of the Christian college, it does not necessarily fulfill a deeper curricular integration.

Integration of faith and learning seeks to find the truths connecting one’s discipline and Christian faith (Enwistle, 2004). An important aspect in faith integration is allowing faculty to collaborate in developing their faith-infused curriculum and share best practices in teaching (Reeder & Pacino, 2013). In some ways, the faith-integrated university is not one single entity but instead consists of many classroom experiences under the guidance of individual faculty members. In faculty interviews exploring the experience of integrating faith into the classroom, Helfers, Terry, Larkin, Zafonte, & Russell (2014) found that faculty often “expressed difficulties or traditional resistances to faith within disciplines” (p. 31). To gain insight into how these resistances are handled within the disciplines is the hard work of faith integration that goes beyond the personal level into the curricular level and is one of the aims of this study.

Faith Integration and Composition

Marsden (1997) points out that though universities institutionally call for diversity, this diversity does not include religious or particularly Christian perspectives; rather, Christians are asked to “leave the religious dimensions of their cultures at the door” (p. 35). In fact, “faith-related expression” can sometimes be relegated to being irrelevant or even inappropriate in the composition classroom

(Rand, 2001, p. 350), and some instructors struggle with finding tolerance when students approach them with religious paper topics (Worth, 2003). While the literature on integrating faith into learning in general is quite expansive, there is scant examination of how faith can have a positive impact in the college composition classroom. Most articles that examine faith in the composition classroom are by faculty at public secular institutions struggling with how to navigate religious students’ writing identity (Williams, 2005) or explorations of the struggles Christian, particularly evangelical, students have in writing at these institutions (Ringer, 2013; Worth, 2003). On a hopeful note, often these pieces ultimately encourage instructors to promote conversation about religious identity and Christian worldview because the goal of every instructor is to encourage critical awareness and a better understanding of how faith interacts in these spaces is important to that awareness (Rand, 2001).

Looking instead to the literature of more general faith integration, one must keep in mind that faith integration in the composition classroom is not a singular thing (Ream, Beaty, & Lion, 2004). One end of the continuum focuses on the ways personal faith expresses itself in the classroom. Personal faith of the faculty is often seen as inseparable from the classroom dynamic (Sites, et al., 2009). Vander Lei (2005), for instance, makes it clear that she is interested not in institutional faith but instead in personal faith and the myriad ways it enters our classrooms. She concludes that “when we seize opportunities to teach students about the potential for religious faith to inspire and nurture effective rhetorical practice, we might help them become more engaged students and more effective citizens” (Vander Lei, 2005, p. 3).

This study attempts to specify the ways in which individual instructors see faith as entering their particular classrooms; In listening to these composition instructors, the researchers heard their strategies and ideas for approaching faith in the classroom from both a personal and disciplinary perspective.

METHODS

Faculty working to integrate faith speak often of the need to converse about the process and collaborate with peers (Helfers, et al., 2014). To employ this approach, we chose focus groups as

they best promote “group interaction to generate data” (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 4). In this forum, group members would be encouraged to engage each other in discussion, ask questions of one another, and share anecdotes and experiences (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). The dialogue and shared experience of participants within this setting yields results that are not easily accessed through other qualitative means (Morgan & Spanish, 1984).

All participants regularly teach ENG 105 and 106, the university’s freshman composition courses. These courses each contain several essays. In ENG 105, students are assigned a rhetorical analysis of a public document, an evaluation (or review), and a commentary. The focus of ENG 106 is argument, so students are asked to submit a definition argument, a causal argument, and a proposal argument. It is within the context of these courses and assignments that this discussion took place.

The focus groups were conducted on two separate days. The first day included four faculty members who consistently teach on ground; they were organized into pairs consisting of one full-time faculty member and one adjunct. On the second day, a new set of focus groups met; these were comprised of seven full-time online faculty, some of whom have also been ground adjuncts. The faculty in this session were randomly split into one group of three and one group of four. The focus group sessions were conducted over two days for logistical reasons—ground and online faculty work across town from each other, so the researchers tried to make it convenient for all parties to encourage greater participation.

Groups in both sessions were given three questions to discuss for five minutes each (fifteen minutes of total discussion). During the discussion, each pair or small group was asked to share ideas and discuss them. Each individual was additionally asked to record his or her ideas on sticky notes during the discussion. At the end of the five minutes per question, each participant shared his or her ideas with everyone and handed the accompanying sticky note to the researchers. As ideas were shared, researchers and participants worked to organize them by themes. Focus groups were asked the following three questions:

How do you integrate faith into your curriculum?

