

• GARTH M. ROSELL •

Engaging Issues in Course Development

Over a half century has passed since John Wisdom, the noted English philosopher, first told his well-known “parable of the gardener.”¹ The story centers on two people and a plot of land—land that appears to be a long-neglected garden. While the garden still shows evidence of some “surprisingly vigorous” plants, it has, however, become overgrown with weeds and filled with vermin.

The first man says to the other: “Look at the way these are arranged. There is purpose and a feeling for beauty here. I believe that someone comes, someone invisible to mortal eyes. I believe that the more carefully we look the more we shall find confirmation of this.” As they examine the garden, they sometimes come upon evidence suggesting that a gardener comes and sometimes they come on new things that suggest the contrary and perhaps “even that a malicious person has been at work.” Each learns all that the other learns about the garden. “Consequently, when after all this, one says, ‘I still believe a gardener comes’ while the other says ‘I don’t’ their different words now reflect no difference as to what they have found in the garden, no difference as to what they would find in the garden if they looked further and no difference about how fast untended gardens fall into disorder.”²

Wisdom’s parable, as the reader is undoubtedly aware, was originally intended as a way of engaging issues surrounding God’s existence and character. When applied to matters of teaching and learning, however, it has become for me, over my thirty-five years of teaching, a kind of paradigm for

course development—reminding me regularly of the importance of testing my assumptions, of taking time to think, of setting my goals, of designing my courses, and of evaluating the results.

TESTING OUR ASSUMPTIONS

Wisdom's story, of course, is basically about assumptions—about how it is possible for two radically different conclusions to be drawn from exactly the same body of evidence. A very similar problem exists for those of us who teach (Grunert 1997). Before we ever set foot in the classroom, our assumptions about how we teach, about how students learn, and even about what content should be presented have already begun giving shape and direction to our classes.

Most of us, I suspect, simply teach the way we were taught. Those who were fortunate enough to have studied under master teachers might have an advantage over those who were not so fortunate. In either case, however, few seminary professors have ever given much attention to how they teach. Doctoral programs, quite properly, tend to focus primary attention and resources on helping students master a particular field of study. In doing so, however, they sometimes fail to prepare their graduates adequately for the one activity in which they will be spending the major portion of their professional lives—namely, teaching. The assumption seems to be this: If a person knows his or her field, that person will be able to teach it effectively. As any student can tell us, however, such an assumption cannot always be sustained and is either naïve or simply obstinate. Yet many of us continue to enter the classroom without ever having read a book, taken a course, or even attended a workshop on the subject of pedagogy. Surely the assumptions that lead to this curious irony need to be tested (Chickering, Gamson, and Barsi 1989).

Even less attention, it would seem, has been given to the ways in which students learn (Davis 1993c; Gardiner 1996). This unfortunate state of affairs, as Robert Diamond (1998, 154) has reminded us, appears to be changing as higher education gradually moves “from being teaching-centered to being learning-centered.” My first awareness that such a shift was under way came during the early 1970s when I attended a summer workshop sponsored by the Case Study Institute. There in the heart of Cambridge, in something akin to an epiphany, it first dawned on me that lectures and seminars were not the only arrows in my educational quiver. While lectures and seminars have remained central in my teaching since that time, I have found great delight in using additional methodologies in my teaching—from the use of case studies to the development of on-site courses.

Testing our assumptions about teaching and learning, however, remains insufficient by itself. There is also a need to evaluate our presuppositions about the content of the courses we teach. John Wisdom's "garden," I would suggest, can serve as a useful metaphor for many of the fields in which we labor. It seems all too apparent, for example, that church history contains both that which is beautiful and that which is desolate, both flowers and weeds, both saints and scoundrels. One could, I suppose, choose to see only the good, the right, and the fit, or, like Bertrand Russell (1957), see only the seamier side. It might even be possible for an enterprising soul to divide the "goods" and the "bads" of church history, adopting the first category as part of "our tradition" and attributing the second category to "their tradition."

