

*Chapter Six*

## **The Teaching of History as a Transformative Christian Tool in the Tertiary Classroom: A Study of Student Responses**

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### **Abstract**

This is a study of student responses to the teaching of history in an American university context, conducted by an Australian professional on a year's exchange. It is based on an analysis of data drawn from student response surveys conducted across the units taught. The results highlight a number of key principles for a curriculum that is centred around the revealing of Jesus, particularly in the nature and effect of the learning experiences he created as a master teacher during his earthly ministry. Students identified the following qualities as responsible for measurable changes in their attitudes and perspectives: inspirational teaching, the promotion of critical thinking and discernment and the creation of relevant Christ-centred educational encounters, utilising an inquiry-oriented, open-discussion, and deep-learning context. Students considered these approaches transformational, inspiring them to life-long learning. This study draws on the Christian educational perspectives of White (1903), Palmer (1993) and Kilgour (2019), particularly for its theoretical framework.

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The challenges of delivering a Christ-centred history pedagogy can lead to sincere but superficial responses, such as teaching only Bible or Christian history, or tacking a simplistic moral onto each historical episode. However, the authentic integration of a Christ-centred approach requires a deeper understanding of the true nature of Christian teaching, particularly in the context of teaching history. A number of Christian scholars have reflected fruitfully on what it means to see history through a Christian lens (Case, 1943; Land, 2000; Moyn, 2009; Mullen, 2003), and a few have elaborated on a philosophy of teaching in this context (Denis, 2019; Evans, 2001; Koelpin, n.d.; Land, 1998; *The Christian Teaching of History*, 1981; Zhigankov, 1999). However, there is little research on an actual pedagogy of teaching history in this way. This chapter explores student perceptions of the experiential dimension of learning history through a Christian lens, in the context of a one-year professorial exchange at an American Christian university.

From the rich field of valuable scholarship available on Christ-centred teaching, there are two writers in particular whose work has profoundly shaped this author's attitudes towards Christian practices of teaching history: E. G. White in her seminal book *Education* (1903), and Parker J. Palmer's influential *To Know as We are Known* (1993). Their influential insights are combined with the research perspective of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), whose application to a Christian teaching and research context is outlined by Kilgour (2019). Without negating the value of other thinkers in this space, this chapter will limit itself to exploring the way in which the student experiences of learning history in a cross-institutional and cross-cultural setting reveal key features of Christ-centred learning, as identified by both White (1903) and Palmer (1993).

White (1903) and Palmer (1993) have significant overlap in their views of true education, though using different language at times to express them. To begin with, White (1903) insists that **the heart of true education is Christ**, stating that, 'To obtain an education worthy of the name, we must receive a knowledge of God, the Creator, and of Christ, the Redeemer, as they are revealed in the sacred word' (p. 17). She speaks of cooperation with Christ as the only power that can resist evil: 'acquaintance of the soul with Christ' becomes 'a living power to shape the character' (White, 1903, p. 30). In this approach, the

teacher's first aim should be to help students enter into a relationship with Christ. Palmer (1993), while writing for a more general audience, foregrounds his own Christian beliefs, discovering in this fusion of spirit and flesh the incarnate Christ, the truth 'that is not a concept that "works" but an incarnation that lives' (p. 14). Palmer (1993) identifies Christ as the embodied truth – a key concept in a book that concerns itself with knowing truth.

Another way of expressing the same idea is that true education is centred on love, which White (1903) believes is 'the basis of creation and of redemption, [and] is the basis of true education' (p. 16). Palmer (1993) titles his first chapter *Knowing is Loving*, establishing from the start the intimate connection in his mind between love and education.. And where White (1903) speaks of 'the object of education, the great object of life' as being to 'restore in man [sic] the image of his Maker, to bring him back to the perfection in which he was created, to promote the development of body, mind, and soul' (p. 15–16), Palmer (1993) writes, 'The goal of knowledge arising from love is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds' (p. 8).

