

Institute for Christian Teaching
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**CREATING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS THAT PROMOTE
PERSPECTIVE-TAKING SKILLS**

by

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When Jesus ended his story of the good Samaritan, he asked his audience a rhetorical question: "Which was the neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

The lawyer had the right answer: "The one who showed him kindness." But Jesus pressed the lawyer to produce "right" behavior as well: "Go and do as he did."

To behave as the good Samaritan, the lawyer would have to assume the point of view of the Samaritan, who in turn had assumed the point of view of the victim he found by the road. Contemporary research in moral behavior suggests that such perspective-taking is a highly moral act (Kohlberg, 1969). Paul was modeling this Christian behavior when he wrote to the Galatians, "Put yourself in my place, my brothers, for I have put myself in yours." (4:12)

Both Jesus and Paul endorse behavior that requires taking the perspective of another person. How do you tune into another person, so that the relationship exhibits Christian love? How can this behavior reach all those neighbors defined by Jesus in his parable? Christians wanting to be loving are often awkward, inarticulate, and uncertain of what to do. At other times they're downright forgetful, and even hateful. Calling such behavior natural lack or moral perversity may not be so helpful as finding ways to change it.

Exploring the relationship of moral reasoning to the ability to take the perspective of another, Selman (1971) studied the responses of students in grades five and six (a point at which moral development seems to be arrested--perhaps onset of puberty and its attendant stress diverts the moral progress).

These pupils viewed a series of pictures: a boy being chased by a dog,

the boy running, climbing a tree, sitting in the tree, eating an apple with the dog at the bottom of the tree, the dog trotting away. Asked to tell the story of the pictures, the students aptly told of a boy chased by dog.

Removing the picture of the dog chasing the boy, the researchers asked the students to imagine that they had just entered the room and had been asked to tell the story of the pictures. This time a third of the students reported their original stories, unable to take the perspective of a person who has not seen the removed picture. The rest told plotless narratives of a boy in a tree. However, when asked why the boy is in the tree, half the remaining students responded, "Because the dog chased him." Only a third retained the perspective of a person who has not seen the removed picture.

This experiment took on added significance when subsequent testing of the group revealed that high scores on perspective-taking correlated with high scores in moral reasoning. Although the ability to take another's perspective does not guarantee high moral reasoning, no pupil lacking that ability scored high in moral reasoning (Selman, 79-91).

What implications does this experiment suggest for a professional devoted to Christian education? Although correlation does not establish causation, exploring the relation of perspective-taking to moral reasoning offers some highly probable connections. We recognize history's ultimate model of sharing another's position as consummately moral; Paul describes it:

For the divine nature was his from the first. Yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, revealed in human shape, he humbled himself and in obedience accepted even death-- death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-8, NEB).

Emulating this godlike act, some of Christendom's notable missionaries (e.g., Adoniram Judson, Mother Teresa) have chosen ministries surprising in

privation and meager in visible rewards. Even non-Christians look upon such acts as being notably moral. As early as 1934, psychologist George Mead named taking the role of another "a skill that forms the foundation of all social organizations. Feffer agrees: "The ability to take the role of another, to shift perspective, to 'decenter,' facilitates social interaction among adults." In his study of social influence, Mehrahan concludes that grasping the nature of others' goals and reactions is a major component in successful therapy with adults.

Moral reasoning has generated considerable attention with the recent work of Kohlberg based on Piaget's cognitive development studies. Although the nurturing years of male and female development may produce a slightly different sequence at the conventional level (Gilligan 7-10, 72-72), there is little argument that the pre-conventional stages describe the most immature, and the post-conventional stages are both uncommon and desirable.

The stages, briefly stated as reasons for behaving morally, appear in Table 1 with Biblical or historical examples.

TABLE 1: REASONS UNDERLYING MORAL DECISIONS

CONVENTIONAL (HEDONISTIC) LEVEL TO . . .

(1) avoid punishment. This would apply to people who pay tithe or seek baptism to avoid hell.

(2) get rewards. This would apply to "loaves and fishes" Christians who followed Jesus solely for material benefits.

CONVENTIONAL (UTILITARIAN) LEVEL TO . . .

(3) seek approval. A Pharisee praying on the street corner to be seen performs at this level.

(4) maintain social order. Nathan's staging an act in the the palace to persuade David that rejecting Absalom threatened Israel's security qualifies for this level.

POST-CONVENTIONAL (PRINCIPLED) LEVEL--unusual before midlife--TO . . .