In the end, however, I am convinced that scholars must embrace the whole of the field in which they are teaching. Unfortunately, such an approach presents almost insurmountable problems for course development. Because we must all be selective in what we can cover, we must be especially vigilant in testing the assumptions that guide the selections we make. The sheer amount of available information continues to grow exponentially, and we must guard against the temptation to overlook less familiar arenas of evidence. The composition of the student population in most of our seminaries is increasingly diverse, so we must pay special attention to ensuring that their voices are heard and their traditions are honored.³

TAKING TIME TO THINK

Over the course of my teaching career, I have become increasingly convinced that the careful testing of assumptions—about how we teach, about how students learn, and about the content of our courses—is an absolutely essential preamble to the development of effective courses. Such testing takes time. There are no shortcuts. Before we can construct a course, we must spend time thinking about what we are doing and why we are doing it.

Such an idea is, of course, all too obvious. Educational institutions, one might suppose, are places devoted to thinking—quiet enclaves of learning in which scholars pursue the life of the mind. For growing numbers of faculty and students, however, the life of quiet reflection is tantalizingly out of reach. Busy schedules, unexpected interruptions, and overloaded calendars have left many of us with little time for careful thought.

As participants in The Lexington Seminar have gathered each summer in Maine, these very same concerns have been expressed in conversations repeatedly. The life of the mind is increasingly difficult to pursue in the midst of busy schedules and growing institutional obligations. Students struggle to coordi-

nate the demands of study, work, ministry, and family. Faculty members struggle to find space for research and writing in the midst of countless committee meetings, speaking engagements, family responsibilities, and outside jobs. Administrators struggle to keep up with the growing pile of paperwork, endless reports, and continual meetings. In the midst of it all, little time seems to remain for serious reflection.⁴

Such problems should come as no surprise. More than twenty years ago John Fletcher warned us of “the coming crisis in theological seminaries.” As late as the 1950s, he argued, most seminaries had a single educational goal—namely, to train pastors for the church. By 1980, when Fletcher reported his findings in the Alban Institute’s *Action Information*, virtually every theological institution had expanded its programs to offer continuing education for clergy, theological education for laity, and ethical and theological reflection for churches, community leaders, and the professions. “Seminaries are slowly but surely walking into a minefield,” he continued, if one takes seriously the significant changes that are occurring in student demographics, church membership, faculty aging patterns, growing economic pressures, and the trend toward professionalization. “In an era of increasingly fragmented seminary life and part-time attendance,” Fletcher (1980, 6–10) suggested, “opportunities for serious self-knowledge and mutual reflection on the student’s ethical, educational, and emotional background will be markedly fewer.”

Given these realities, it would be helpful if more of us—as those entrusted to prepare leadership for the church—were to set aside an hour each week for serious thought and focused reflection. The ground rules would be simple: Find a comfortable place where we can work without distractions; select a time when our minds are especially fresh; bring paper and pen to record our thoughts; and then systematically explore who, what, where, when, and how we are teaching. As the Scriptures remind us (1 Cor. 10–15), “each one should be careful how he builds.”

SETTING OUR GOALS

Having tested our assumptions and having thought about our task as teachers, the next step in course development is the setting of our educational goals.⁵ It is essential, as Diamond (1998, 125–67) has phrased it, that we develop “a clear statement of instructional goals” for our courses.⁶

For many of us, however, setting goals is no easy task. Throughout the history of theological education, in fact, fierce battles have been fought over the establishment of educational goals. At America’s oldest colleges, as George Marsden (Marsden and Longfield 1992, 15) has reminded us, “higher educa-

tion simply meant expertise in the classics.”⁷ Heavy emphasis was given to subjects such as “Latin, Greek, and mathematics” (Ringenberg 1984, 37), and a focus during the classroom sessions tended to be upon “reciting classical authors” (Marsden and Longfield 1992, 13).

