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ABSTRACT

"Active Learning" refers to activities that help students connect new academic subjects with previous knowledge and experiences. This paper is an outline of a senior seminar on making connections between psychology and the broader lives of students. It is assumed that, for many undergraduate students, basic understandings of human nature are linked to the religion, faith, and spirituality fostered in their homes. The senior "capstone" course at Messiah College (Pennsylvania), for example, begins with a fairly objective and analytical comparison of data drawn from psychology and religion. A range of logical options for connecting theological and scientific theories is discussed to help students identify their own religious or theological convictions and epistemological presuppositions. The second part of the course deals with the effect of faith on human behavior or the study of human behavior to provide practical rather than theoretical examples of the interaction between religious faith and behavioral science. The final section of the course focuses on more individualistic and personal connections between psychology and spirituality. Students are exposed to stories of others who have connected the spiritual dimension of human life and the world around them. The purpose of this segment is to engage students in personal meaning-making. Student evaluation data for the course are consistently positive. Fifteen suggested texts are included. (TGI)

The Soul of Active Learning

Connecting Psychology and Faith

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THE SOUL OF ACTIVE LEARNING: CONNECTING PSYCHOLOGY AND FAITH

Introduction

When we talk about "active learning" we generally refer to the kinds of activities that help the student connect the new academic subjects they are learning with other things they already know or have experienced. For many undergraduate students, their most basic understanding of human nature has been formed as a result of religious nurture in their homes and places of worship. This is true whether these students are enrolled at public universities, private non-religious colleges, or private church-related schools. Dealing with religious issues then would seem like a natural place to explore some significant connecting points between the discipline of psychology and the broader lives of our students.

What does it look like to teach about connections between religion and psychology? At our church-related college, this concern has been addressed for many years. Like psychology departments at other church-related colleges, we include a religious dimension in a number of our courses, but we especially emphasize this dimension in the senior "capstone" course. I have taught this senior seminar for the past several years, and this presentation will describe some of the approaches that I have experimented with in teaching this seminar.

Definitions.

"Religion" refers to a formalized system of symbols, ideas, and ritual practices.

"Faith" refers to the ways various individuals try cognitively and practically to connect the religion(s) they share with others to the spirituality that tinctures their own individual existence.

"Spirituality" refers to an individual's general sense of the sacredness of the universe or of the mystery of life.

The Structure of the Course

I. Religion and Psychology

The course begins with a fairly objective and analytical comparison of data drawn from psychology and from religion. This analytical approach deals explicitly with historical and contemporary philosophy related to the interface of psychology and religion. It is the most specifically academic of the approaches, in that it requires familiarity with current philosophy of science and some fairly sophisticated understanding of epistemelogical issues. I usually begin this section by pointing out that both theology and science deal with developing theories based upon available data. We then discuss a range of logical options for connecting theological theories and scientific theories. The main purpose of this section of the course is to help students identify their own religious/theological convictions and epistemological presuppositions as they relate to human beings. The purpose of this section is to develop a more refined and nuanced understanding of what science can and cannot claim.

Suggested texts:

Barbour, I. (1990). Religion in an age of science. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Browning, D.S. (1987). Religious thought and the modern psychologies. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Carter, J.D. & Narramore, B. (1979). The integration of psychology and theology. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Evans, C.S. (1979). Preserving the person: A look at the human sciences. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Van Leeuwen, M.S. (1985). The person in psychology. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

II. Faith and Psychology

This part of the course deals with explicit behaviors, that is, it looks at how "faith" impacts human behavior or, alternatively, at how faith impacts the study of human behavior. The texts for this part of the course are not particularly philosophical or theological, rather they are behavioral studies describing the role of faith in human life. The range of possible topics is huge. For example, this unit has dealt with professional ethics, with gender roles, and with the distinctives of clinical vs. pastoral counseling. The purpose of this section of the course is to provide examples of the interaction between religious faith and behavioral science at the level of practice as opposed to theory.

Suggested texts:

Lebacqz, K. (1985). Professional ethics: Power and paradox. Nashville, TN: Abindgon.

Myers, D.G. (1993). The pursuit of happiness: Who is happy--and why. New York: Avon.

Reece, R. & Siegal, H. (1986). Studying people: A primer in the ethics of social research. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.

Van Leeuwen, M.S. (1990). Gender and grace: Love, work and parenting in a changing world. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.)

III. Spirituality and Psychology:

This segment of the course moves into the more individualistic and personal connections between psychology and spirituality. By reading stories of others who have thought deeply and experienced intensely the spiritual dimension of human life without losing sight of the world around them, it is hoped that students will make connections to their own lives. The purpose of this segment is to move the course to the level of personal meaning-making. Frankly, I want students to be inspired at the gut-level by the lives and reflections of exemplary individuals.

Suggested texts:

Coles, R. (1990). The spiritual life of children. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Frankl, V. (1963). Man's search for meaning. Boston: Beacon Press.

Gilkey, L. (1966). Shantung compound. San Francisco: Harper Collins.

Maslow, A.H. (1964). Religions, values, and peak-experiences. New York: Penguin.

Nouwen, H.J.M. (1979). The wounded healer. New York: Doubleday.

Vanauken, S. (1977). A severe mercy. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Conclusions

The senior seminar is one of the most enjoyable parts of my teaching load, and it has also been a course that most students value. Student evaluation data supports that conclusion. Our evaluation procedures ask students to complete a nationally-normed standardized evaluation form as well as three open-ended questions about the course. The standardized evaluation results are consistently positive, and the written comments, I believe, confirm this conclusion: students are motivated to think deeply simply because of the subject matter of this course, and consequently they feel good about the course as well as about the instructor.

The books and the particular content that I select are helpful with the students that attend my own institution. I am sure that the content would have to be significantly modified to meet the particular needs of students at other campuses. Nonetheless, I think it could provide a useful elective course on most campuses. It's a course that is invigorating to teach because it connects with students and tends to energize their thinking. Once a classroom environment is established that doesn't permit either indoctrination or provocation, the subject seems to encourage careful, even courageous, thinking from students.