(5) abide by agreements, protect communal and individual rights. Esther's risks to protect the lives of her compatriots belong here, as does Nathan's risk when he illustrated David's crime against Uriah by telling a parable to the king.

(6) act on conscience based on self-chosen, abstract principles. Luther's position: "Here I stand; I can do no other"; Job's "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him"; and Paul's declaration, "If food be the downfall of my brother, I will never eat meat any more, for I will not be the cause of my brother's downfall" all state the speakers' principled behavior.

Although Kohlberg reports that "religious" students score no higher than others whether in the United States, Israel or Formosa, and whether they are from middle- or working-class families, his critics (Lee 1980) have pointed out that what Kohlberg calls "religion" is mere church affiliation, not instruction or commitment. To claim that moral development is independent of religion is to overlook the developmental nature of religion. Not a static phenomena, religion cannot be autonomous from morality.

Kohlberg and other investigators of moral behavior tell us that we can expect college students--and most adults--to reason no higher normally than the conventional stage. Because both perspective taking and moral reasoning are prized Christian behaviors, their lack should concern Christian teachers.

Consider these results from freshmen English students producing an exit essay to demonstrate their writing skills by addressing this assignment:

Write a letter to your parents, telling them which of their child-rearing strategies you would use and which you would reject if you were a parent.

Although students rarely describe their parents' faults in a letter addressed to them (indeed, students rarely write letters and they

surely know better than to bite the hand that sends the college a check), these students on a Christian college campus produced papers of surprisingly good quality in mechanics, organization, coherence, clarity, and specificity--all skills they were required to demonstrate. What the majority lacked was something not required: an element of grace in naming their parents' faults. Imagine, for example, being the parent who receives a letter with one of these remarks:

You were raised in a very old-fashioned way, and you tried to raise me the same way, making things intolerable at home.

You were never fair when it came to [my sibling]. She wasn't disciplined when she needed to be--and, on the other hand, you were hard on me. I developed a strong dislike for her, and for that you are responsible.

Because of the experiences I had while living with you, I am very bitter and disappointed. I had an opportunity to grow up as a normal adult, but the both of you have ruined it.

You always had a problem with the fact that you can't give or accept love.

Father showed his ugly side by having that damn short temper. [Later in this paper the student pledges to conduct daily family worship in his home, after citing its lack as another parental omission which he regrets.]

While all of the students named positive qualities as well, unwittingly verifying James' observation that "out of the same mouth come praises and curses" (3:5), the jarring nature of their accusations would defuse the positive effects of these students' letters. Fortunately, none of the letters went into the mail. A teacher-evaluator did pen a memo to his colleagues: How can we add achievement of grace to our writing curriculum?

Alerted by this experience, one of the teacher-graders submitted examples of graceless comments to students in a feature writing class. Most of the students showed ability to revise the statements following the

direction, "Consider the effect this graceless comment will have on the reader. Improve it with an element of grace to provide less pain." Discussing the meaning of grace, they agreed that the language of both theology and propriety would fit here. When they moved to analysis of peer writing later in the class period, the students, unprompted--and sometimes ungraceful--surprised the teacher by identifying one another's evaluative statements which lacked grace.

This evidence that college students are susceptible to the challenge of writing gracefully, supports Kohlberg's hypothesis: "Moral judgment and all of moral development can be significantly enhanced by providing certain structured sets of experiences with which the individual can fruitfully interact." (Lee 339,340).

The feature writing students' responses to a consciousness-raising exploration of the impact of their writing prompted the inquiry for this paper: seeking strategies appropriate for college writing assignments which require students to consider the effects of their comments on their audience, a perspective-taking experience, hypothesizing that such experiences assist students in moving to higher levels of moral reasoning. In his study of moral development, Fowler underlines the importance of this kind of experience:

If the social environment encourages children and youth to take the personal and social perspectives of others, the expansion of moral imagination eventually required for moral reasoning will be nurtured. . . .

Moral development requires progress in the ability accurately to take the perspectives of others, their needs and rights, and to see one's own claims and obligations with similar balance, detachment, and accuracy (131).

The proposed strategies for the most part are appropriate for any discipline where students are required to organize and synthesize

information in writing, whether in a formal paper or essay examination item. The problems inherent in evaluating papers and essay test items notwithstanding, producing such writing remains an important educational experience in every discipline.

Note also the heuristic possibilities inherent in each writing assignment.

STRATEGY ONE: Assign an audience.

