This fall, I began my 50th year as an educator. I’ve taught thousands of students in dozens of different spaces ranging from large, bright rooms to decrepit shacks with dirt floors to cyberspace for online graduate courses. I expect that some of you teach in well-designed spaces with the latest technology. Others may teach in cramped and inadequate church basements. And still others may teach in conditions of poverty with no reliable power and with chalk as their only “technology.”

Parker Palmer once wrote that to teach is to create space in which obedience to truth may be practiced (1983). There is much wisdom in this metaphor. And while physical space does affect teaching and learning, creating space where students discover and experience God’s truth can be done in almost any physical space.

Palmer’s space is closely related to how we view teaching. And what is biblical teaching? It guides children into a Christian way of life, one by which they commit themselves to serving God and neighbors. It shows them God’s great deeds in creating and upholding His world so that they can take care of and unfold its potential. It helps them develop and apply their insights and abilities to contribute to God’s Kingdom and society. To attain this, we need to create space where students experience and practice truth—a faith-affirming spiritual space, a Great Commandment-honoring ethical space, a stimulating and reflective intellectual space, a respectful and accepting social and emotional space, and, yes, a physical space that enables the other “spaces” to flourish.

So how do we create space in which truth is experienced and practiced?

First, we need to consider what space we create by how we view our own role as teachers. If we see ourselves as technicians, our teaching space is confining. Then we do not allow students to explore God’s created reality and respond to it in a personal way. But if we see ourselves as constructivists, our teaching space is too open-ended. Then we do not show students that they are learning about God’s structured reality in which there are rights and wrongs.

In the Bible Jesus is called the Great Shepherd (Hebrews 13:20). We’re so used to this metaphor that it no longer surprises us, even though shepherds were among the lowest strata of society. Why then would the Bible apply this metaphor to Jesus, and why would I suggest that it is a useful metaphor for our role as teachers? A shepherd guides his sheep so that they will have food and safety. A shepherd provides protection, provision, and direction so that his subjects are able to fulfill their intended calling. Thus as shepherds we provide meaningful, goal-oriented learning that equips students to become competent, discerning, responsive, and committed persons. We unfold life’s meaning and potential. We structure our classroom space for respect and love, for justice and grace, and for proficiency and excellence. The space we create enables students to exercise and fulfill their God-given calling. We are shepherds who guide our students.

We also create curriculum space in our classrooms. That space is not traditional since it provides room for student discovery, interpretation, and unique giftedness. But nor is that space constructivist since we promote a common vision with a moral purpose that transcends a personal or social construction of knowledge. We guide learners to observe God’s created world systematically. We help them think critically and creatively in ways that add to their existing knowledge and wisdom so they can use them in service to God. We help students ask and answer, • What is God’s intent for the topic we are investigating? • How has God’s intent been distorted through sin? • How can we restore, at least in part, the love, righteousness, and justice that God intended? Our curriculum space allows students to explore truth, gain wisdom, and experience how they can be a faithful presence wherever God places them.

I do want to mention that we can distort our curriculum space by using assessment strategies that create fear or even resentment. Students often compare the “space” of assessment with rat mazes or with hanging from a noose. Instead of looking at assessment as judgment or as hitting a target, what difference would it make if we ask, “How can my assessment be a blessing for my students? How can I extend justice through grace as I assess?” (I develop how we can do this in my book Walking with God in the Classroom [2009].)
We see ourselves as shepherds/guides and use our curriculum to consider how God wants us to respond to His laws and precepts (Psalm 19). Our learning space will also be affected by recognizing our students as God’s created image bearers. Students are far more than blank slates or trainable objects. We therefore allow them to reflect on and draw conclusions from their experiential knowledge, to conjecture and imagine, to pose questions and problems. But there is also a time when we develop enduring understandings, key concepts, and theories in a structured way. But what we may not forget is that such structured learning should then be followed by a time for open-ended response in which students apply their learning in what for them are new situations. When I explained this to a fellow educator, she said, “Yes, the phases of learning are saying ‘hello’ to a new topic, to learn to ‘know’ the topic, to ‘show’ that they know the topic, and to ‘grow’ in applying what they have learned.”

Finally, classrooms where students can practice truth are ones where we have created a sense of a safe, supportive, encouraging community where all may contribute with their special gifts. It’s a space where we learn and pray together, where we celebrate and sometimes mourn together, where we observe biblical virtues and solve conflicts peacefully. Each student is valued but also expected to fulfill certain responsibilities. There will be disruptions, of course; we all are sinful. And with some classes it is a long and difficult journey. Yet we continue to aim for a learning space that assists our students to take on life’s tasks in faithful, responsive, and responsible ways.

How do we put all this into practice? One of my student teachers in a sixth-grade Japan unit wanted her students to understand how cultural values are embedded in beliefs, traditions, and lifestyles. So throughout the unit, students kept track of Japanese values and compared them with Canadian ones. They reflected on their readings, discussions, and viewings of video clips that contrasted Japanese and Canadian lifestyles (“hello”). Near the end she used a jigsaw strategy for students to understand Japanese approaches to harmony, decision making, communication, respect, and position (“know”). Small groups then made posters titled Japanese Cultural Values (“show”). The students walked past the posters. With student input, the teacher developed a two-column chart, Japanese vs. Canadian cultural values. She then led a discussion on questions such as these: What would you find attractive and difficult about living in Japanese society? Which Japanese values could benefit Canadian society? Why? Which Japanese and which Canadian values are affirmed in the Bible? The students were then asked to write a short essay about the values they would espouse if a group of Canadian and Japanese sixth graders camped together for a week (“grow”).

One underlying aim was that students would become committed to values that may “borrow” from several cultures but that reflect biblical ones. This teacher was a shepherd/guide who allowed students to explore but also promoted clearly defined learning outcomes. She had the students ask how cultures can promote respect, righteousness, and justice and how those are rooted in basic beliefs. Her assessment took into account her students’ differing gifts in a safe and supportive learning context. Her classroom became a space in which students experienced and practiced truth.

How are you shaping your learning space this year? Is it a space where both you and your students are walking with God?

References

Dr. Harro Van Brummelen is executive director of Christian Studies International and professor emeritus at Trinity Western University. He is the author of Walking with God in the Classroom, Steppingstones to Curriculum, and coeditor of Metaphors We Teach By.