At Yale College, for example, students were receiving this kind of classical education well into the nineteenth century (Noll 1979, 7–8). Augustus Hopkins Strong (1836–1921), who graduated from Yale in 1857, described his educational experiences in fascinating detail. “In those days there was almost no instruction,” he wrote in his autobiography (Douglas 1981, 62–63).

Professor Hadley and President Woolsey . . . are the only teachers whom I can remember to have given actual information to their pupils. The system . . . consisted simply of learning lessons from a textbook and reciting them to the tutor or professor. No discussion was permitted at any time. I do not recall that a single question was asked by any student of an instructor during the whole four years of my college course. It was a dead-alive system, which of itself did much to make scholarly work a drudgery and almost nothing to make it attractive. Great as Professor Hadley’s merits were as a drill-master and an example of thorough investigation, he never so much as intimated to us that Homer was a poet. . . . [Professor] Dwight taught us Plato, but he never told us that Plato had a system of philosophy, that there was a difference between the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, or that either of these had a following down the ages. Never was it suggested to us that a subject might have light thrown upon it by side reading; never were we referred to books for illustration; never was the history of a science spoken of. . . . When I think what might have been done in the way of making study interesting and how completely the student was left to his own devices, I feel that I was treated hardly, and I thank a good Providence that prevented me from utterly despising the regular studies of my course.⁸

For educational reformers like Charles G. Finney, however, the kind of curriculum offered at Yale was like “David in Saul’s armor”—forcing students to stagger under the weight of an educational system that Finney described as essentially irrelevant, scattered, impractical, and out of touch with common folk (Finney 1989, 88).⁹ Oberlin College, under Finney’s leadership, sought to provide an alternative—what they called a more “thorough education”—one that not only combined physical, mental, and moral training but that also opened its doors to both women and African Americans.¹⁰ “Suppose you were going to make a man a surgeon in the navy,” Finney argued. “Instead of sending him to the medical school to learn surgery, would you send him to the nautical school to learn navigation? In this way, you might qualify him to navigate a ship, but he is no surgeon. Ministers should be educated to know what the Bible is, and what the human mind is, and know how to bring one to bear on the other. They should be brought into contact with mind, and made familiar with all the aspects of society. They should have the Bible in one hand, and the map of the human mind in the other, and know how to use the truth for the salvation of men” (McLoughlin 1960, 188).

Such practical wisdom, as Finney understood it (1989, 89–90), required far more than the memorization and recitation of classical authors. Consequently, Finney adopted what we might today call an interactive seminar method of teaching (Foster 1888, 104). Rather than the traditional emphasis on classroom recitation, each student was assigned a specific topic or issue on which they were expected to read and reflect and about which they were to prepare an oral presentation for class. During the class sessions, Finney would put the names of the students in a hat, shake them together, and pick one out at random. The student who was thereby selected would be asked to make his/her oral presentation to the class. This would be followed by a time of lively and intense interaction—as the instructor and other members of the class asked questions, raised objections, and presented alternative interpretations. On occasions, according to student reports, the discussions could continue over several days.¹¹ After class, students would frequently “swarm” around Finney “like bees,” as Hiram Mead (1877, 11) described it, anxious to pursue some issue or other a bit more fully.

“It is our custom in this institution,” wrote Finney, “to settle every question, especially in theology, by discussion. I have now for twelve years been going annually over my course of instruction in this manner, and owe not a little to my classes, for I have availed myself to the uttermost of the learning and sagacity and talent of every member of my classes in pushing my investigations. I call on them to discuss the questions which I present for discussion, and take my seat among them and help and guide them according to my ability; and not infrequently, I am happy to say, do I get some useful instruction from them. Thus I sustain the double relation of pupil and teacher” (Hardman 1987, 357–358).

The contrasts between the “Oberlin” model and the “Yale” model, at least during the mid-nineteenth century, are instructive. While both have their strengths and weaknesses, they remind us that the decisions we make about our educational goals can have an enormous impact on what happens in the classroom. If our goal is to teach the content of a field, then the methods we use to accomplish it will likely take a particular shape. If our goal is to help students think for themselves, then the structure of our syllabus will likely flow out of that set of values. If our goal is to make our students more globally aware, then our reading and paper assignments will likely include those kinds of priorities. If our goal is to sensitize our students to the realities of poverty, then our classroom may have to move outside our buildings.

