



# Teaching in Time

By David I. Smith

My sense is that when we think about how faith informs teaching and learning in Christian schools, the instincts of most folks push them toward thinking about what is Christian about the words and ideas in the curriculum, or about the qualities of character and relationship sustained in the school, or about the devotional practices and service projects that punctuate the semester. All of those are relevant things to think about. They also all happen within a medium that tends to slip by invisibly (except in our constant complaining that we do not have enough of it). What might we see differently if we learned to think of time not just as the passing hours, but as the medium in which we practice faithfulness, and as a medium that we have responsibility for shaping in ways that support that faithfulness? What does teaching have to do with how we imagine time?

Curriculum theorist Dwayne Huebner has written about how all school curriculum implies a story about time. The present in which any act of teaching takes place evokes a past and projects a future (1999). There is an implied vision of where students themselves and the surrounding society have come from, and of where things should be headed. We inherit an environment, a set of current capacities, a story about what has gone before, and those aspects of the past that we choose to remember and dwell upon help shape the future horizon. We set goals and teach in ways that imply the future activities and competencies toward which students are to grow, and so we invite students to live now towards particular kinds of futures. In this sense, teaching itself is always telling a story about how we inhabit time—about who we are, where we are now, and where we are headed. Do we paint a story of the good old days in which everyone was virtuous (and slavery was a thing) or of a future of unending increase in our standard of living if we will only work hard? Or is it gloom in both directions? What do the images we give students of past and future communicate about our values?

Those kinds of big questions are important, but here I want to focus more on the small moves, the ways in which we manage the flow of time in class. Over the years, I have had occasion to sit in the back of a number of classrooms watching candidates for teaching positions teach a demonstration class. I often find these somewhat awkward affairs. The teacher does not know the students and is abruptly stepping into the story of the class mid-plot. Nevertheless, the way the challenges are handled can be revealing. I remember one occasion in particular, a competent enough class period dragged down by a pervasive sense of struggle, like a rehearsing jazz orchestra that can't quite find the rhythm. For the best part of an hour, the well-prepared professor labored visibly to get discussion going, asking a creative string of questions about the assigned foreign language text. The result was rather strained, with the students saying little as the professor pressed bravely on. At the subsequent interview, the professor speculated that perhaps the students were tired and had not felt like discussing the text, or perhaps they had not done the reading. After watching the class and chatting with a couple

of frustrated students afterward, I believed both stories to be false. I think the main reason for the lack of engagement lay elsewhere.

The kinds of questions asked were one contributing factor. A good number of the professor's questions were convergent; the kind that invite only a brief, unvarying answer and are unlikely to get discussion underway ("Look at the first paragraph, do you think the author is being sarcastic?" "Yes."). Yet there were also plenty of good, divergent questions that invited more thought and could have sparked more success. The bigger problem seemed to be one of timing. The teacher's tolerance for silence ran to two or three seconds, and so a repeating cycle became apparent. A question was asked, and after two or three seconds of silence the teacher would either rephrase it and ask again or answer it for the class and ask a fresh question. Whether this was over-eagerness or insecurity I am not sure, but in those two or three seconds the task facing students was to understand the question (asked in their second language), grasp the thought behind it, relate it to the text they had read, think of an intelligent answer, formulate that answer (in their second language), and resolve to be the first to make their answer public. In most instances this was simply too steep a hill to climb, and both teacher and students left feeling stymied. What sabotaged this teacher's performance was not lack of mastery of content, lack of charisma, or lack of presence and determination. It was the way they moved through time and the way they shaped time for their students.

Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel (1951) notes in his book *The Sabbath* that we tend to think of time as a simple measuring device rather than as something that we indwell together and that takes on particular contours as we do so. He argues that biblical faith points toward a more variegated way of inhabiting time:

Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time. Unlike the space-minded man to whom time is unvaried, iterative, homogeneous, to whom all hours are alike, qualitiless, empty shells, the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious . . . Jewish ritual may be characterized as the art of significant forms in time, as architecture of time. (p. 8)

I find the image of an architecture of time suggestive. It points to how our life together is shaped not just by how we arrange space but by the rhythms and ways of focusing that characterize our shared movement through time. This is perhaps most visible in the rhythm of work days and Sabbaths, normal time and festivals (both sacred and secular), that structures what we do as a community at particular times, but it can also be seen in our smaller gestures. When we teach we 'give time' to some topics and questions and not to others, we allow some activities to stretch out and we hurry others along, we attempt to give structure to how students will use and experience time both

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inside and outside of class. These are not just pragmatic moves. When we do something as simple as asking a question, the amount of time we allow for responses will affect who is able to respond. Students who are working in their second language, or who have grown up in cultures in which answering a question without first observing a silent pause is felt to be disrespectful, or who simply need more time to formulate their thoughts, will only gain a voice and the chance to participate fully if more time is allowed. A short time allocation will tend to reward the most vocal and speedy, reinforcing a cultural norm that tends to assign more intelligence to those who show the greatest speed of verbal response. It may also reinforce habits of reading quickly, skimming for answers, and speaking out before thinking carefully, habits that seem at odds with the kind of attentiveness that might characterize an approach grounded in charity and justice. Lengthening the time allowed for response will tend to result in more students contributing and in more substantial contributions (Budd Rowe, 1974; Budd Rowe, 1986). These contours of time for questions and answers are one small way in which particular rhythms are imposed on students, resulting in a learning community in which it is easier for some than for others to engage and to thrive. As we learn one kind of rhythm, we tend to become deaf to alternatives.

