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Reviews

Exploring Doctrine: A Theological English Curriculum

Will Bankston and Cheri Pierson. Langham Global Library, 2018.

Reviewed by Jan Dormer, Messiah University

Exploring Doctrine: A Theological English Curriculum meets a need in the emerging field of theological English materials. As a short, focused text written for intermediate-level English learners, it will be a welcome resource in programs where more extensive theological English texts for more advanced English learners would prove challenging to use. Authors Bankston and Pierson frame the goal of the text as bridging “the gap between intermediate English and theological English by providing an overview of evangelical Christian doctrine that couples language instruction with theological education” (back cover). The book achieves these two main purposes well. The introduction to Christian doctrine covers five doctrines essential to understanding the Christian faith: the Trinity, Christology, revelation and Scripture, soteriology (salvation), and creation. These concepts are not only made accessible to English learners who have not yet reached advanced proficiency, but utilized to further develop reading and writing skills, alongside increased understanding of selected English structures and theological vocabulary.

The brevity of this book intrigued me from the beginning. It is not often that one encounters *short* texts with the words “doctrine” or “theology” in the title! I wondered if I would find a sort of “theology for dummies” approach. I was very pleased to discover that this was not the case! Authentic, original sources and use of accurate theological terms result in a text that is accessible to English learners, but not overly simplified in content. I checked the readability levels of reading passages at the beginning, middle and end of the book, and found it to be written at around a grade 7-8 level. This is an appropriate readability level for high intermediate English learners reading complex content. This balance of English accessibility and authenticity of content is difficult to achieve, and is one of the very best features of the book. Another strong selling point is the authors’ value and promotion of students’ native languages. In each chapter, English learners are led to read Bible passages both in English and in their native languages. In the hands of a skilled teacher, this feature could expand to include the sharing of different shades of meaning and cultural applications from translations in different languages, for rich classroom

discussion.

The book is clear and straightforward in presentation. Following a very short introduction and a two-page scope and sequence outlining themes, reading skills, vocabulary and grammar focuses, five chapters comprise the bulk of the book. Each chapter focuses on one of the Christian doctrines. Chapters are organized in a similar, though not identical, fashion, balancing the value of predictable structure with the need for gearing readings and activities to the theological and language development undertaken in each chapter.

Each chapter utilizes a broad range of readings, including scriptures read in both English and students' native languages, readings from well-known theologians and apologists, and passages written or summarized by the authors themselves. Texts are not encumbered with an over-abundance of citations and references, which can make reading difficult for intermediate-level learners, but rather utilize footnotes to provide source information. Pre- and post-reading tasks throughout each chapter help students develop reading and writing skills, hone in on specific grammatical structures, and learn new vocabulary. Grammatical structures covered include relative clauses, conditionals, comparisons, complements, discourse connectors, infinitives and gerunds. Specific reading skills taught and practiced include identifying main points and supporting details, intensive and extensive reading strategies, and skimming and scanning. Though writing is not emphasized as much as grammar, reading and vocabulary development, students do gain practice in synthesizing, rephrasing and paraphrasing ideas through writing tasks.

Each chapter concludes with a word analysis activity. These all use the same graphic organizer, eliciting a synonym, an antonym, a definition, and an example sentence. The consistency of this vocabulary study in each chapter would help students to develop a solid strategy for learning new words. Though the text does not claim to develop speaking skills, activities in which students share thoughts with a partner or small group, or engage in "communicative practice," are included in every chapter. In addition, a final "conclusion" at the end of the five chapters leads students to prepare an oral presentation on one of the doctrines. Two helpful resources are found at the back of the book: a full answer key, and a short vocabulary list of key theological words introduced in each chapter.

There are many additional attractive qualities of this text, such as:

- Authentic and contextualized examples of grammatical structures. The structures of focus in each chapter are those occurring naturally in the selected readings, and prominent in theological writing. For example, comparatives are taught within the context of comparing Christ's divine nature and his human nature.
- Abundance of note-taking templates and organizers. These organizers help learners to understand structural features of the English language, develop specific reading and writing skills, and learn the theological content.
- Diversity in graphic organizers. Students learn multiple ways to graphically organize concepts and information.
- Variety in exercise types. Students develop understanding of grammar structures and vocabulary through diverse types of activities, which include both individual and group tasks.
- An emphasis on the development of critical thinking throughout the text. Sections discussing "orthodoxy" and "heresies," for example, are especially helpful in fostering the kind of critical thought necessary not only for understanding theology, but also for applying concepts within diverse cultures and contexts.
- Inclusion of small group and pair communicative activities. Though not claiming to develop oral English skills, these features make the text very attractive for classroom use. A skilled teacher could utilize these activities to develop oral skills.
- The presentation activity in the conclusion. This would be ideal for an end of semester assessment.

