

## Book Reviews: *Checking for Understanding* and *The Art and Science of Teaching*

Reviewed by Bryan Lynch

Those of us in classical Christian schools are sometimes wary of the latest education guru touting the method of the day that will save education. We're not alone. In my first twenty years of teaching, spent in a public high school, many of the teachers I taught with had become quite cynical as they saw old ideas recycled and the pendulum of educational emphasis swing back and forth over the course of their careers. Sometimes good ideas were just not doable given available resources. Some ideas were just plain bad. But while a healthy skepticism toward the established education system may be justified, it would be a mistake to ignore everything that comes our

way from it. After all, some good *can* come from Nazareth. Such is the case with *Checking for Understanding* and *The Art and Science of Teaching*, two recent publications from the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development. These books provide a wealth of good ideas that all teachers, new or experienced, classical or otherwise, would profit from incorporating into their approach to their classrooms.

In *Checking for Understanding*, authors Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey provide a summary of the differences between forma-

tive and summative assessment, and then go on to detail practical ways in which teachers can be sure that their students are indeed learning what the teacher thinks is being taught. This emphasis on formative (or "informative," "on-going") assessment in this book is meant to help teachers avoid the too-frequent and puzzling situation where a group of students did not perform well on a test or assignment, even though the teacher spent a lot of time

dozen techniques discussed by the authors, and then presented their strategy to the rest of group, having the teachers practice that strategy. Because many of the techniques in the book can be done in a few minutes, even seconds, they were easily learned and taught to others. For example, response cards, value line-ups, and whip arounds provide teachers (and students) with a very quick check on student ideas or learning. Other strategies, such as "read-

write-pair-share" can be adapted to be more thorough, in-depth assessments.

Experienced teachers will recognize many of these strategies as old friends. The great service the authors have done all teachers

is to put these into one place and into the context of the very important step of formative assessment.

*The Art and Science of Teaching* is well organized, with chapter headings in the form of questions: "What will I do to help students effectively interact with new knowledge?" and "What will I do to help students practice and deepen their understanding of new knowledge?" Some of these topics are not as useful, perhaps, to very experienced teachers: "What will I do to recognize and acknowledge adherence and lack of adherence to classroom rules and procedures?". One of the more interesting aspects of reading the research and theory summaries in each chapter,

### *Checking for Understanding: Formative Assessment Techniques for Your Classroom*

by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

Association for Supervision and  
Curriculum Development,  
Alexandria, VA, 2007,  
pp 158, \$26.95

apparently teaching the subject. Formative assessments are meant to provide teachers with constant feedback on student understanding so that they can, if needed, modify instruction (e.g., reteaching, differentiating, etc.). In addition, well-designed formative assessment lets students know how they are doing so that they can be more self-conscious and self-regulating in their learning.

In a recent teacher training day at our school this book was at the center of our morning. Teachers divided up into teams to become "experts" on one of the three

**Bryan Lynch** is the headmaster and a founding board member at Veritas School in Newberg, Oregon. Veritas School has been accredited with ACCS since 2007. For more information on Veritas School, visit <http://www.veritasschool.net/>

continued on next page

AUTUMN 2008

## Book Reviews...

continued from page 9

and the steps meant to be based on that research is that, in all likelihood, it was all there in the works of John Milton Gregory, or Quintilian, or some other of the older writers on education. What good research tends to confirm is what good teachers already knew to be the case. (I once did a comparison for the teachers at my school of a best-selling book on brain research and Gregory's *Seven Laws of Teaching*. What was remarkable—though not surprising—was how much agreement there was between the implications of cutting-edge research and the understanding of a keen observer of children.) This does not render the research useless, of course, but rather sound research confirms reality. And it tends to be persuasive when we can point to Ciceronian and contemporary science for why we teach what we do.

What Marzano provides is not a radical approach to education, but very practical methods that are made readily available to teachers. In the chapter "What will I do to help students effectively interact with new knowledge?" research and theory are briefly discussed, and then a variety of classroom strategies are summarized, and "action steps" provided. The practical methods are very concrete actions that teachers can implement to work toward solving the question raised in the chapter. For example, the action step on "providing opportunities for students to practice skills, strategies, and processes" suggests a number of characteristics: initially pro-

vide structured practice sessions spaced close together, then provide practice sessions that are gradually less structured and more varied, and eventually provide practice sessions that help develop fluency. The chapter on engaging students discusses several techniques, from academic games (Jeopardy, Name That Category, etc.) to managing question responses through wait time, response cards, choral response, response chaining, and more. With several action steps and sub-steps for each of the ten

very experienced teachers with good results as well. The many classroom "action steps" will include ideas that all teachers can apply right away. Marzano's emphasis on the importance of the art of teaching, the individual application of principles, is one that I found valuable. Here is an extended quotation from the book's Afterword: "In this book, I have promoted the notion that effective teaching is part art and part science. The science part of effective teaching is founded on decades of

research that has provided guidance for the general categories of behaviors that constitute effective teaching and for the specific techniques that can be employed within those general categories. The

art part of teaching is founded on the dual realizations that research cannot provide answers for every student in every situation and that the same behaviors can be employed in a different order and fashion by two different teachers with equally beneficial results. I hope that I have succeeded in providing the necessary research base and practical suggestions to equip new and experienced teachers alike with the tools to enhance the art and science of effective teaching."