History seems like an unlikely candidate for a subject centred around love. But the solution is in a much-repeated phrase of White's regarding the purpose of a Christ-centred education, insisting that it should 'train the youth to be thinkers, and not mere reflectors of other men's thoughts' (p. 17). She denounces an education whose main emphasis is merely memorising, producing a graduate who is 'incapable of vigorous, self-reliant effort, and is content to depend on the judgment and perception of others', rendering the student 'incapable of discriminating between truth and error, and fall[ing] prey to deception', being 'easily led to follow tradition and custom' (White, 1903, p. 230). Referencing Isaiah 1: 18, 'Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord', White (1903) argues that reasoning powers must be exercised. In a similar vein, Palmer (1993) speaks of teachers not being possessive of their subject matter, instead allowing students to own it, and encouraging students to listen not just to the teacher but also to the subject matter.

Several consequences flow from these statements. Firstly, **education must emphasise critical thinking**, extending beyond mere recall. This is a corollary of independent thought. To this end, students must be unshackled from both their own preconceptions

and from the limits of the teacher's perspective and be nurtured into thinking for themselves. It is here that love enters the picture: the loving God, who created us in His image, wants to have restored in us His powers of independent creative thought and action, with each of us reaching their individual God-given potential. Liberating the student to discover how to think for themselves encourages that individuality and the development of the mind's powers that lie at the heart of restoring the image of God. To free students to engage with the subject on their own terms, to empower them to think beyond the teacher's thoughts, is an act of love, demonstrating a respect for their individuality and powers of the mind, as given to them by God.

To do this is to **liberate the student from the confines of received opinion and allow them the honour of making their own explorations of truth**. Palmer (1993), explains his concepts of openness, boundaries and hospitality as removing 'impediments to learning' (p. 71) and setting aside the barriers behind which we hide, noting that teachers often protect themselves from appearing ignorant, when not knowing is the gateway to true learning. At the same time, it is essential to create appropriate boundaries around the uncertainties generated by admitting ignorance, as is creating a safe and hospitable place where painful learning can take place. He identifies fear, not ignorance, as 'the enemy of learning' (Palmer, 1993, p. xi), hence the need for a safe relationship in which these fears and uncertainties can be addressed. Elsewhere, Palmer (1993), speaks of finding truth through consensus – not as a compromise by which we sacrifice our convictions and choose to agree in order to avoid conflict, but as a consultative process by which we hear each other and truth – allowing the collective relationship of learners, teacher and content to arrive at what is authentic.

A teaching approach motivated by a love of the students and respect for their powers of autonomous thinking underpins the point that false education is about power and control, whereas true education is where 'selfish ambition, the greed for power, the disregard for the rights and needs of humanity, that are the curse of our world, find a counterinfluence' (White, 1903, pp. 225–226). Palmer (1993) frames the same idea in the context of the origins and ends of knowledge: it can spring from curiosity or control, but both of these origins are dangerous, as curiosity lacks safe boundaries,

and control imposes inappropriate ones. However, knowledge that springs from compassion and love is the best. Furthermore, against the grain of a time where clinical objectivity in higher education is idealised, Palmer (1993) argues that objectivism is false; rather, truth is only found in relationship. Objectivism is about power and control, whereas truth is about relationship (Palmer, 1993). He speaks of truth as being personal, while simultaneously existing in community. White (1903) agrees with this view, highlighting that the personal element and ‘attention to individual development’ is essential in ‘all true teaching’ (pp. 231–232).

Both the personal and the communal are aspects of **relationships essential to Christ-centred teaching**. For example, while religious information can be learnt objectively, Jesus Himself can only truly be known relationally. Therefore, for the Christian history teacher, forging a relationship with both students and content is crucial, as is promoting relational attitudes towards faith and God, as opposed to a simple mastery of content.