Most of us do not reduce any of our courses to a single goal—or even to a single set of goals. Most of us, I suspect, want our students to be physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually healthy graduates, and we hope that our teaching can contribute in some way to making that possible. Yet, we know in

our hearts that no single course can accomplish all those goals. Nor can an individual faculty member, working in isolation, bring about the desired result. The glory of an educational institution, after all, is that it provides an entire curriculum and an entire faculty and an entire library and an entire community to accomplish all that needs to be achieved.

Such a realization places a special premium on lively conversation and good communication. This, at its core, is the reason for The Lexington Seminar—to remind the academy and the church that it is possible to build a community of learning in which life can be enriched and multiple goals can be achieved. Like a great symphony orchestra, different sounds and tempos and passions can, in fact, be blended to the glory of God and the good of society.

DEVELOPING OUR COURSES

Because we naturally gravitate toward subjects that interest us, because we prefer to focus on fields in which we are professionally trained, and because we like to teach materials that stir our intellectual passions, our best courses tend to emerge from the very core of our being. Therefore, our best courses, I am convinced, take many years to develop. In a sense, one might argue, they take a lifetime.

My fascination with teaching began around the kitchen table in a Minnesota home. For it was there, as our family gathered each evening for good food, lively conversation, probing questions, Bible reading, and prayer, that loving parents taught us to think, helped us to express ourselves, gave us our core values, and introduced us to a world of immense variety and wonder. Having grown up in that environment, it is no surprise that all three children became professional teachers.

Since leaving my Minnesota home, I have been privileged to study under many fine teachers—from gifted Sunday school instructors like Frank and Edith Johnson to a college mentor like Arthur Holmes to graduate thesis advisors like Lefferts Loetscher and Timothy Smith. Their high expectations and gentle promptings helped to sharpen my growing interest in the study of philosophy, then of theology, and ultimately of Christian history. I had long been fascinated by ideas and systems—but my teachers helped me to discover that my deepest passions centered on an exploration of how those ideas and systems operate within living human communities. Through the guidance of good teachers, history became my intellectual home—nourishing my spirit and engaging my mind.

Quite naturally, then, I want my students to love history as much as I do. I am aware, of course, that in our current postmodern culture the study of his-

tory is often neglected and sometimes dismissed. Consequently, I have tried to find ways in which to engage my students with those traditions that have shaped their lives and the communities in which they live and work. I actually believe that students need to understand the personalities, issues, themes, and literature of Christian history if they are to be effective in their life and work.

Much of this task can be accomplished through the more traditional settings and methodologies of classroom lectures and intensive seminars, particularly when they engage students with primary documents and reliable historical evidence. Indeed, in my judgment, nothing can ever replace the learning environment created by a gifted teacher, an eager student, and good library.

About fifteen years ago, however, it began to dawn on me that the “classrooms” in which we conduct our courses can also “teach.” My American Puritanism class, for example, takes place entirely outside the traditional classroom. Dubbed “Rambling with Rosell” by my students, a variety of lectures, discussions, and dramatic presentations take place at the actual sites where historic events occurred and where the participants in those events lived. Debating the theology of Anne Hutchinson in the shadow of Cyrus E. Dallin’s famous statue of her near the Boston Common, listening to the re-creation of a George Whitefield sermon at Pulpit Rock, or discussing an Anne Bradstreet poem at the very site where it was composed tend to engage students in fresh and exciting ways. Ancient gravestones, unusual styles of music, and changing patterns of architecture often produce the sorts of questions rarely heard in the traditional classroom. Most notable, perhaps, is the power that on-site learning seems to have in helping students integrate their studies. Historical, theological, pastoral, sociological, and political questions are woven together into a single fabric. Indeed, as students have told me, it is difficult to think and talk on one level only when confronted by a complex and multidimensional world.¹²

THE SEVEN-STEP PROCESS OF COURSE DEVELOPMENT

In developing my own courses, I have found a seven-step process to be especially helpful, and as an example of the process, I present the steps as I followed them through the design of my course on American Puritanism.

