

# Integrating Faith and Learning In the College Classroom One Teacher's Discoveries Part I

By Bill Walthall

It was the kind of experience no Christian teacher wants to have. The bright, mature Christian student sitting across the desk from me confessed in some frustration, "I feel like the academic part of my life is destroying the spiritual part."

As I slid a little farther down into my chair, he explained, "I'm so involved in my studies that I don't have the time for Christ. There's me the Christian, and there me the student; and the Christian me is losing ground." Had I been teaching at a secular university I might have expected his difficulty. But as a Christian teacher in a Christian college, I felt helpless and intimidated. I could have easily dismissed his problem as "difficulty establishing time priorities." But I knew that in my pursuit of high academic standards, I had neglected my basic goal in teaching--educating Christians in a Christian manner. I suddenly realized that *I* had separated my Christian life from my academic life. The result? My students were learning that these two aspects of *their* lives ought to be separated.

This article is an attempt to share some of my discoveries in integrating faith into learning in the college classroom. Most of my discoveries have come by trial and error. Though there is much theory on the subject, few

practical helps are found in the literature beyond basic education. Perhaps this article will stimulate others to develop and share their discoveries in this area as well.

## **Classroom Mood and Course Content**

The discoveries I have found the most rewarding fall into two main categories: classroom mood (feeling, tone) and course content. The former, which I describe in Part I, was by far the easiest to change. In actuality it is also proving to be the most effective. Integrating course content (dealt with in Part II) has been more difficult, but it too has brought good results.

In attempting to change the tone of my classes, an entirely new dimension of teaching opened up, radically changing my relationship to work and the students' encounter with learning. This came about when I made a concerted effort to make my work as a teacher a specific ministry. I determined that the students who sat in my

classes would receive more than just gathering of facts. Not only would I teach, but also I would tend as a shepherd does his flock, as a pastor would care for his church. I resolved that I would be seen by my students as a caring teacher caring not just for the subject, but for them as well.

Here are some specifics:

1. *Entrance.* When I enter the classroom I communicate, "I'm glad I'm here, and I'm glad you're here." Sometimes I actually say this; other times I imply it by smiling a lot, establishing good eye contact, and making small talk with individual students, looking confident and relaxed yet enthusiastic, dressing sharply and professionally (for me it's a tie and lab coat), and being punctual. I make sure I'm well prepared to talk about the day's topic and ready to answer questions.

Sometimes that enthusiastic entrance takes a lot of energy. On "blah" mornings it requires a cup of hot beverage or an ice massage to my forehead. If I haven't already prayed for the students in my "quiet time," I try to do so before classes. This is no superstitious gesture; I firmly believe the Holy Spirit begins to work in my mind and the minds of my students.

What does this kind of entrance imply? It transmits "I care about this, and you're important to me." This in turn affects students' attitudes about learning.

2. *Learning names.*

Calling students by name builds their self-esteem. When they are available, pictures help me put together the name and the face. I try to learn the names *the students like to be called*. I remember one young woman who was always called "Wendy" by classmates and other faculty members. I started

calling her by her native name, Choi King. When she graduated she thanked me for being the only faculty member who called her by her real name.

Why learn students' names? This gesture says, "I care about you; you're not just a number or grade."

3. *Birthdays.* A small item, you say? Not for many people. I check my list and try to recognize students' birthdays if they fall on a class day. Other students often respond with goodies. In this case, the more closely knit the class, the better it works. A birthday celebration says, "You're a special person; let's recognize that." And students love to hear that from their teacher.

4. *Visitation.* I have established an open-door policy, and I work at making myself approachable. I want students to feel that they can come to me and express anything they want, even anger. By being open like this, I feel I can break down the pedestal teachers often tend to set themselves upon aloofness. I would really like to be more than a teacher; I enjoy being a friend, a counselor, a co-worker.