As relationships are **vibrant and dynamic, so too is the teaching of history in a Christian context**. White (1903) talks of teaching with ‘simplicity and effectiveness’, and manifesting ‘enthusiasm’ (p. 233) in the classroom. ‘Teaching should bring a freshness, a quickening power, that awakens and inspires,’ she writes (1903, p. 279). Palmer (1993) identifies education as taking place in an atmosphere of dialogue, one where teacher, student and subject listen to each other, rather than a teacher-dominated, jug-to-mug approach.

‘True education means more than pursuing a certain course of study’, writes White (1903); ‘it has to do with the whole person, and with the whole period of existence possible to human beings. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers’ (p. 13). We need ‘wholesight,’ Palmer concurs, a vision of the world in which mind and heart unite ‘as my two eyes make one sight’ (1993, p. xxiii). He labels his vocation as ‘the spiritual life, the quest for God, which relies on the heart’, while his ‘avocation is education, the quest for knowledge, which relies on the eye of the mind’ (Palmer, 1993, p. xxiii). From this comes the conclusion that **the teaching of history should be holistic** – linked to both heart and mind, to other disciplines, to the present and to the whole-of-life experience of the students.

In this way, **the teaching of history in a Christ-centred way is transformative**, a term White (1903) uses to describe the power of Christ. ‘Character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings,’ White notes, adding that for ‘the strengthening and upbuilding of character... [o]f no study is this true to a greater degree than of history. Let it be considered from the divine point of view’ (1903, pp. 225, 238). She links character building to the command to love God, bringing us back to this chapter’s opening premise of the centrality of the love of God in true education, and identifies character as ‘the most valuable possession of earth or heaven’ (1903, p. 141). Palmer phrases the same idea as, ‘To teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced’ (1993, p. 69). Obedience to truth and character building are both about the transformational impact of education on the life of the student.

CHAT informs this study of student experiences in an American Christian university context, providing a useful framework of concepts and a ready terminology to understand the dynamics of the processes involved. Originating in Vygotsky’s (1978) attempts to broaden psychology from a purely scientific observation to include an awareness of cultural and historical factors in shaping human personality, Cole (1996) developed Vygotsky’s ideas into the CHAT framework. Its main elements include an ‘activity system,’ which (in this case) is represented by the university and its associated systems, including university education in America in general, as well as specific processes within the university, such as classes and its educative environment. Another element is the ‘goal’ or ‘object’; in this instance, this refers to the learning outcomes of the unit, building into the larger goal of obtaining a degree, itself part of the larger object of securing a specific career. In a Christian university, an essential part of the goal is not merely professional but personal, more specifically, spiritual. ‘Subjects’ refers to those engaged within the activity system, namely the students and staff, and ‘tools’ are the ‘mechanisms through which the subjects in the activity system move from the objective to the outcome’ (Kilgour, 2019, p. 185), referring in effect to the learning tasks used, including assessments. The final element of ‘community’ defines the participants by the roles in which the group moves towards its object (Kilgour, 2019). Kilgour (2019) identifies the way in which CHAT highlights the necessity of dealing with culture when addressing religion, making it a useful instrument

for exploring Christ-centred learning experiences in history pedagogy. He speaks of the importance of ‘disruptive’ and ‘subversive’ learning (Kilgour, 2019, p. 189), especially when reframing learning to the gospel and undermining a human culture from which spiritual perspectives have been excluded or distorted, as history often does. This connects to both White’s (1903) and Palmer’s (1993) insistence that education must liberate students from the tyranny of received opinion and preconceived thought. As a research tool, CHAT helps in:

recognising the complexity of the activity system, having well-publicised objectives in mind, and being aware of the community in which they are working. They need to be aware that the history and culture of the participants (‘subjects’ in CHAT) and that the mediating artefacts and tools all need to be interrogated when looking at the overall activity system. (Kilgour, 2019, p. 192).