1. Make Use of Existing Models

I began by looking for existing models. Fortunately, in this case, I had a senior colleague in history, Nigel Kerr, who had taught a similar class for over a decade. Knowing of my interest in the subject, Nigel invited me to team teach the class with him. It turned out to be a marvelous experience for both of us as we shared responsibilities, discussed teaching strategies, and argued over divergent inter-

pretations. Of most importance for me, however, was the opportunity to observe the complex dynamics of on-site teaching. Although I have subsequently changed many aspects of course content and methodology, having a tested model with which to begin was an enormous help.

2. Test Your Assumptions

The second step in the process was the testing of assumptions. I had assumed, for example, that traveling courses would be less effective in teaching content than the more traditional forms. What I discovered, to my surprise, was that students seemed significantly more interested in detailed information about the people, events, and issues connected with the sites than was normally true in my campus-based classes. I had also assumed that students would tend to read less in these contextually oriented classes than they did on campus. What I found, again to the contrary, was that they tended to read more. I had further assumed that the students whose performance was average in on-campus courses would continue to perform essentially at that same level in the field. I discovered instead that some of these “average” students became intellectual stars in the field. I found that different styles of learning tend to respond differently to various contexts for learning.

My biggest surprise, however, was the discovery of how much time it takes to prepare to teach an on-site course. I had assumed, to be quite candid, that such classes would be the least demanding on my time and energy. After all, I supposed, I wouldn't have to be talking all the time. What I discovered, to the contrary, was that on-site courses were the most difficult I had ever taught—both in terms of preparation and organization. For lectures and seminars, in which the teacher essentially controls what is presented or discussed, preparation can be more focused. Standing in a cemetery, however, one is confronted by a huge array of possible topics—from the theology of gravestone art and the nature of colonial medical practice to the problems of dating historical events and identifying those who were buried beneath our feet. The instructor's knowledge, I found, must be significantly broader, deeper, and more fully integrated than is usually the case in more traditional settings. Quite simply stated: When preparation is thorough, on-site courses appear deceptively simple; when preparation is weak, they flirt with disaster.

3. Identify Your Educational Goals

For the American Puritanism course, five primary goals emerged.

Knowledge of Field. My first goal was to engage the students with the personalities, issues, and themes of a movement that helped to shape the culture of New England. In order to accomplish this goal, I asked each member of the class to do detailed research (using both primary and secondary materials) on

two individuals and two themes connected with colonial New England (such as John Winthrop, Anne Bradstreet, Puritan architecture, and the Salem Witch Trials). The students were then expected to present their findings at the appropriate historical site in a lively, well-organized, ten-minute oral presentation and provide their classmates with appropriate written materials that supported their presentations. In effect, they were expected to become mini-experts on those topics throughout the course. Because their peers came to rely on them for information on those individuals and themes, they tended to work exceedingly hard on their assignments. Many of these presentations, in fact, have been outstanding.

Familiarity with the Literature. My second educational goal was to introduce the students to some of the enormous literature in the field. Not only was each student expected to read Heimert and Delbanco's excellent anthology of Puritan literature and Leland Ryken's *Worldly Saints*, a fine interpretative study of the movement, but through the student presentations and my mini-lectures they were exposed to perhaps sixty or seventy additional resources. As a result, the students finish the course with a working knowledge of much of the important literature in the field.

Move beyond Mythology. A third educational goal was to help students move beyond legend and myth. While every movement has had its critics, few have suffered more than have the Puritans at the hands of their detractors. Consequently, one of my goals for the course was to help students come to know the Puritans as they really were, not as many modern critics want them to be. This goal could be achieved (I was convinced and remain convinced) by encouraging students to read what the Puritans wrote rather than simply what has been written about them.