A decision as small as how many seconds to wait after asking a question before we accept a response thus turns out to be connected to questions of inclusion, community, and justice. Here we find a point of connection with faith concerns, for these themes also inhabit theological discussions of time. Robert Jensen (1997) comments that, “God can, if he chooses, accommodate other persons in his life without distorting that life. God, to state it as boldly as possible, is roomy . . . God makes narrative room in his triune life for others than himself; this is the act of creation, and this accommodation is created time” (p. 236). What happens if we take this roominess in God, the gracious creation of space and time for others, and connect it with how we think about the flow of time in our classrooms, and who is included or excluded by it? If Christians are called to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God, might that turn out to be connected to something as small and material as wait time when asking questions in class? Can we imagine teaching Christianly as connected to how we make our students inhabit our space and time?

Do we ever think of the flow of time as part of the faith language of the classroom? Do we think of the ‘integration of faith and learning’ as something that has to do only with ideas and course content? What might it have to do with our architecture of time, with the meanings made by the ways we use pace, rhythm, or silence?

### Sabbath and Blessing

As Heschel’s image of an architecture of time implies, the larger structures that we create, such as the way a whole semester or year unfolds, are also consequential. A few years ago, a colleague voiced concern that like the rest of us, our students are always rushing from one activity to the next.<sup>1</sup> This leaves little space for reflection, for rest, for worship, for Sabbath.

I suspect that the easiest interventions for an individual faculty member to imagine in my context might be to plan a series of classroom devotions about Sabbath in Scripture, or to assign a reading about the importance of Sabbath and the idolatries of modern life. Perhaps we can picture my colleague choosing biblical texts, collecting examples and stories, designing handouts, reviewing the theological arguments for the role of Sabbath in a Christian view of the world, and composing pointed questions for class discussion about how we use our discretionary time. Perhaps we can hear him exhorting students to live more intentionally, more Christianly. All of this might be a good thing (though notice that some of it adds more things for students to do).

In fact, my colleague took a somewhat different approach. He decided to restructure his course so that it was not feasible for students to do work for it on Sundays. He designed homework assignments so that they were always due before Saturday evening, with penalties for late submission. No new assignment for the following week was announced until Monday morning. He also planned to discuss with students why the semester was structured in this way, connecting the specifics of how time was structured to the biblical call to Sabbath, and to share with students how he spent his own Sundays.

This combination of structure and shared imagination is important, and not only because students might not actually realize what is intended by the changes unless they are let in on the thinking behind them. A focus on the minutiae of practice without inviting students explicitly into a corresponding shared imagination amounts to behavioral manipulation, which falls short of intentional Christian practice. Conversely, a focus on narrating Christian beliefs and norms without attending to the structures of communal practice that might make it more feasible to live them out together risks sliding into a hypocrisy or self-righteousness in which we exhort students to meet standards that we are not ourselves modeling. Jesus rebuked the scribes of His day for laying cumbersome burdens on people’s backs while not lifting a finger to help (Matthew 23:4). Rather than just telling students that they should live more faithfully, restructuring the time parameters of the course created a shared pattern within which there was a built-in bent

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towards the desired outcome. This will hardly solve all of the contextual challenges of living well in an overloaded cultural environment, but it lays the groundwork for the kind of intentional shared practice that can set us in the right direction.

It matters that the pattern of engagement here is extended over time, across the whole semester. Another colleague, also teaching at a Christian college, once shared with me their frustration that when students filled out evaluation forms at the end of a semester, they had given low scores for Christian perspective, even though the whole of the first week had been devoted to readings about how theology related to the discipline being taught. That colleague's expectation seemed to be that the connection between faith and learning was something that could be grasped intellectually at a particular point in time. It was something to be understood and banked for future reference, rather than something that would be worked out consistently over time in a combination of intentional, explicit practices and the patient building of a shared imagination.

Pondering my colleague's approach to Sabbath got me thinking about the ways in which courses at my institution typically end. It struck me recently that most church liturgies end with a blessing and a commission. God's peace and favor are spoken to us and we are called to go out and serve in light of what has just been declared. Most semesters where I teach, on the other hand, end with a judgement and a dismissal. The last things to happen are an exam followed by remote communication of grades via an online system, after which the course is over. For the past few years I have been experimenting with a different pattern for the end of the semester. This involves inverting the exam and the final class, holding the exam during the final class session and then using the scheduled exam time for a final class meeting. During the final meeting, I lead a discussion of what the most important themes were from the semester and what students think they have learned. We also focus on what comes next—which of the things learned this semester do students want to keep hold of and carry forward? How might those gains inform their work in the coming semester? What are their hopes and fears for the next part of their learning? How have they grown, how will they continue to grow, and what strategies will they use for consolidating what they have learned so far? At the end of this discussion I pray for the students, and on that note we conclude the semester. It is not perfect. Sometimes (though not always) it can be a challenge to secure full attendance at the final class session, given that the teaching semester is over and the exam already completed. Grades are still posted later, though I send narrative commentary to each student before posting them online. I have no hard evidence for what this change

might be achieving. I simply wonder how it might shift the learning experiences of students if their semesters were to end consistently with a blessing and commission instead of a judgement and a dismissal. It is another instance of imagination and practice in conversation.

What if we spent less time complaining about not having enough time, and more time deliberating together about how to structure the time that we have so that loving God with our heart and mind and strength begins to seem feasible? Might taking time to meditate, with others in community, on our architecture of time and what it is saying lead us to more careful ways of moving through time together? What kind of pedagogical home is constructed by the way we shape time?

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### Footnotes

1. I owe this example to Kurt Schaefer. I have mentioned it in passing in a previous CTJ article.

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