Educational objectives and thie influence on religious education and formation programs

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Question: Last year in our diocese roughly 50% of the religion teachers resigned. A very high attrition rate! Could you diagnose the sources of frustration?

Answer: The frustration religion teachers are experiencing cannot be isolated from the larger educational context. The ordinary classroom teacher of any discipline is currently caught in the middle of two very different educational movements, both urging all-or-nothing commitment. One group (represented by writers like Rogers, Maslow, Neill) urge that knowledge is personal. The student, driven by inner and spontaneous curiosity, should be allowed to roam through a rich educational environment, pausing where interest is aroused; the teacher is to remain in the background, there if needed but reluctant to interfere, receptive rather than directive or intrusive. A second and equally vocal group (represented by Skinner and the behavioral objectives movement) shift attention away from spontaneous student self-direction to carefully prescribed outcomes. They complain that schools in the past have wandered through their task, providing hit-and-miss activities, whose efficacy or validity was backed by little or no solid empirical evidence. Schools and classrooms must become more scientifically oriented; teachers have to set precise objectives and manage their resources to achieve those outcomes.

The classroom teacher is besieged from both sides and ends up substantially confused on how he should respond. Both theories have a certain appeal. The teacher would like to maximize student freedom and initiative; he wants to trust that inner curiosity. He hopes that such an approach would eliminate some of the hostility or disinterest he occasionally or frequently encounters in his students. On the other hand, he fears the results of taking such a risk. He realizes that there are certain skills and knowledge which the student should have and the teacher feels a responsibility to make certain that the students have built up those skills and acquired that knowledge. Teachers both want students to know **something** and at the same time desire that the students respond in some highly personal way to the material.

How does this tension between clearly designated objective content and personalized response apply to the religion teacher?

The tension between these two tendencies is especially acute for teachers in the more value-oriented disciplines. The religion teacher is probably the most dramatic example. He is convinced that his subject is an area which demands more freedom and personal response than any other in the curriculum. But he also may be con-

vinced that to some extent religion is an academic area like any other, that it presents the potential learner with some of the richest and most exciting ideas and achievements that western civilization has to offer. Religious phenomena and the disciplined ways of understanding them are part of the cultural heritage of the student. The teacher feels an obligation to communicate that heritage to the student and to make sure that he knows and understands it. Yet in this process, the teacher may be haunted by the guilty feeling that he should not force the student to learn something which is really so personal. This feeling becomes acute when the time comes to evaluate students.

What about the question of evaluation? How are we supposed to evaluate our programs?

There is no simple answer. But problems of evaluation do provide further insight into the dilemma facing the religion teacher. If the emphasis of the religion teacher or department is on highly subjective and personal response, then ordinary evaluative measures seem out of place. The arena in which the student makes his personal commitment to religious beliefs or values should not be subject to testing or grading. Who would give a test after a retreat?

On the other hand if religious studies is a discipline similar to the other disciplines, if it has established itself as an academic department within a school, then it might be argued that it can proceed to evaluate just as the other disciplines do. The study of religious areas involves information which students can be expected to master; it includes ideas and concepts which students can be expected to understand; it presents critical issues and vigorous disputes which the student can be expected to analyze critically.

Many a religion teacher or department has been tossed between this academic Scylla and Charybdis. Should the religion courses be totally student-centered and focus on the felt religious needs of the students? Or should the religion department set aside current personal problems and attempt to develop knowledge and understanding about the religious area? Frequently, teachers or departments have opted for one or the other, or have produced a confused mixture of both the student-centered and the discipline-centered approaches.

Do you see any way out of this dilemma for religion teachers?

I think an argument can be made that the confusion which currently marks thinking about teaching religion stems from a reluctance or inability to distinguish and sort out objectives and plan activities and evaluative measures appropriate to these objectives. This confusion about objectives is then transmitted to students, their parents, and the teachers and administrators with whom religion teachers work.

How can religious educators sort out their objectives?

A possible route out of this confusion is inherent in the very suggestive distinction between educational objectives that has been offered by Elliott W. Eisner. Eisner sees the schools performing a dual function of transmitting the cultural past to the student while at the same time equipping him with the skills he will need to creatively expand this cultural treasure. Paralleling this dual function, Eisner suggests a distinction between two kinds of educational objectives: instructional objectives and expressive objectives.

Instructional objectives are objectives which designate the specific behaviors

which are expected from the learning activities engaged in. These may be knowledge of specific items of information, or a particular skill, or a level of understanding. In each case the instructional objectives provide the teacher with a specific measure of the outcome desired. The statement of the objectives is co-extensive with the terminal behavior desired.

Expressive objectives, in contrast, do not contain in their statement a description of the terminal behavior sought. Eisner describes them in this way: "An expressive objective describes an educational encounter: It identifies a situation in which students are to work, a problem with which they are to cope, a task in which they are to engage; but it does not specify what from that encounter, situation, problem, or task they are to learn. An expressive objective provides both teacher and the student with an invitation to explore, defer, or focus on issues that are of particular interest to the inquirer. An expressive objective is evocative rather than prescriptive."