Create Community. My fourth educational goal was to create a learning and sharing community. Many elements of our educational system tend to encourage competition and strengthen intellectual individualism. While there are obvious benefits to these emphases, they should not be the only kinds of experiences to which our students are exposed. In American Puritanism, students learn from each other, from the sources, from the sites, and from the instructor. Such learning fosters a spirit of interdependence, a building of friendships, and an appreciation for differing perspectives.

The final session of the course is always held at my home. The purpose of this session is threefold: to consolidate the learnings of the course, to encourage students to continue their explorations of these subjects, and to help bond the community. I am no longer surprised when students in the class tell me that the course was transformative for them.

Stimulate Further Study. Because any course is finite, my last goal is to encourage further study. In order to accomplish this goal, I have constructed

a detailed notebook for each student containing bibliographical suggestions (organized by categories), detailed descriptions of all the sites on our itinerary, and a variety of background documents (not readily available in standard anthologies). I also encourage students to incorporate into the notebooks the written materials that other students have provided with each of their presentations, and I have constructed the notebooks to provide room for written comments and any notes that the students might wish to record.

The results have been heartening. Many students in the class actually revisit the sites either by themselves or as tour leaders for family, friends, or groups. This process greatly enriches the educational experience for the students and reinforces those learnings that have already taken place. A number of these students have become so fascinated with the Puritans, in fact, that they have chosen to focus on some aspect of the movement in their doctoral studies.

4. Select the Appropriate Methodology

American Puritanism can be taught as a traditional seminar, a lecture course, a case-study course, or an on-site course. The selection of one or more of these educational methodologies, however, should grow directly out of the educational goals one has selected. Each methodology, as most of us have discovered, has its own inherent strengths and weaknesses.

If a primary goal is to provide a general overview, a lecture format might be the best choice. If one wishes to immerse advanced students in primary documents, the seminar might be the way to go. When discussion of various interpretations are the target, case studies might be selected. If the educational goals are those I have identified in Step 3, then an on-site course might be the best choice. The instructor might even want to use a variety of methodologies to accomplish the educational goals. Each approach has its benefits and drawbacks. Consequently, it is important to select your methodology with great care.

5. Set Appropriate Requirements

Many of us, I suspect, follow a familiar pattern in setting requirements for our courses: namely, one midterm exam, one final exam, one twenty-five-page paper, and two thousand pages of reading. Were you to check my syllabi, in fact, you would discover that these are exactly the requirements for most of my lecture courses. Why require anything else, we might ask, when this pattern has worked well enough for us and others in the past?

Change for the sake of change, of course, is seldom wise. It is equally foolish, however, to set the requirements for our courses without first asking ourselves if these are the most effective means of helping our students achieve their educational objectives. Requirements, like the selection of methodologies, should flow out of clear educational goals.

In American Puritanism, for example, I decided to eliminate formal exams. This was a risky move for someone like myself who deeply values classical and traditional educational structures. What I discovered, to my great relief, was that students' presentations became a kind of informal test of the quality of their work. Moreover, the absence of exams seemed to contribute to a greater sense of community and mutuality of learning among the students.

6. Clarify Your Expectations

In designing our courses, we need to be absolutely clear as to our expectations for students in the class. The syllabus, I am convinced, should be seen as both a legal contract and a moral covenant with our students. We should require nothing that is not recorded there in writing. We should honor all that does appear. And we should strive to be as precise as we can regarding dates, times, topics, assignments, and standards for evaluation.

7. Evaluate the Results of the Course

Although I will be saying more about evaluation in a moment, a brief comment about this final step in the course development process would perhaps be helpful with reference to the American Puritanism course. Our seminary, like many others, requires formal course evaluations at the end of every course in the curriculum. Standard forms, appropriate to each type of classroom setting, have been approved by the faculty. Students remain anonymous. The machine-scored results, authorized by and completed under the guidance of the academic dean, are available to the instructor only after submission of final grades for the course.