Though many student texts require a companion teacher's book for full effectiveness, this text can work well on its own. Instructions are clear and easy to follow, providing sufficient direction for both teacher and students. Still, a skilled teacher will find many opportunities to extend learning beyond the pages of the text. For example, throughout the text there are activities requiring summarizing, note-taking and paraphrasing. These activities could provide good opportunities for additional skill-development in writing. In short, the novice teacher will find the text easy to use and follow as is, and the more experienced teacher will find that it also presents many possibilities for branching off into other areas of learning.

I have been privileged to use and/or review three theological English student texts, and felt that the following chart comparing basic features of these three might be helpful for readers.

	Language Level	Theological positioning	Length and use of text	Type of English dev. focus	Resources
<i>Exploring Doctrine: A Theological English Curriculum</i> , 2019 Will Bankston and Cheri Pierson Langham Global Library	Intermediate	“Evangelical Christian doctrine”	134 pp. Short, paperback; suitable for a one-semester theological English course	Focus on specific grammatical structures, theological vocabulary, and reading skills	No teachers’ guide; full answer key in back
<i>Theological English: An Advanced ESL Text for Students of Theology</i> , 2018. Pierce Taylor Hibbs with Megan Reiley. P&R Publishing	Advanced	“Reformed tradition”	376 pp.; large hard-cover; suitable for a year-long theological English course	Development of all four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening	No teacher’s guide; full answer key in back
<i>Exploring Theological English Reading, Vocabulary, and Grammar for ESL/EFL</i> , 2010. Cheri Pierson, Lonna J. Dickerson, Florence R. Scott. Piquant.	High-intermediate	“evangelical view of Christianity”	398 pp.; paperback; suitable for a year-long theological English course	Focused on developing reading skill; vocabulary and structure focus result in increased reading comprehension	Teacher’s Guide with teaching suggestions and answer key

While thumbing through *Exploring Doctrine: A Theological English Curriculum*, I recalled my years teaching in seminary English programs in Indonesia, Brazil and Kenya. This text would have met the need we had in those programs for intermediate-level, theologically-focused materials, and made me want to return to seminary English teaching to try it out! As a short, simple, yet rich text, I have no doubt that Bankston and Pierson’s work will find a home in many seminary courses for English language development.

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On Christian Teaching: Practicing Faith in the Classroom

David I. Smith. Eerdmans, 2018.

Reviewed by Bradley Baurain, Moody Theological Seminary and Graduate School, Chicago

What does it mean to teach as a Christian or in a Christian way? David I. Smith of Calvin University ambitiously aims to answer this question in his recent book, *On Christian Teaching: Practicing Faith in the Classroom*. In large measure, he succeeds.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the book's key purposes. It argues that there is a significant lack of Christian conversation about pedagogy. We're willing to talk about subject area content, or worldview, or character formation, or communication skills, but somehow the everyday nitty-gritty of actual teaching is neglected. This book aims to address that gap as well as to reimagine teaching not as a set of "methods" but rather as a "home"-like place in which teachers and students dwell together. (Please see a reflective essay, entitled "A Home for Pedagogy," on just such an educational experience by one of my graduate students, Kelsey Betz, immediately following this book review. Betz relates her experience to Smith's book.)

Chapters 2-3 are the ones about which my novice teacher-students most consistently want to talk and write. Chapter 2 intensively narrates and explicates the first nine minutes of the first session of a college German 2 course taught by the author. This is presented as a kind of model of how to keep our professional focus on the realm of the concrete and practical, and of how deeply a teacher's seemingly ordinary pedagogical choices can matter. The narrated activity is a typical "getting to know one another" activity, but upon Smith's analysis it emerges as packed with faith-based purpose and intentionality in areas including language acquisition, management of classroom space and time, the promotion of certain types of reflection and participation, cognitive load, learner identity and motivation, classroom atmosphere, and the future learning trajectory of the class. This narrative unpacking leads in Chapter 3 to an analytical unpacking of a larger claim about the ecosystem of teaching: "More than one thing is happening when we teach and it all happens at once, and although we have focal learning goals, faith frames our approach" (p. 27). These two chapters do an excellent job of setting up the rest of the book.