What topics lead to easy integration of faith?

How are ideas for implementing faith into curriculum generated?

RESULTS

Though the focus group questions and general format provided quite a bit of structure and organization to the faculty responses, the data analysis indicated four major areas of focus: integrating personal faith into classrooms, topics that work well with faith integration, areas of the writing process that particularly aid in faith integration, and tools that help generate ideas.

Personal Faith in the Classroom

General classroom interactions were one popular way that instructors incorporated faith into the classroom. They expressed that the tone they set in the classroom was an important aspect of faith integration. Classroom instructors can strive to be the embodiment of the words from Matthew 25:40: “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Getting to know learners individually and showing concern for them makes faith an active part of the classroom dynamic, through the practice of this principle.

Online instructors who participated in our focus groups employed several techniques to integrate this faith principle into their virtual classrooms. Some establish prayer forums and invite students to submit prayer requests. Some of these instructors share their personal experiences with prayer in their biographies, which also often include scripture quotations designed to start a dialogue about faith before the content of the course was introduced. One instructor starts this process even before class begins: when speaking with online students, she offers “to pray, or encourage the student to pray, at the end of every welcome call.”

This faith in action can be extended to student interactions not only with the instructor but also with peers. In the composition classroom, one such space for this is during peer editing. Peer editing is reciprocal reading of assignments for assessment among peers, involving “intelligent questioning, together with increased self-disclosure and, thereby, assessment of understanding” (Topping, 2003, p.

66). Despite its benefits, many students go through the motions when performing peer reviews; however, a robust discussion of the religious and ethical implications of the Golden Rule, for instance, can inspire some students to do their best to help their classmates. Prior to leading a class through a peer review exercise, one faculty participant reminds students of the words of Matthew 7:12: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." Using this verse can be helpful to remind students of the nature of the peer review process and make them intentional in the help and feedback they provide their peers.

Some instructors also incorporate Bible verses within their classroom for student reflection or to set the tone for discussions and writing activities. This might simply mean using a scripture-of-the-day-type app or just choosing a particular inspirational verse (e.g., for the week of final exams: "Be anxious for nothing ... [for] the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7)). Some instructors have this verse on a Power Point slide as the class begins and as they get their materials ready, allowing the students to reflect on it if they choose. In discussion forums, students are asked to find Bible passages that illuminate topics currently under study. Sites such as BibleGateway.com were suggested to allow students easy access to different versions of the Bible (e.g., King James, NIV, etc.).

Topics that Facilitate Integration of Faith into Curricula

The overwhelming response from faculty about where they draw their inspiration for integrating faith topics in the classroom was current events. Asking students to think critically about local, national and global events or analyze political and cultural phenomena is something educators are already charged to do; as Christian educators, faculty members can challenge their students to engage in these discussions by way of their faith. Faculty also argue that it helps to be familiar with the genres that are practiced in our composition classes because then, as news breaks and articles appear, it is easy to incorporate these current events into daily lesson plans. Discussions of the latest mass shootings, raising the minimum wage, or the drought in California, for example, can readily be

seen through the lens of faith.

One current and controversial topic that provides opportunities for discussion of religious and ethical issues is the sale or donation of human organs. Instructors who assign this topic have reported successful discussions concerning questions such as, "Should organ sales be legalized?" "How do different religious sects and denominations view organ sales and donations?" "Should prisoners be allowed to donate their organs?" "Will the legal sale of organs diminish altruism and reduce donations?" One instructor shared a story about "a girl who committed suicide in India to donate her organs to family members in need." Asking students to engage with stories like this serves the purpose of not only engaging them in critical thinking skills but also enabling them to think through and articulate the various worldviews, including the Christian worldview, through which these ethical and moral situations can be examined.

The religious and ethical ramifications of the ever-increasing number of children being medicated for ADHD also generate lively discussions. Students are challenged to question whether ADHD is an actual "disorder," or a construct with symptoms that are numerous, vague, and subjective. In other words, is ADHD pathological in nature or is it a natural condition arising out of "how we were created?" Students are also asked to consider the efficacy of prayer and faith healing in the treatment of ADHD.