These two publications offer all teachers an important opportunity to reflect on what they are doing, and provide support for those teachers who desire to accept a high degree of responsibility for

### *The Art and Science of Teaching: A Comprehensive Framework for Effective Instruction*

by Robert Marzano

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development,  
Alexandria, VA, 2007,  
pp 221, \$26.95

chapters, the book has numerous helpful suggestions and something new for probably everyone.

Some strategies are less helpful than they might be. And sometimes old methods are just dressed up with a new label, as in "concept attainment" which seems to be the process of comparing and contrasting; "reciprocal teaching," which means small group discussion; and, one of my favorites, "elaborative interrogation," which is much the same as asking the students "why?" As with anything, use discretion in application.

This is a book that packs a lot of solid, practical information in a few well-organized chapters. New teachers (and their administrators) will particularly find this book useful, but it can be read by

## Book Reviews...

*continued from page 10*

the learning that happens—or doesn't—in their classrooms. As R.C. Sproul says, if the student hasn't learned, the teacher hasn't taught. Too often teachers in classical schools may be tempted to view their task as one of presenting data, or telling information, with the complimentary task of the student to receive the telling and to give it back when required. With our ambitious curriculum there is much to learn, lots of information to digest, rigorous preparation for college success to be done. Those students for whom this comes naturally will thrive, get high SAT scores, go to good colleges. We may then congratulate ourselves on the wonderful job we're doing in our school. But for those students for whom learning this way does not come easily, we rarely have an answer, or if we do it's sometimes not very

encouraging: they need to work harder, or longer, or get tutoring, or stop being lazy. It may not occur to us that perhaps our teaching is at fault; what these students need is for their teachers to have more tools in their tool box, more tricks in their bag. Teachers in classical Christian schools may need to become more flexible, more adaptable in their practice if they are to teach more than the top of the heap in their schools. This is not a call for dumbing down the curriculum but for wisening up the teaching. The more we as teachers learn about our craft the better we will be at teaching all of the students in our classes, and not just those who learn most easily the way we like to teach.

While these books may not rise to the level of Gregory's *Seven Laws of Teaching* in terms of its comprehensive discussion of the

teaching process, and are not as interesting to the classical educator, perhaps, as Comenius's *The Great Didactic* or even Gilbert Highet's *The Art of Teaching*, they do have the advantage of being useful in solving immediate classroom problems and offering strategies teachers can, with wisdom, begin using the next day. *Checking for Understanding* and *The Art and Science of Teaching* are two excellent resources for educators who want to grow in their understanding of the teaching and learning process.

---

### Book Review: *Culture Making*:

*Recovering Our Creative Calling*

Reviewed by David John Seel, Jr.

John Seel's review of Andy Couch's book, *Culture Making*, continues this discussion on culture and follows closely with the theme of "Recovering Truth, Beauty, and Goodness," (the theme of the 2008 ACCS national conference). Space constraints prevent us from reprinting the entire article, but we commend it to you. Please visit the Ransom Fellowship website at <http://www.ransomfellowship.org/featurearticles.asp> to read John's entire article. His review is titled, "Material Boy: On Artifacts, Discernment, and Elites".

#### Excerpt from "Material Boy: On Artifacts, Discernment and Elites"

Andy Crouch's *Culture Making*, is an important book written by an insightful writer. It warrants wide discussion. It is also strangely troubling. Perhaps this is by design: the sting of Socrates' gadfly. It got me irritated enough to get on a train and go visit the author in person. This review benefits greatly from our three-hour conversation.

Crouch is the editorial director of the Christian Vision Project at *Christianity Today* and sits on the editorial board of *Books & Culture*. He is a major voice in the future of the church.

#### David John Seel, Jr.

*John Seel is a cultural renewal entrepreneur, film producer, and educational reformer. He is a Senior Fellow at the Work Research Foundation and adjunct professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Kathryn, live in Cohasset, Massachusetts. He can be reached at [djsjr@earthlink.net](mailto:djsjr@earthlink.net).*