Rationale: Audience awareness stretches students' thinking beyond themselves. Without an assigned audience, students write for an amorphous grader whose proclivities they typically consider for mere selfish reasons. Burke (579) has observed that you persuade another person "only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his."

Sample Assignments: An essay test question can provide an audience for the response:

How would you explain the electoral college to a newly arrived visitor to the United States?

Describe to a novice on our campus the process for finding (a) current journals, (b) recent unbound journals, (c) bound journals in our library. The novice is shy and will not respond to your suggestion to ask the librarian. Use efficient instructions to get the student into the right area and explain explicitly how the magazines are arranged. Name locations and sources for determining what journals are in the library's collection. Don't overlook the significance of call numbers for locating bound volumes.

The narrator in the story you have just read includes several lengthy digressions. Imagine the story's author is in your writing group. How would you respond to someone's suggestion that he omit or retain the digressions?

Even a book report can have an assigned audience:

Write as if your readers have not seen the book and will decide whether to read it based on what you say. Because your readers have interests and purposes separate from yours and unknown to you, don't

recommend or condemn the book. Instead, provide specific data that will let your readers know if the book coincides with their interests and purposes.

Evaluation: To evaluate the report for success in perspective-taking, ask: Has the student regarded his or her audience capable of making a decision without including interpretation of the information provided? A student who says, "I don't agree with the author's biased statements about women in Chapter 3," needs a reminder: Your reader will wonder: What position does the author take in Chapter 3?

STRATEGY TWO: DESIGN ASSIGNMENTS THAT ALLOW STUDENTS TO PERFORM AS IF THEY ARE PROFESSIONALS IN YOUR DISCIPLINE

Rationale: Learning to behave "as if" they are professionals involves students in the procedure for arriving at knowledge. They are evaluating as well as collecting information. Jerome Bruner has observed that nothing is "more central to a discipline than its way of thinking. . . . The young learner should be given the chance to solve problems, to conjecture, to quarrel as these are done at the heart of the discipline" (1965). Writing assignments can cluster around such conjecturing and quarreling as the discipline entertains.

In an English language study class, Postman and Weingartner point out, "the fortunate students gets to behave a language scholars do--the grammarian, semanticist, lexicographer, language historian, dialectologist, language sociologist, and psycholinguist" (38).

Sample Assignment: Write an imaginary dialogue with a major person in the discipline we are studying.

Make weekly journal entries constituting a dialogue with the textbook writer or a seminal professional/thinker.

Evaluation: For a student whose response began: "When I began reading your short stories, Mr. Hemingway, you left me pretty ho hum," an evaluator awaited further response. It came:

I'm beginning to like you better. You hit the nail on the head with your stories about superficiality--about brutality and triviality--about people in the height of their people-ish-ness. (Barkema 92, 93)

For a student who begins the assignment thus, "Herr Doktor Freud: How much of your Oedipus complex relates to your attachment to your mother? I'd like to talk with you about over-generalizing from your own experience," the evaluator acknowledges that the student has mastered the textbook's substantive information. Then to continue the playful perspective-taking, she asks: How would Doktor Freud respond to your question?

Further evaluative questions could include these: Have you engaged in a dialogue? Have you questioned your source? Have you achieved a unique position/response? A new/personal insight? Will your response pique the interest of your audience or raise his/her ire?

For floundering students the evaluator can provide a model. Out of C. S. Lewis' imaginary dialoguing with God, written at the time of his wife's death, comes a beautiful example of a journal entry. Although a model for students in any discipline, it is particularly appropriate for students journaling meditations for religion class:

Lord, are these your real terms? Can I meet H. again only if I learn to love you so much that I don't care whether I meet or or not? Consider, Lord, how it looks to us. What would anyone think of me if I said to the boys, 'No toffee now. But when you've grown up and don't really want toffee you shall have as much of it as you choose?' (54)

STRATEGY THREE: ASSIGN PAPERS THAT REQUIRE MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES.

Rationale: To achieve decentering, students writing case study reports (e.g., for social work), classroom observations for education, or summaries for counseling sessions in psychology or the ministry, will profit from preparing two or more reports from different perspectives. Researchers (Borzak and Hursh) report that students in a community studies class proved more likely to establish satisfactory peer-like relationships with supervisors and to achieve higher academic success in the course if they could successfully "decenter," i.e., apprehend another person's frame of reference as well as their own (Feffer 415-422).

Sample Assignments: Produce decentering exercises based on these instructions:

Write your first paper from the perspective of the client.
Write your second paper from the perspective of the professional.
For your last and most extensive paper, use your own perspective.