While these formal evaluations can be helpful, a less formal course such as American Puritanism should also be evaluated in less formal ways. Over the years, in fact, I have sought out as many members of the class as time would allow to solicit their comments and suggestions for the course. These conversations have been enormously helpful in shaping the course and in providing useful feedback on how individual students are experiencing the course. Because these classes tend to be relatively small, usually involving twenty to twenty-five students, such a process is possible to pursue.

EVALUATE THE RESULTS

John Calvin's *Institutes* went through a variety of editions between 1536 and 1559.¹³ Although composed in twenty-four days, G. F. Handel's *Messiah* also went through many revisions between its first performance in 1741 and the composer's death in 1759 (Larsen 1972). If these great works require much

time and revision, it should come as no great surprise that our courses also need time to come to full maturity.

If we are sufficiently wise to accept the gift of evaluation, however, our teaching can be strengthened and our courses can develop into little symphonies that will inform the mind, enrich the spirit, and promote the common good. Unfortunately, for many of us the experience of evaluation is anything but welcome. Like the fearsome angel with the flaming sword that blocks our way back to Eden, we have come to see evaluation as largely punitive and enormously discouraging.

What is needed, perhaps, is a kind of paradigm shift in the way we understand course evaluations.¹⁴ Some years ago, it was my privilege to publish a brief *Classroom Observation Form* (Rosell 1978). Not only did I find it helpful in my own courses but to my great surprise it began to be used by many colleagues as well.

The concept is disarmingly simple. Begin by asking a colleague to attend one of your classes—to observe what happens in the class, to keep notes on those observations, and to discuss with you what he or she observed. The goal is not so much to judge as to describe what took place in the classroom.

The insights that can come from this process are amazing. On one occasion, for example, I was asked to observe a colleague who had expressed a concern that he was never able to get a good discussion going in his classes. “It always seems to end after a sentence or two,” he told me, and he asked if I could offer any suggestions that might help. The class had barely started when a student raised her hand to ask a question. The teacher, who happened to be wearing a three-piece suit, responded immediately to the student, but while doing so he also buttoned his suit coat and stepped behind the lectern. Following his brief verbal response, no further discussion ensued. I noted the incident in my notes but thought little about it, and the class went on. Ten minutes later another student raised his hand, and the same suit-buttoning, retreating-behind-the-lectern process was repeated. Indeed, this happened several more times before the class was over, and the results in each instance were the same.

In our discussion following class, I mentioned what I had observed. My friend was clearly surprised to learn of his behavior, and we chatted a bit about why he might have been prompted to respond in that way. As a result of those discussions, however, we decided to try an experiment. I would observe the class once again, but when a question came up this time he would (without being too obvious) unbutton his coat and step out from behind the lectern and toward the student who was asking the question. As he did so, the class literally came alive with discussion. Our eyes met, and his expression was one I will not soon forget.

Most of us have mannerisms that either enhance or detract from what we are trying to accomplish. Often we are not even aware of them and only rarely will our students tell us about them. What a gift it is, therefore, to have a colleague who can make us aware of what we are doing and can discuss with us how we might improve.

Such observations can also help us develop skills in setting the pace of a class session. In my experience, faculty members frequently spend so much time on preliminary or even logistical comments that they are forced to rush through the most important parts of their lecture. A time line, noting significant points of transition, can be of great help in correcting this problem.

A good observer can also be a great help in charting the kinds of interactions that are going on in class. It is possible, for example, to draw a box on a plain sheet of paper for each student in the class—keeping track of how many times each interacts with the teacher or with other members of the class. By the end of the class, my chart looks something like a sociogram with interaction lines (including times of the interactions) drawn from box to box. In the middle of each box I put the total number of times each student participated verbally in the class.

Such a chart can help a teacher in many ways. There are times, for example, when I have observed a class in which students on only one side of the room were active participants. In some cases, such a pattern is a result of where a teacher focuses when he or she looks up from the notes. On other occasions I have discovered that only the male students participated in the class discussions. Such patterns, and many others, are vitally important for a teacher to know if he or she is to make the class as effective as possible.