Participants expressed misgivings with certain topics. One participant argued that topics such as abortion or capital punishment could actually "make learning more difficult" because the arguments on either side are so charged and entrenched. One way to engage in these important societal discussions without students retreating to their entrenched sides and talking points is by bringing in an actual case. If one can talk about the facts of a specific case, then nuances appear and the standard "for and against" arguments disappear. This allows students to examine and explore their own beliefs and figure out how their personal faith deals with nuances.

There are also, of course, religious and ethical issues related to academic concerns. Some students consider plagiarism to be a minor academic demerit, but the integration of faith into a discussion concerning plagiarism can show it to be a serious violation of the commandment, "Thou shalt not

steal.” Some instructors begin a conversation on academic dishonesty with these words from Leviticus 19:11: “You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another” and then students are asked to reflect on the verse and discuss the meaning as it relates to plagiarism.

The Writing Process as Springboard to Integration

Many of the first-year composition assignments and activities lend themselves quite naturally to the integration of faith and learning. For instance, one requirement of commentaries is that students must assign praise or blame, which gives them an opportunity to express a religious point of view. Journaling encourages students to reflect on their religious values and worldview. Instead of asking students to analyze the rhetoric of an editorial or a speech, instructors could ask students to analyze the rhetoric in a sermon, an encyclical, or a doctrinal statement. The Epistles of Paul, who was trained in rhetoric, contain numerous examples of the effective use of ethos, logos, and pathos. Traditional and online instructors identified numerous ways to incorporate Biblical texts into classroom activities. In lessons about paraphrasing, for instance, students are asked to paraphrase parables such as the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18). In activities designed to prepare students to write a rhetorical analysis of a public document, students are asked to perform a rhetorical analysis of a Bible passage.

Some aspects of teaching the writing process lend themselves particularly well to discussing faith. For example, a key aspect of writing is assessing the relevant characteristics of the audience. In doing that, students need to consider various worldviews and perspectives, so participants identified this aspect of writing as a prime one to discuss the Christian worldview. A discussion of the Christian worldview in this context might have students looking at the values and beliefs that are inherent within it before considering whether or not this is a belief system shared with the audience. Another sentiment was that students examine their worldview even as they consider that of their audience. One instructor summarizes this idea by getting students to consider the following question: “Does your faith keep you from looking at things with which you disagree?” This alternative perspective on their faith can be a novel and eye-opening experience for freshmen.

Generating Ideas for Integrating Faith into Curricula

The researchers asked faculty how they generated ideas for integrating faith in the classroom. Some of the expected responses were using Internet search engines, such as Google, to search for topics, or looking at the trending feeds on social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter. Often, these feeds reflect current events or popular ideas that instructors can bring to their classes and discuss in the context of faith. Staying up on current events, listening to or reading the news, help foster this classroom application of faith to content.

Student writing and posting were also cited by instructors as great places for topic ideas. Our students often come with various faith experiences, and the unique perspectives they bring can be a great inspiration to rethinking a topic or a paper. These experiences are often shared in prayer forums and in student bios in online classrooms, which encourage classmates to contribute their own experiences. Perhaps the most fertile ground for ideas generated by student writing can be found in discussion forums and ground classroom discussions; here, student responses to questions that lead to reflection can enable instructors to introduce related topics that can inspire students spiritually or guide them ethically.

Participants also cited collaboration with colleagues, from within and outside of their discipline, as another source of great ideas. These ideas can be shared in meetings—formal and informal—seminars, and symposia. Best practices, successful Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs), and effective materials can easily be disseminated though shared drives. Collaborating with colleagues on research projects such as this one is another effective way to share ideas and concerns.

Finally, instructors use various faith tools to tie to the curriculum. Bible apps or verse of the day websites were mentioned alongside stories and parables from the Bible that could be illustrative of a concept or paper. One instructor uses the school’s own Doctrinal Statement as a springboard to discussing classroom expectations and behaviors in an introduction to the class.

DISCUSSION

Though traditional academicians and rhetori-

cians might approach faith as a difficult, foreign, and sometimes unwelcome concept in their composition classrooms, the instructors we spoke to have nevertheless found ways to integrate faith into their freshman composition curriculum. This integration happens in multiple ways. As Sites, Garzon, Milacci and Boothe (2009) found and our instructors expressed, faith can be strongly demonstrated in the classroom through the relationships with students and the way in which all students are regarded. Vander Lei (2005) points out that personal faith, rather than an overarching institutional belief, is the one that is visible and active in individual classrooms. Our participants shared that view and found that setting the tone in the course through student interactions, prayer, or Bible verses can be an important step in integrating faith.