The point is that uniform outcomes neither can nor should be specified when dealing with expressive objectives. The focus is on the subjective, highly personal response of the individual. The responses will be as many as the people involved since each will be the expression of a unique personality.

How could such a distinction be applied to teaching religion?

Though I think any teacher could be helped by such a distinction, the religion teacher is perhaps the one who could be aided most since he is the one for whom the tension between person-centered and content-centered approaches is most acute. It would enable him to sort out his purposes both in his own mind and for those who feel they have some special stake in the religious education program. He could announce that certain religion course objectives are **instructional** and that appropriate teaching and evaluative techniques will be used. The students will be expected to respond in relatively the same way that they do with the instructional objectives in the other academic disciplines. On the other hand, the teacher may also point out that he has other **expressive** objectives where students will be given the opportunity to come to some personal position on the material he is presenting and that these objectives will be pursued differently and evaluated on a different basis.

Could you give an example of how such a distinction might be applied?

Take a course or unit on faith. Such a unit might identify as overall instructional objectives an analysis of the biblical foundation of faith, the history of the concept in systematic theological thinking, an understanding of the controversies between the different Christian denominations on the meaning of faith, and current problems and theories concerning faith. The teacher might use the lecture method or seminar approach to present this material. He could expect that the student would accumulate a certain minimal amount of knowledge about the areas mentioned above and that he would be able to clearly explain or critically analyze the various concepts and positions connected with the material.

In this same unit on faith another announced objective of the teacher might be to give the students the opportunity to explore the meaning of faith in their own lives. Such a process would necessitate a more personal and involving approach. The outcome of whatever activities were planned would be evaluated in a very different way than the section previously described. Perhaps the only expectation and consequent measure would be the

depth and honesty of the individual's reflection and expression.

An issue that has plagued religion teachers is the relationship of their work to the entire school program. Religion departments frequently complain that their work has to be supplemented by the total faculty if it is to be efficacious. Other faculty members complain that they have their own responsibilities and cannot simultaneously be expected to be religion teachers. Does your analysis offer any way out of this dispute?

This controversy seems to me to center around a failure to sort out and articulate the different kinds of objectives appropriate to the religious education and religious **formation** programs in the school. Teachers of other disciplines might be justified in objecting if the religion department expected them to accept responsibility for the instructional objectives connected with the religious education program. On the other hand, the religion department could be correct if they were arguing that the expressive objectives of the total school religious **formation** program could not be achieved without cooperation of other agents and agencies within the faculty.

For example, an overall expressive goal of the religious formation program of the school might be that the educational process will take place within an environment which is sympathetic to the serious consideration of religious questions (without prescribing how various members of the student body or faculty might answer such questions.) In such an atmosphere the student would have the freedom to review and re-establish (or not) his commitment to Christian values. Obviously developing such an environment is not within the scope or capacity of the religion department though it might be regarded as a valuable resource in the attempt. Rather it would require the cooperation of the entire faculty which must accept this as an objective towards which it will move in concrete ways. In the total life of the school it would mean, for example, providing opportunities for prolonged religious reflection, for liturgical participation, for personal counselling on religious problems. All of these activities would involve expressive religious objectives. As such they might well, or perhaps even better, be pursued by agents outside the religion department.

Your remarks bring to mind another point currently disputed among religious educators. Some argue that required religion courses violate the personal freedom of the student in determining his own faith life. The solution they urge is optional religion. What is your opinion?

This dispute over optional religion is another example of confusion over objectives. Those who favor optional religion argue that students should not be forced into a situation where they would be expected to compromise themselves in a very personal area. Thus only those who want religion should be exposed to it. Such a position is frequently taken in schools where there are numerous required courses in the other academic disciplines. What might be better said, for those who argue for optional religion, is that no student should be forced to conform to the religious values or practices that are part of the religious tradition associated with the school. On the other hand, it seems legitimate to expect that those who come to a school connected with a religious tradition will learn more about that religion; that their knowledge and understanding of the religious tradition will increase as their knowledge and understanding of the rest of the world (mediated in the other disciplines) grows. At the same time it seems clear that no student should be placed in a position where he would be expected or in any way intimi-

dated into making or feigning a religious commitment.

Would you say, then, that what we need is a more precise vision of objectives?

I think all teachers would be more effective if they had a clearer idea of what they were trying to accomplish. Certainly those connected with religious education and formation programs in a school—students, teachers, parents, administrators—all would live less anxiously if the agents responsible for religious education and formation could sort out their objectives using the distinction similar to the one suggested above.

It is unlikely that much progress will be made until the staff at the individual school level can evolve a clear consensus about what they are trying to accomplish and designate with equal precision the agents in the school who are responsible for their accomplishment. Until such a time religion teachers will remain confused and their confusion will be transmitted to students, parents, faculty colleagues, and administrators. And the religious education and formation programs in their schools will continue to be centers of turmoil and frustration.