Other things that a good observer can watch for are the time and manner in which the class is started and concluded, the energy level of the students, the use of technology, the sensitivity with which the instructor interacts with the students, and how many students arrive late or leave early from the class.

Over the past thirty years, it has been my privilege to observe scores of my colleagues as they teach their classes. I have also benefited from the observations of faculty and student colleagues who have done me the honor of observing my classes. Not only have they rescued me from a multitude of practices that would have damaged my teaching, but many of them have also become very special friends in the process. What I have discovered, to my surprise, is how fascinating the issues of teaching and learning can be for those of us who labor in what are often called the classical disciplines.

Education is not my field, and it would be foolish for me to pretend to possess the kind of expertise that I do not have. My life has been spent as a historian whose primary time and energy has been directed toward research, writing, and teaching in that field. In pursuing those tasks, however, a won-

derful circle of academic friends has developed, friends who seem glad not only to help each other professionally but who also share a common passion for teaching.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Much more could be said about the process of course development. These brief reflections, therefore, are simply intended to begin the conversation and to stimulate further thought on how we develop our courses.

It is a daunting task, whatever our discipline, to gaze out on a field filled with more than can possibly be packed into any course, indeed, far more than any of us could master in a lifetime. The task of testing our assumptions about how we teach, about how students learn, and even about what we should include in our courses can sometimes seem overwhelming. The job of setting appropriate goals for our classes and our institutions can wear us out. Even the need to invest more of our busy schedules in the work of quiet reflection can prove to be a weariness to the soul.

Yet we need not despair. For all around us, if we have ears to hear them, are friends and colleagues who are ready to share the load. All around us, too, if we have eyes to see it, is the providential care of a gracious God. In a fragmented world, often divided by anger and strife, it is good to know that we are not alone.

And so we return, at the end, to John Wisdom's fascinating garden, grateful for the questions about teaching and learning that it has raised and grateful for friends who stand ready to help us discover the answers. For the parable is not only about a garden. It is also about a conversation.

NOTES

1. First published in *Wisdom* (1944/45, 191–192) and reprinted in *Flew* (1951) and *Wisdom* (1953).
2. Quotations are taken from *Hick* (1957, 145–146).
3. Church history, for example, has been taught for many years from a largely Western perspective. The field, happily, is gradually becoming more global in its perspective as assumptions about the proper locus of historical study begin to change.
4. This section is adapted from *Rosell* (2002, 3).
5. This does not mean, of course, that the task of testing assumptions and thinking about what we are doing is finished. On the contrary, it is a process that continues throughout life.
6. A variety of helpful guidebooks have been published providing practical tips on course development. Among the most useful is *Grunert* (1997).
7. America's nine oldest colleges are Harvard (1636), William and Mary (1693), Yale (1701),

196 **▪ENGAGING ISSUES IN COURSE DEVELOPMENT** **▪**

Princeton (1746), Columbia (1754), Pennsylvania (1755), Brown (1765), Rutgers (1766), and Dartmouth (1769). For the development of education in America see Miller (1990), Ringenberg (1984), and Veysey (1965).

8. For an excellent study of Strong, see Wacker (1985).
9. For a fuller discussion of the Oberlin College model and Finney's role in its development, see Rosell (1993, 55–74).
10. See Fletcher (1943, 173), *The Woman's Journal* (1890, 385), and Finney (1989, 88).
11. For example, see Clark (1876, 49–53) and Blackwell, Oberlin College Archives, General Files, Box no. 12, 2.
12. One of the most fascinating discoveries of on-site teaching was my growing realization that students perform differently in different environments. Some of the students who tended to struggle in a traditional classroom setting became veritable “stars” when on the road. See Smith and Kolb (1986) and Gardner (1993).
13. See Calvin (1989) and McNeill (1960) for the first and final editions.
14. A shift much like that described by Kuhn (1962).