Explain from Harry Truman's position reasons for ordering the bombing of Hiroshima. Next take the role of a Japanese survivor of the bombing forty years later and give an assessment by the survivor. Finally, offer your response to this event.

Evaluation: For an unsuccessful paper, the evaluator takes the role of the person inadequately portrayed: But Harry Truman will say: "My position gets short shrift in your paper. Please don't overlook the ethical issues as I defined them." For a successful paper, the evaluator notes: "One of the strengths of your response is that in spite of your differences with Mr. Truman, he could endorse your explanation as fair."

STRATEGY FOUR: DESCRIBE A JOURNAL AUDIENCE USING SPECIFIC DATA FROM SIX CONSECUTIVE ISSUES.

Rationale: Successful completion of this assignment leads students to

look at a journal or magazine relevant to a selected audience. They imagine who they would be if they were devotees of the magazine. This relieves a judgmental stance toward a journal for irrelevancies such as bland layout in a professional journal which achieves its reputation from substance. An added advantage of this assignment is that articles for students to lean upon do not exist. They are on their own in imagining other times and readers.

Sample Assignment: This idea modifies one designed by Eugene Hammond in Critical Thinking: Thoughtful Writing (280).

From the list of humanities journals provided, select one title. Examine six consecutive issues of this magazine to determine the journals' probable audience. In a paper, describe who would read this magazine. What are their interests? What have advertisers inferred about the nature of the publication's audience? Would the buyers be likely to buy off the rack or subscribe? Instead of criticizing a gaudy or drab format, consider who would be attracted to the magazine's notable qualities. Perceptive students in the past have recognized the format stringencies imposed on publications of World War II vintage. Your audience is someone who has not seen the issues you examine and who is not acquainted with the assignment.

This assignment provides the added advantage of having few published articles on the topic for students to lean upon. They are on their own in imagining other times and readers.

Evaluation: A student who flaws a paper with this beginning, "The magazine I looked at for this assignment . . ." needs an alert to observe the restrictions of reporting discourse. An efficient evaluation could be: Your reader will ask: What assignment?

STRATEGY FIVE: GIVE STUDENTS OPPORTUNITY TO REFRAME OTHERS' ACTIONS IN THE MOST FAVORABLE WAY POSSIBLE

Rationale: A strategy gaining positive reputation in counseling and psychology, the reframing process appears under various rubrics: role taking, perspective taking, cognitive decentering, permeability,

mutuality, and decentering. A teacher can model this construct to good advantage for the growth of students' self-esteem. But because dealing gently with a student does not necessarily produce a like response, a specific skill practice approach, popular with counselors, appears promising.

Marriage counselor Richard B. Stuart (51) says that a person's willingness to label a spouse's behavior in the best possible light (e.g.: "She's late to dinner because she's so devoted to her work" or "because she has such a tough time breaking off other people's intrusions on her time"), rather than the worst ("She's late because she's selfish and doesn't care about me and the kids" or "because she's so eternally gabby with other people") is notably efficacious to the relationship, even if the label is wrong. Why? Because the spouse then gets the benefit-of-the-mistake treatment, reducing conflict, avoiding self-esteem damage, and experiencing acceptance.

Before practicing this skill, students uneasy with the concept should consider this potent Biblical example: Jesus characterizes his crucifiers in a surprisingly gentle manner: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." A more conventional frame would be "They're cruel, insensitive, devoid of integrity." Jesus chose the conciliatory frame.

Sample Assignment: Translated into a writing assignment, reframing helps students deepen their interpretation if they have read superficially.

After reading Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Greenleaf," students responding to this assignment correct their superficial interpretation. Successful responses to this exercise will indicate ability to take an alternate point of view:

Most readers initially assume the story's point of view--that of a widow trying to keep things going on the family farm. The continuing

irritations she experiences from the hired man and his family are easy to identify with. These people have neither dignity nor station in her world. The hired man responds laconically, indifferently to her demands. But the story is told exclusively from Mrs. May's point of view. Imagine that you are the hired man, retelling your experiences to your family. Explain why you engage in subtle delays. What affronts have you experienced? How are you playing this game between non-equals?

Write your response as if you are the hired man. He would not begin by saying, "If I were the hired man." Neither would you-as-the-hired man.

In another reframing exercise, students assigned to report the history of America's "discoverers" from the view point of the American Indian must deal with the Indian's question: "You think who discovered this land?"