This also involves visitation-not in the home or dormitory-but in the hallways and the lounge. It's helpful just to find a flock of students and talk informally with them. Sometimes I'll invite a student to drop in and visit, to discuss how things are going. Although the conversation usually centers around academics, good heart-to-heart talk and counseling often result. By the way, I have never found that getting to know my students on this level has interfered with assigning grades, even bad ones!

5. *Prayer requests.*

Initially I failed miserably at soliciting prayer requests. I did let the students know that I care for them and often prayed for them individually. Now, rather than just asking for requests on a piece of paper (which turns out to be intimidating to many), I ask them to list anonymously what they like most about the class. Then they tear the paper in half, and on the blank half I ask them to share any specific need in their lives they want me to pray about. On this half a name is usually given. The response has been tremendous and has given me much insight into my students' needs, anxieties, and problems. I send occasional follow-up notes to let them know I'm still praying for them and concerned about their requests. In turn, this often leads to effective counseling.

6. *Devotions.* I don't like, and I find most college students dislike, the word *devotions*. It seems awkward to insert the term into the academic setting. Instead, I have instituted a similar activity that I call the "right hemisphere break" (referring to the right side of the brain). In this activity, which I usually schedule at the beginning of class, I try to address a particular need the students might have. Examples include putting grades into the proper perspective; addressing the fear of academic failure; balancing social life and academic life; integrating their Christian philosophy into the learning experience;

mate selection; vocational goals; God's will for each person's life; handling stress; the importance of health and exercise, and so on. This right hemisphere breaks rarely take longer than five minutes, and are not approached as a matter of routine.

In addition to regularly scheduled activities, addressing student needs seems appropriate anytime, a conviction that has been reinforced by the positive feedback from these breaks.

7. *Grading.* My feeling is this: Protect those who do poorly; praise those who do well or improve. For those students who fail to improve or even make a passing grade, I make a special effort to counsel them so that their self-worth is not devastated by their grade. It is important that the below-average student see me as a teacher with high standards, but not as punitive. I have to be honest and realistic in my grading, but not lacking in empathy. I want students to feel they can counsel and pray with me any time.

Other thoughts on grading: I try to avoid using a red pen. Although it stands out and seems easier to read, it also arouses a lot of negative student emotions. I know use a green or blue pen.

In listing grades I quit putting the low grades at the bottom. Can you imagine always seeing your name at the bottom? This carries negative connotations and diminishes the student's self-worth. Fortunately, our school assures privacy by a superb numbering system that helps protect the weaker students.

Because grades hold such powerful meaning to college students. I try to encourage and praise whenever possible. To help accomplish this, I purchased some

decorative notepads at the local Christian bookstore. I've found that sending little notes of encouragement or praise not only builds rapport but also assures the students that I'm concerned. And I enjoy getting notes back, too!

8. *Manners.* I find that treating the students as adults greatly enhances our relationship. This seems reasonable—they *are* adults! True, many do hang onto juvenile tendencies, but acknowledging and encouraging their adult side seems to bring that side out in my students. I try not to interrupt or speak condescendingly. I've learned to say "I'm sorry." "I made a mistake," and "I was wrong." I try not to become defensive or aggressive when challenged about exam questions or scores. I try not to change the schedule without asking permission or taking a vote. As a matter of courtesy, I religiously observe breaks and end class on time. I'm also learning to laugh when the joke is on me.

Last, but most important, I strive to be fair. Nothing will damage rapport more than for students to feel they have been treated or graded unfairly. A lack of fairness breeds anger, diminishes credibility, and destroys the student's desire to integrate faith and learning.

These, then, are some ways I've found to make learning a Christian experience for the student. Our perfect example is Jesus Himself. His ministry of caring and pastoring went far beyond His teaching ministry. He taught and ministered to the daily needs of His hearers.

I can never play the role of savior (Believe me, college students won't let you!), but I can minister to them through my teaching. That very integration on my part seems to provide the basis of student integration of faith and learning.