These concepts and precepts form the basis for the analysis of the experiences of students during a professorial exchange year in the USA, in 2017, encompassing the Winter semester of one academic year, and the Fall semester of the following academic year. The classes taught – or tools used to move subjects (students) towards their goal or learning outcomes (Kilgour, 2019) – included ones on world history, largely targeting non-history majors completing compulsory general education requirements in history, and a history of Christianity, mostly taken by theology students. As requested by the American university, the content of three classes was imported from the Australian teaching context: Australian history, cinema and history, and the world wars, the latter taught through the innovative application of table-top wargaming for pedagogical purposes (Reynaud & Northcote, 2015). The exchange professor from America followed a similar pattern of importing their own innovative units to add to those they were asked to teach from the Australian institution’s regular classes. Being unfamiliar with the American activity system, or context, the author was anxious to assess the effectiveness of the tools employed, measuring them against the expectations of the subjects, or students (Kilgour, 2019). The analysis of this learning experience is based on data generated by voluntary student responses to anonymous surveys, completed at the end of each semester, to ensure an effective teaching outcome, as well as on unsolicited student feedback.

There were several elements of the typical American university activity system, especially in pedagogy, that were unfamiliar to



the author, in particular, the assigned readings that were assessed in quizzes each class period. For several senior classes, the author swapped the American-style quizzes for Australian-style assessments based on student presentations, papers and discussions in tutorials, debates and seminars (some of which took place in an online forum), and research essays of up to 2,000 words. In completing these papers, some Education students revealed that they were writing the first expository essay of their academic career outside of those required for a class on academic writing. In the history of Christianity class, quizzes were changed to Australian-style assessments, after being challenged by the students to reconsider the quizzes in light of the author's view on the merits of critical thinking over memorisation as an educational outcome. In all these cases, the Australian modes of assessment were new to almost all students, though the history majors were familiar with essays.

In the world history class, the author kept the quizzes of approximately ten true-or-false, multiple-choice and short-answer questions inherited from the American professors for the Winter semester, but changed these to two 100–150-word paragraph-style questions in the Fall semester, based on a class review at the end of the Winter semester of the effectiveness of quizzes. The more able students pointed out how, in quizzes for which they had conscientiously prepared, they may have failed to remember one or two specific items from 20–30 pages of reading, but had retained the key concepts and events; hence, a quiz did not fairly measure their learning. Changing to a more generic paragraph-style answer allowed them to demonstrate a higher-order understanding of the course content, in addition to purely lower-order content recall. With some reluctance from many intimidated by a new style of evaluation, students rapidly developed the skill of writing a paragraph or two that demonstrated recall of key events, along with a level of critical evaluation. In fact, after a trial return to conventional quizzes, they voted unanimously to retain the paragraph-style assessment format. Average marks for this new assessment component were higher than those of the first semester quizzes.

As students had already read the content of the lectures before class, either in set readings from a text or from lecture notes posted online, the author did not deliver lectures. Instead, aspects of a flipped



classroom were implemented (Freeman et al., 2014; Lage & Platt, 2000) using the lecture time to expand on the material already covered, where students could demonstrate their familiarity with the content, engage with the material interactively and ask further questions.

Such an approach allowed students to explore topics of interest and facilitated integrative learning, drawing together conclusions from multiple periods and disciplines that helped make sense, not so much of history but of contemporary life, particularly by highlighting the origins of prevailing current attitudes, behaviours and beliefs, and allowing them to better reflect on the values intrinsic to such beliefs. History provides a wealth of examples of ‘selfish ambition, the greed for power, the disregard for the rights and needs of humanity’ (White, 1903, p. 225), and these were opened to discussion and evaluation in class. This triggered many invaluable discussions of spiritual issues that emerged organically from the conversations, such as questioning the ethics of politically-manipulative leadership in governments and organisations (even to achieve positive ends), or the degree to which various economic systems reflect biblical values. Most of these discussions did not include a debate-closing conclusion from the lecturer, but rather raised multiple facets of issues that were left for individuals to resolve. For many students, these learning experiences were a novelty, the impact of which became evident in their responses to the surveys.