Evaluation: Successful students will indicate ability to take an alternate point of view. A student competent with the Greenleaf story will perceive the subtlety and sophistication of the hired man. Other clues to competence would be retaining the hired man's diction, reflecting his resigned nature, portraying his cleverness in dealing with his boss, and maintaining his point of view consistently.

STRATEGY SIX: CREATE ASSIGNMENTS REQUIRING OBSERVATION AND ASSESSMENT OF DISCRETE BEHAVIORS OF OTHERS.

To assume the perspective of another person or group of people of a different race, sex, or social class, students need more than encouragement to agree that people whose ways are different are not necessarily wrong. Discussion may leave a student with a vague sense that he should be tolerant. But a clear sense that others have ways worth knowing and learning about requires specific data. When the disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the Messiah, Jesus could have expounded the

Old Testament prophecies. Instead, he continued his daily routines, healing and teaching. At the end of a data-collecting day, John's disciples received an assignment in reporting data: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard."

Students who are quick to generalize will approach data collection skeptically. But these assignments can assist them in going beyond surface interpretations.

Sample Assignment: Here's a cross-disciplinary inquiry adaptable to education, psychology and language students:

Because a person's learning style (or linguistic orientation/metaphorical preferences) affect his view of the world, counselors have found that if they perceive and use a counselee's orientation to audio, visual, or kinesthetic learning/metaphors, they achieve a higher rate of progress. This skill should assist you in teaching, counseling, nursing, employer-employee relations, or even dating a significant other. To sharpen your perceptions of such usage, record during the next four days metaphors related to audio/visual/or kinesthetic orientation collected from a person with whom you have two or more contact hours. This can be a family member, date, or professor. To be purely uncontaminated, your data collection should remain unknown to your subject. Categorize all metaphors that fall into one of these three categories. In class we will practice appropriate responses for them.

Evaluation: Students diligent in data-collecting will produce specific verbatims and will persist until they have discovered a pattern or diversity in another person's neurolinguistic preferences. To practice or asses mastery of the skill of responding in like metaphors, an evaluator could offer these signals for identification and response. Sample student responses appear for each one.

Identify each speaker's learning style--audio (A), visual (V), or kinesthetic (K). Then offer a response in the same mode.

- A V K 1. I just don't SEE it.
Response: Let's LOOK at it this way.
- A V K 2. That doesn't RING A BELL with me.
Response: Are you HEARING me?

A V K 3. I can't seem to GET A HANDLE on this.
Response: How does this GRAB you?

In a classroom where perspective-taking is prized, this caveat is in order: Students learning to assume another's point of view deserve clarification that this is not license to borrow another person's scholarly output. In the academic world, such plagiarism constitutes a cardinal sin. Delineating the awesome nature of this crime in academia and providing a rationale for avoiding it should accompany any writing assignment. This explanation describes the scholar's obligations:

You give credit to another person for putting data together and coming up with unique conclusions [an appeal to moral reasoning on level four or possibly five]; and, being less than an expert yourself, you also establish credibility for your paper by citing the experts to show that you've gone through the literature [an appeal to a pre-conventional, immature level of reasoning].

When student papers deplorably lapse into unmistakable "encyclopedia" or "journal" language, this strategy may help: Ask the students to read a portion of heavily borrowed material from their papers in your presence. Then ask them to put aside the page and write it on their own. The process will inform them and you of how much they understand the material and the route they need to take to produce on their own.

Serious as plagiarism is, many students do not realize their heavy dependence on sources, and writing assignments may be so threatening to them that they do not prize their authentic voice as more valuable than the impressive sound (to them) of a source. Framing the students' action in the most accepting terms, a teacher can say, "You need to achieve your own voice. It hasn't emerged in this paper. I don't want you to sound like the Encyclopedia Britannica or even Hemingway. It's your voice I prize." Or, "When you say, 'This was the bloodiest war fought during World War II,' I know you aren't an expert on all World War II battles, so you haven't earned

the right to make that assessment. You need to give credit to your source." Instructors with integrity don't put up with documentation lapses. The effort and pain of rewrite should give the student awareness of the distinctive sensitivities writers have to exploitation, another experience in perspective taking.

Christian college students deserve exposure to strategies like those described in this paper. Such exercises allow writers to interact creatively with substantive material as they deepen sensitivity to another's perspective. These creative, playful, purposeful academic experiences with their promising impetus to higher levels of moral understanding, underline the congruent nature of an integrated Christian education.

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