Chapters 4-5 go on to consider larger pedagogical patterns. Specifically, Smith's intention in Chapter 4 is to foster "dissatisfaction with existing patterns of teaching" and then in Chapter 5 to guide "attempts to design something better in their place" (p. 41). The frame of reference is the overall Christian life, in which sound doctrine must be accompanied by right

conduct. Our faith means there is a moral order and shared imagination about how things ought to be, and these are opposed to the values and ways of life we find in the world around us. As a Christian language teacher, the author thus found himself in tension:

I taught in a curriculum framed by the goods of successful economic competition, the flourishing of the consumer self, and the primacy of the pragmatic, even as my own sense of self and calling was tethered to the Christian themes of love of God and neighbor. (p. 52)

Exploring how faith might shape actual teaching practices, he works his way toward four priorities: (1) Seeing students as humans made in God’s image. (2) Telling stories. (3) Acting as if language and learning have moral significance. (4) Giving attentiveness to both students and content. In his discussions and examples, Smith revisits stories and themes familiar from his previous writings (see <https://onchristianteaching.com/>), but this does not come off as repetitive. Rather, he circles back to these anecdotes and metaphors as parables, which can offer different lessons from different angles without changing their essential character or meaning.

Chapter 6 goes on to introduce a three-step framework, which Chapters 7-9 then flesh out. The framework is intended to help Christian teachers become more intentional and biblical about living out their faith in the classroom. It is also essentially the framework behind the What If Learning (<http://www.whatiflearning.com/>) and Teach Fastly (<https://teachfastly.com/>) website projects. Chapter 7 begins with the first step of “seeing anew,” which engages the imagination and storytelling, explained as “witnessing in our words and actions to an underlying story about the way things should be” (p. 81). Chapter 8 continues with the second step of “choosing engagement,” or promoting student involvement in learning. Chapter 9 then discusses the third step of “reshaping practice,” which encompasses classroom space, time, teacher language, and material resources.

Chapter 10 asks if teaching practices can or must be *distinctively* Christian. The answer depends on what stories they are used to advance:

The goal is not to find some technique that Christians can copyright. The goal is to shape a set of practices that are as consistent as we can manage with the story of all things made new as the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. (p. 130)

Spiritual disciplines and community are also important dimensions of this answer.

The final Chapter 11 explores the state of Christian scholarship on teaching, confirms that actual pedagogy is seldom addressed, and discusses why. In a scholarly article, this sort of literature-review-to-establish-a-gap would have come earlier, yet in this book it packs more punch by being placed at the end. Readers had been convinced of the need for truly “Christian teaching” in Chapter 1, based on their own personal and professional experience. Then a better vision was cast—in ever more complex, inspiring, and challenging strata—in the body of the book. To end with the need or gap writ large, in the profession as a whole, reorients us in the real world and powerfully reminds us that the classroom choices we make have eternal impacts.

Is this Smith’s best book on teaching? No. That distinction belongs to *Teaching and Christian Imagination* (Smith & Felch, 2016). But *On Christian Teaching* is the one I assign to my students. It’s more digestible, perhaps more relatable, and it doesn’t hurt that each chapter ends with a handful of questions “For Reflection and Discussion” as well as a “Journal” writing prompt. *On Christian Teaching* is overall an excellent book, one I can eagerly recommend to any Christian teacher.

Reference

Smith, D. I., & Felch, S. M. (2016). *Teaching and Christian imagination*. Eerdmans.

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A Home for Pedagogy

by Kelsey Betz

David Smith begins his book *On Christian Teaching* by informing readers about a medieval method of education. Smith (2018) explains:

Before more centrally organized colleges won the day in the fifteenth century, the basic options for students coming to study at the university were to rent private accommodations or to become a part of a communal student house. Such a house was both a part of the university structure and a distinct place of learning. A master of the arts would oversee it and provide academic teaching while also being responsible for food,

furniture, and the shared rules and routines of the community in exchange for a weekly fee. (p. 11)

Their communal houses were referred to as *paedagogium*, meaning “a place of pedagogy.” Economic and educational shifts over the following centuries and decades changed ideas about pedagogy. As Smith (2018) remarks, “After the seventeenth century, a *pedagogy* would become a method, a systematic set of steps to follow. The image of the *paedagogium* hints that a pedagogy might rather be a house, a home, a shared dwelling space” (pp. 11-12). Smith is not calling for a return to medieval methods of learning but wishes to challenge our cultural assumption that teaching involves using a toolbox of practices to hammer information into students’ brains. What if, instead, we viewed the responsibility of the teacher as creating “a home in which teachers and students can live together for a while, and shape the patterns of life together within which we will grow” (Smith, 2018, p. 12)? Although pedagogical homes can take various forms based on the values they uphold and the practices they cultivate, Smith’s description reminds me of a pedagogical home I inhabited. Since Smith emphasizes real-world application instead of verbose treatment of educational theory, I will describe this *paedagogium* and how it formed my view of education, community, and Christian fellowship.