The surveys at the end of each semester asked students to identify the best and worst features of the class, what they would keep and/or change and whether the class had met their expectations. The author was unprepared for the degree of enthusiasm expressed by students regarding their learning experiences and by the almost complete absence of negative feedback. Adverse responses were limited to a few who felt that it was harder to score well on the assessment tasks, though further qualifying that this had encouraged them to up their academic game. Student responses used in this chapter, while already anonymous, have been coded to track any repeat comments from individuals.

First, a number of students expressed surprise and gratitude for the opportunity to **experience encounters with Christ in the classroom**. One wrote a personal card of thanks for ‘*teaching Godly perspective*’ (175W4C). Others in the world history classes appreciated how ‘you

*tried to help us see things through a Christian lens'* (175WS8) or that *'you even were able to show God through it'* (175FS2). The history of Christianity class provided a more obvious and natural vehicle for matters of faith, but even here, the survey responses demonstrated their appreciation for a class *'about God and his Awesomeness'*, with this particular respondent adding, *'I learned so much about life, culture, history and my own limited understanding of God. There has been no class period when I didn't learn more curious things about God and wanted to discover more about him'* (365FS5). Another in the same group considered the best thing about this class was *'To be drenched by Jesus more and more'* (365FS6). A fellow student named the best thing as *'Deep, philosophical tangents that led to theological discussion. I loved every class I attended because I always learned something new'* (365FS9).

The students went on to identify **critical thinking** as an element that lifted the impact of their learning. Having heard an emphasis in each class on the importance of critical thinking over recall as a goal or object of higher education, students repeatedly identified it as an educational gain. *'I really enjoyed the open discussion in class, as it fostered critical thinking,'* one wrote (175WS7). Another appreciated thinking about history *'in a different way'* (175FS2). *'Best thing about this course?,'* wrote another: *'The push to have me "think" and not "remember". To ask the question "why" instead of "what"'* (365FS6). Another considered the favourite part of the class to be *'that we were encouraged to actually think critically and connect history instead of memorizing dates and names'* (175FS19). *'The course surpassed my expectations, as it encouraged me to think critically,'* yet another wrote (365FS7). Others responded in a similar vein. One appreciated the *'genuine learning'* that happened in the wargaming classes (465AFS5), while a colleague wrote of those classes helping *'to rip away myth from our Hollywood perception'* of history (465AFS3), indicating an unshackling from popular received thought to one of independent reflection.

That **students felt liberated to do their own thinking** became evident in the feedback as well. *'You have taught me things I cannot price,'* a student wrote in a card of thanks. *'The humility to seek perspective and the hunger to understand'* (175W4C).

One student identified Palmer's (1993) concept of the weight of fear in inhibiting education, writing, *'Truth is something to aspire towards, not something to be afraid of. What I learned from you, that you assisted in my growth is that being open minded and thinking are assets to being human. Wish you came sooner!'* (175WS12). A world history student *'expected this course to be taught in an objectional way of stating facts and events'* but instead discovered that *'This was not the case. Though opinions were used, they were not taught to be the only idea, but as a way to show and demonstrate [that] as educated people we should think for ourselves'* (175FS11). Similarly, a film and history student *'liked how things were presented in a way that wasn't as if the teacher thought he was right about everything; there was freedom to disagree'* (365FS1). In the history of Christianity class, a student expressed thanks *'for challenging me to think for myself. Thank you for changing the way I look at the world, its history, my church, my God. Thank you, most of all, for allowing me to push myself, more than any other professor'* (365FS6). What is most striking in this last statement is the identification of self-motivated learning as a direct result of being liberated from teacher-dominated education.

