

MENTORING FACULTY NEW TO CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

by Katherine G. Schultz, Schaeffer Academy

Mentoring is not a new concept. Jesus mentored his disciples throughout his years of ministry. Paul mentored Timothy, and probably Silas and Barnabas. Mentoring has been a part of many professions throughout history. In fact, teaching is unusual in that it demands a novice to be independently successful from almost the first day of the job.

Many new teachers are recent college graduates in their early twenties. Their friends are in entry-level positions surrounded by many more experienced professionals to watch, train, and correct them. They can go home from work and forget about their day, perhaps reliving their enjoyment of youthful activities and behaving immaturely with friends. Teachers, however, are typically the lone adults in their classrooms on the first day of school. They carry work home with them daily, and their responsibilities are little different from those of a 30-year veteran. In addition to the demands of any teaching job, the distinctive nature of classical Christian education is often unfamiliar to novice teachers, adding a layer of complexity to their professional expectations. Even the best prepared can be overwhelmed.

We all want our students to learn well every day of every school year. We want our schools to be known for academic excellence and a Christian worldview. We want to encourage our teachers to grow and develop

professionally to continue building our school programs to be as effective as possible. John Milton Gregory reminds us that

unreflecting superintendents and school boards often prefer enthusiastic teachers to those who are simply well educated or experienced. They count, not untruly, that enthusiasm will accomplish more with poor learning and little skill than the best trained and most erudite teacher who has no heart in his work, and who goes through his task without zeal for progress and without care for results. But why choose either the ignorant enthusiast or the educated sluggard? Enthusiasm is not confined to the unskilled and the ignorant, nor are all calm, cool men idlers . . . There is an enthusiasm born of skill—a joy in doing what one can do well—that is far more effective, where art is involved, than the enthusiasm born of vivid feeling.¹

In light of this, ACCS schools should have a formal program for helping new faculty become effective teachers in a distinctly classical and Christian setting. Such a program should help the faculty member adjust to the school culture and classical Christian education. It should be practical, addressing the realities

Katherine G. Schultz, EdD, has spent over 25 years in K–12 Christian school classrooms and administration and has been the associate headmaster at Schaeffer Academy in Rochester, Minnesota, since 2006. She also teaches courses in rhetoric and literature at Schaeffer. Her other professional interests include student worldview, teacher mentoring, and curriculum development in classical Christian schools.

of a demanding job. It should have a provision for remediation when a teacher first begins to struggle with any aspect of the job. Even teachers with previous teaching experience benefit from a mentoring program that helps them transition into a classical Christian school.

GETTING OFF TO A GOOD START: SCHOOL CULTURE

Any mentoring program starts with helping the new staff member become familiar with the culture of the organization. In a school, that includes formal policies and procedures, of course. But it also includes the intangible aspects of school culture that help a person align with the overall program. Every school has a unique culture derived from its geography, community, history, personnel, clientele, and more.

It is not only the individual school culture that new faculty need help to understand. In light of how unfamiliar many novice teachers are with classical Christian education, one important goal of mentoring should be to educate the new teacher on its distinctives. This includes the fundamental idea of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. It should include discussions on Christian worldview—both as a part of content, and also as it has implications for pedagogical methods. And of course, it should incorporate John Milton Gregory's seven laws of teaching.

A PRACTICAL PROGRAM FOR MENTORING

John Milton Gregory has articulated the key factors for a teacher to understand to be successful and effective, and they can be an excellent structure within which to design a formal mentoring program. Using his book *The Seven Laws of Teaching* as a foundation for reflection and improvement helps the mentor and the protégé target the most important skills early on, and address concerns before they become larger than life.

Gregory's book has eight chapters. We use each chapter as the basis for discussion in one-on-one mentoring sessions with teachers new to classical Christian education, whether they have previous teaching experience or not. Following are a few examples of questions based on Gregory's text:

- Overview: Gregory says he is stating the obvious about teaching,² but many novice teachers have not yet had enough experience to realize what is obvious to master teachers. What do you see as some benefits of articulating these laws even if they are obvious?
- Overview: Gregory says that order is a prerequisite to using the seven laws.³ How are you establishing order in yourself and in your students?
- Overview: Do you think you are more of a "natural" teacher or an "artisan" teacher?⁴ What difference does this make in your practices?
- Overview: Of the violations listed for each law, which are your "most likely to commit," and what is the best way for you to guard against those violations?⁵
- The Law of the Teacher: What are the topics that have made your soul "catch fire"?⁶
- The Law of the Teacher: How do you record what you are learning?⁷
- The Law of the Teacher: What will you study this week?
- The Law of the Learner: How are you assuring your students are attending mentally, rather than merely outwardly?⁸
- The Law of the Language: What are the most important terms of your classes/subjects?⁹
- The Law of the Lesson: How are you verifying the students know the essential information in order to assure they are ready for the new information?¹⁰
- The Law of the Teaching Process: What is an example of something students can learn for themselves, and how can you direct them toward that learning?¹¹
- The Law of the Learning Process: Describe how

a student might pass through the five stages of learning¹² on something you are teaching them this week.