On January 3, 2016, I embarked on a study abroad adventure in Israel with thirty-two other students from the Chicago and Spokane campuses of Moody Bible Institute. Though I had shared interactions with many of my travel companions during my time at Moody in classes, small groups, and even at church, I knew them superficially at best. I would have been hard-pressed to produce more than five of their names.

Although we began our trip as strangers, we quickly, out of necessity, began to learn about each other. We were housed in a three story hostel called Beit Ben Yehuda (BBY) for the duration of our three month stay. This venue became our classroom, meal hall, movie theater, dance floor, sleeping quarters, gym, and conference center. We were responsible for preparing meals, cleaning dishes, determining living arrangements, mediating roommate conflicts, and welcoming new professors to our shared space every three to four weeks.

Each of our professors shaped our communal practices. They instituted frequent ice cream excursions following class time; encouraged us to venture out in large and small groups, never alone, to explore Jerusalem; and taught us about Shabbat, the Jewish sabbath, and the blessings and customs of the messianic Jewish community. Since our focus was on one class at a

time, we met with our professor for four hours in the morning, then ate lunch and were free to do as we pleased for the rest of the day. Our classmates were our housemates, so we collaborated on papers we wrote, gleaned wisdom from our professors over lunch, and studied over breakfast.

On Dr. Michael Vanlaningham's first day with our group, he fought the drowsiness of jet lag and ventured into BBY's kitchen. He found Lindsey, Sami, and I making lemonade for a homesick classmate and announced, "Girls. Ice cream. Now!" He bought us ice cream from a local shop and asked questions about our group, trying to gauge whether we were a cohesive whole or a conglomeration of clichés. Smith (2018) writes, "A pedagogy can include or exclude, can be hospitable or inhospitable, can energize or deaden" (p. 12). Dr. V's kindness and genuine concern galvanized our own efforts to care for all of the members of our group.

Our efforts echoed some of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's practices for the school at Finkenwalde: "He required each student to go for a long walk at least once with each other student during each session of classes in order to foster stronger relationships. There were social games and communal walks" (Smith, 2018, p. 100). We cultivated communal disciplines during our time in Israel. We met on Tuesdays and Thursdays to take turns sharing our testimonies, the women met weekly to study God's Word and pray, and the women chose to pair up with someone new each week and take a walk. Our group played soccer, went on runs, took day trips, and played games. Gossiping was not permitted, and on two occasions, individuals confronted the group about complaining or disunifying speech and we confessed our communal sin and prayed for unity. Smith (2018) writes of Bonhoeffer's school: "The learning at Finkenwalde came not only from the lectures, but also from intentional practices aimed at opening space for self-examination and communal reconciliation" (p. 100). The shape of our living arrangements left no room for unaddressed bitterness; we recognized that reconciliation was crucial if we were to maintain harmony as the Body of Christ.

When Dr. Laurie Norris came during the last class session of our time in Israel, she recognized an opportunity for communal learning. She taught Communication of Biblical Truth in a three week format, allotting one week for instruction about writing sermons and two weeks for preaching. Each of us preached two sermons, which meant that we listened to an average of five classmates' sermons during our class time each day. We wrote sermons during the rest of the day, but took breaks from our own work to listen to friends practice their own messages and to help them organize their ideas. Smith (2018) argues, "The choice available to us is not

whether or not to communicate values beyond course content, but which ones to communicate” (p. 31). Dr. Norris taught us how to preach sermons, but she also taught us to value each other’s exhortations, to inconvenience ourselves for the sake of others, and to approach God’s Word with gravity.

Smith (2018) writes, “A pedagogy offers a temporary space to live in together while learning” (p. 12). BBY was a literal space where I lived with my classmates and professors while we learned together. We formed a learning community where we developed academically, relationally, emotionally, and spiritually. In the fall, most of us returned to the Chicago campus for a new semester. The learning community we had established in Israel shifted when we no longer met daily for the same classes or lived in the same space; however, we continued to learn together, sharing insights we gained through our courses, reading each other’s papers, and discussing issues we wrestled with. Even after graduating from Moody, these friends of mine call and meet with each other whenever possible to study God’s Word together, share what we are learning, and pray together. As a teacher, I recognize that it will be highly unlikely that I will get to whisk my students away to spend three months in an intensive learning environment. But I have seen how a classroom experience can feel like home, and I believe teachers can foster an environment where students are inspired to take responsibility for their own and their classmates’ growth.

Reference

Smith, D. I. (2018). *On Christian teaching: Practicing faith in the classroom*. Eerdmans.

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