Kilgour's (2019) concept of gospel-centred learning as 'disruptive' or 'subversive' (p. 189) emerged in other feedback: *'Best thing about the course? Provocation'*, wrote a history of Christianity student, adding that they *'enjoyed the style of teaching and how Christians can stay true to their foundational beliefs without excluding or distorting church history'* (365FS4). Another *'loved the emphasis on thinking through some of the theologies that we have always accepted as true'*, continuing with, *'thank you for challenging me to think outside of the box and to understand Christianity from a broader worldview'* (365FS3). A student in world history appreciated another disruptive aspect, during an open-ended discussion of American Christian attitudes to guns and the military. *'Thanks for the pacifism and challenging the normal train of thought. It was needed and appreciated'* (175FS13).

Several specifically mentioned the disruption of their American viewpoint, with one student valuing the opportunity to hear *'a whole new perspective about world history, rather than a biased American standpoint'* (175WS4). Using similar language, others

*'left each class with a whole new perspective on culture and history that was a refreshing change from my American, egoistic mindset'* (175FS9), a perspective that broadened *'our scope of understanding beyond what we know in America'* (365FS2). Others enjoyed the *'different opinions'* provided by the author's *'different culture'* (175WS8), or the *'more "Oriental" perspective'* as one respondent described it (175WS11), with others considering the different perspective as an unparalleled feature of the class, stating that *'All history classes should be taught in light of this one'* (175FS16). One student's dislike of history led them to write that they *'honestly loathe this class,'* though adding *'but it was worth it. I learned to think outside of my perspective... Students got a bang for their buck'* (175FS17). These all reflect Palmer's (1993) premise of creating a safe place, *'not to make learning painless, but to make the painful things possible, things without which no learning can occur'* (p. 74).

A further recurring theme in the feedback was an appreciation for *'the open discussion that we were able to have in this class'* (175WS2). Another wrote of highly valuing these discussions, noting that *'I learn a lot from them. And I like the fact that you don't really lecture, but you lead the conversation'* (175WS5). The question and answer format appealed to another, stating that they loved *'how open the teacher was to different points of view'* (175WS6). Others noted how the discussions *'fostered critical thinking'* (175WS7), *'student ideas and involvement'* (175WS9) and *'looking at things from different perspectives'* (175WS12). A number of respondents echoed the idea that classes did not feel like lectures, but more *'like he was just having a conversation with us. We were able to give lots of input'* (465AFS2). Another valued the *'interesting'* in-class discussions, where *'every student was able to engage with the material'* and the *'theoretical basis was strong'*, resulting in a class that was *'even more interesting than I could have imagined'* (465BFS7).

Another feature identified in the feedback as responsible for raising the impact of the learning was that of the **appropriate and effective relational contexts**. As Palmer (1993) notes, the relational context of love *'is not a soft and sentimental virtue, not a fuzzy feeling of romance'* but rather *'tough love, the connective*

tissue of reality' (p. 9). One student emailed an assignment with the message, *'Thank you for being patient with my procrastinating self. And thank you again for teaching this class this semester. It was a bright spot in my year'* (175W2). Another considered the best feature of the class as *'your willingness to work with us when we needed help'* (175WS1). One student named the *'relaxed (yet rigorous) course work'* (175FS14) as a strength, while another valued the way in which students were *'treated as adults'* (465BFS6). This highlighted an earlier classroom incident, where a student begging for permission to leave for a medical appointment was told to exercise their judgement as an adult. The author was astonished by the electrified reaction of the entire class to their response, as the students exclaimed that being called adults represented a culture shift for them. Both examples are indirect observations about the nature of the relationships in the classroom setting, demonstrating respect for the students, as well as the learning activity of the class.