- The Law of Review: How are you reviewing before assessing to assure learning?
- The Law of Review: What new discoveries have you made as a teacher in reviewing the lesson this week, and how are you invigorating your instruction through your own review?¹³

SETTING SAIL: THE TEACHER'S FIRST YEAR

Most likely, there will be more to address with a novice teacher than the seven laws of teaching. Many practical questions come up, not only at the beginning of the year, but at various times such as grading periods, special events, or conferences. For this reason, we have found it beneficial to meet with each teacher individually on a weekly basis throughout the entire first year.

This ongoing interaction allows the novice to ask questions that are important to him or her individually. In addition, it also allows us to tailor the program to that individual teacher's developing needs. Though not all at the same pace, and with individual variations, most teachers still experience common stages as they settle into the new job.

Let's think of those stages in terms of sailing a boat.

First, the novice teacher is eagerly rigging the boat. He anticipates the journey, gathers supplies, studies the instructions, talks to experts and friends with excitement, and looks forward to the start of the journey on the first day of school. Next, he weighs anchor. The first few days or weeks are filled with all the energy of a new adventure. Students are generally cooperative, the preparations are paying off with creative lessons, and everyone seems happy. Then come the doldrums: the teacher is still positive about being on this journey, but the winds have died down, and he has to get out the oars and do more of the work for himself. He has used the ready supply of lesson material he prepared before

the start of school, the papers to grade are piling up, and he is getting tired. Most likely, he will experience some disillusionment in this stage as he encounters parent conflict, a student disappoints or disobeys him, or his teaching responsibilities occupy so much of his time that he gets pressure from family or friends. He may be surprised that his experience in a classical Christian school is not perfect, and may not know how to overcome that without help from someone who has experienced and overcome similar realizations. But this gives him a chance to come about, and to get his "second wind." Though there is still work to do, still daily lessons and grading, he can now see the shore again. He has developed some routines that allow him to be more efficient and effective in planning and grading. He has had opportunity to put some creative ideas into practice and see the students respond positively. He can reach port and spend time celebrating and reflecting on the journey. And he can begin to plan for the next one—the next school year. It may not be easy yet, but it will certainly be easier for the year of experience behind him. And he can continue on the journey of a lifetime of continuous growth and improvement as a teacher if he has viewed his first year as a part of the larger whole.

MENTORING EXPERIENCED TEACHERS NEW TO CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

It is not only novice teachers who need mentoring. Many teachers at ACCS schools arrive there with previous teaching experience in schools with different philosophical and pedagogical commitments. It is important to assist these teachers with as much attention to their professional development as for the novice teachers. They are sometimes even more likely to experience disillusionment because they have seen the inadequacies and failures of those other educational systems first hand, and they have an idealistic view of what a classical and Christian school should be. Regular

mentoring and dialogue assists those teachers in making the transition smoothly. It increases the likelihood of their success as they bring their previous experiences into the new school, and allow their practices to be redeemed by submitting them to the light of God's Word. And it can be a terrific blessing to the school as the experienced teacher catches the mission and vision and helps move the whole organization forward.

CONCLUSION

ACCS schools can help their new teachers become a positive and significant part of serving families if they invest time in educating and training them in classical Christian education throughout their first year. Regular meetings for questions, discussion, support, and mentoring allow a smoother transition, and help the school maintain a strong program that is distinctly classical and Christian.

NOTES

1. John Milton Gregory, *The Seven Laws of Teaching* (Veritas Press, 2004), 27–28. Gregory's book was originally published in 1886.

2. Gregory, 22–23.

3. Gregory, 25. This can be a helpful opening to address issues of classroom management that many novice teachers face.

4. Gregory, 27–28.

5. There is a danger in asking this question because the teacher may be fearful of bringing up areas of failure. It requires that the mentor has established trust. It is also helpful if it can be done in the context of continuous improvement for every teacher, rather than a way to focus on problems negatively. However, the benefits of addressing problem areas early is that so many of them can be corrected before they become a major issue to parents and students that requires more public action, or even non-renewal of a teacher's contract.

6. Gregory, 39.

7. Gregory, 44

8. Gregory, 60.

9. It may also be helpful to read Mortimer Adler's *How to Read a Book* in thinking about the importance of specialized terms in a given subject.

10. Many students of education may recognize the work of Vygotsky and understand the zone of proximal development. Challenging students to reach for something just beyond their current abilities is likely most successful when done through the familiar avenues of their previous learning.

11. Gregory, 101.

12. Memorize, understand, translate, know why, apply. Gregory, 125–128.

13. Gregory, 139.

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