Participant discussions about their experiences in college classrooms demonstrate that there are myriad ways to bring Christian concepts and lenses into the study of composition and rhetoric, but two of the most obvious and effective are through topic selection and discussion of the writing process itself. Encouraging students to think about global, national, and often secular events through a Christian worldview enables students to go beyond talking points and see nuances, thereby not only deepening their connections to Christianity but also developing critical thinking skills.

Contrary to current views reflected in the academic literature, our participants expressed confidence that—despite some challenges—the teaching and discussing of the writing process actually lends itself well to a discussion of faith. Discussions about audience, ethos, tone, and academic honesty can engender thought-provoking evaluations of how faith can play a role in the writing and reading of various texts. Additionally, religious or doctrinal texts can be a fruitful avenue to pursue discussion of faith and rhetoric. For example, the university's Mission and Doctrinal Statements not only remind students, faculty, and administration of the institution's *raison d'être* but also can serve as challenging and informational texts for writing and reading assignments. The Mission Statement, for instance, contains quotations from the Bible such as this one from Matthew 20: 26 that calls for servant leaders: "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant." This quotation requires students to use their critical thinking to discern

the profound truth in this apparent paradox and to see how Christian values are still as relevant—if not more so—as ever. The Doctrinal Statement expresses the institution's shared understanding of Christian dogma while also providing opportunities to analyze rhetoric.

In conducting these focus groups, the aim was to be mindful of the participants' time, which necessitated deliberately moving the participants on to the next discussion question at times. The collegial dynamic and the lively discussion that happened during the focus groups made it abundantly clear that faculty are eager to listen to and share integration techniques at the disciplinary level. There is much experience and knowledge in the faculty voices that we listened to, and it was clear that this discussion was just the beginning of examining how our discipline intersects with faith at the curricular level.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Due to the timing of the focus groups at the beginning of summer break, the researchers did not have as many participants and perspectives as would have been ideal. It is likely that more participants would have generated a higher level of robust discussion and, potentially, more ideas. The researchers also would have liked to have combined modalities within each group so that online instructors were sharing ideas with classroom faculty, though this limitation is somewhat minimized because a majority of participants have had experience teaching in both modalities.

It would also be interesting to explore what impact class size has on the integration of faith and learning. At our university, composition classes can have anywhere from 20 to 95 students. Smaller classes are taught in traditional classrooms, while larger sections are held in theatre-style lecture halls. It might be beneficial for future research to look into the question of how the size and physical environment of composition classes affects the successful integration of faith and learning. Additionally, since the goal of our focus groups was to generate practical methods of integrating faith and learning in individual classrooms, the questions did not look to address any of the challenges in integrating faith within the discipline. Future studies might more fully explore uncomfortable dimensions of faculty allowing faith to be more fully a part of the writing classroom (Williams, 2005).

Another area for future study would be the integration of faith and literature. While one could argue that Christianity has a stronger interdisciplinary history with literature than composition, the increasingly secular focus of our society has dimmed the influence of Christian thought in literature studies (Gallagher & Lundin, 1989). Though several of the participants and researchers also teach literature courses, the researchers chose to focus solely on the composition courses in this study. A strong case could be made for doing similarly oriented focus groups centered on integrating faith and literature.

Finally, it has been noted that there is a dearth of research documenting the positive impacts of expressing and integrating faith in the composition classroom. A future study would need to develop indicators of positive impact and measure those within classrooms in which integration activities are undertaken, either quantitatively or qualitatively.

CONCLUSION

Deepening our students' connection to Christianity is a core value of our university, as indicated in this excerpt from the Mission Statement:

The ... community defines its culture by the way its members reflect a committed relationship with Christ and creates the ... experience in a manner that reflects His teachings to support students and graduates through a successful life journey (Grand Canyon, n.d.).

Statements such as this emphasize how central the integration of faith and learning is to the mission of a university dedicated to preparing its "learners to become global citizens, critical thinkers, effective communicators, and responsible leaders by providing an academically challenging, values-based curriculum from the context of our Christian heritage" (Grand Canyon, n.d.). Given this mission, the university's faculty seeks to integrate faith and learning whenever and wherever it is appropriate.

This study is a necessary first step in examining how faith can be integrated into the composition classroom. The interest and collaboration among participants highlighted a real desire to explore the details of what faith integration looks like on a daily, lesson-by-lesson basis within our discipline. It is our hope that this study is but a launching point for instructors looking for concrete ways to incorporate faith into their classrooms.

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