As part of the relational dimension, student feedback repeatedly credited an **inspirational and vibrant learning environment** for enhancing their learning. In describing their experiences, students used words such as *'most enjoyable'* (465AFS3; 465BFS6; 175FS7; 175FS10), *'enthusiasm'* (365FS10; 175FS6), *'very excited'* (465AFS7), *'enlightened'* (175FS20), *'passion'* (365FS10), *'fun'* (175FS19; 465AFS2), *'refreshing'* (175FS4; 365FS3), *'profoundly moved'* (465BFS5), and *'inspiring'* (175W1; 175WS11). A number of students spoke of how they *'loved'* their class experiences or developed a *'love'* for learning (175W1; 175WS6; 175FS6; 175FS12; 465AFS4; 365FS3; 365FS9; 365FS10) because of these classes. Others described feeling *'inspired'* (175W1; 175WS11), with one specifying *'to be a better scholar'* (365FS7). These responses indicate that the classes engaged them beyond their expectations, with several responses to survey questions declaring that the classes *'far exceeded expectations'* (465BFS5; 365FS6; 365FS7; 465AFS8), with one adding, *'It may be the best class that I have ever taken. Certainly the most memorable'* (365FS2).

In the world history class, one of the most common responses alluded to how much the students normally dislike history, but found this class engaging and educative. *'I came in assuming I would*

*be bored and came out interested in the history we've discussed. Thanks for teaching us. I'm not being cheap by saying this has been my favorite course this semester,'* one wrote (175FS14). Others responded, *'At first I thought I was going to hate it, but I liked it'* (175FS15); *'I originally thought it was going to be a boring class and it turned out to be one of my favorite classes'* (175FS5); and *'I normally dislike history courses passionately, but loved this one'* (175FS12). One expanded on this theme with, *'I have never enjoyed listening to history before, always bored me. This course, however, constantly had me intrigued. The only history class I've liked. Expected to hate, ended up enjoying and learning so much'* (175FS7). Perhaps the act of affirming the right of the non-history majors to not enjoy compulsory history classes liberated them from an expectation, paradoxically freeing them to respond with a different attitude.

A further element that evoked a positive response from students during feedback was that students could relate the class content to their own reality, to current events and to their own attitudes and future career paths. This element facilitated the subjects in integrating the tools into the outcome, in effect developing an element of **holistic learning** from what they had anticipated would be only remote factual information, detached from their actual lives, careers and interests. Students commented that they *'liked how the professor would at times take historic values and events and explain how they affect current events'* (175FS3) and how *'the class made me think about more than just history'* (365FS11). Another thought their *'new mental shift when it comes to looking at the world'* would *'help to positively color the way I live and work in my career'* (175FS9), while another echoed the *'so many new insights'* about history could *'be applied for career [sic]'* (365FS8). Another respondent appreciated how *'The class helped me understand the present by showing me the past'* (365FS4). So meaningful were many of the engagements that one student kept *'a list of quotes from this class period on my phone that I appreciated from you/this class'* (365FS11).

As suggested by the responses already cited, a great many students considered their classroom encounters to be transformative. *'I absolutely will treasure the mindset of this class,'* a student



wrote. *'The new perspective I gained on other cultures (and mine) will go with me for the rest of my life'* (175WS3). Other similar feedback included, *'I was profoundly moved by the content in each class'* (465BFS5) and *'I felt enlightened after just about every class'* (175FS20). One student thought the class would be *'another history class that I would barely skim by'*, based on memorising *'dates and names... Instead I actually learned ☺[sic]'* (175FS4). One high-achieving history of Christianity student admitted at the end of the semester that he had done few of the set class readings, which would normally have been the subject of quizzes each class. He hastened to insist that, despite this, he had learned more in this class than in any other in his academic career, because of the class discussions and assessments that required him to reflect critically about the content. Another student offered an extended evaluation of the class in a thank you card:

*I confess I did not expect to enjoy the class overly much, and only took it because it fit with my schedule and I am required to take a history class. I have been pleasantly surprised, however, as I have found the class to be not only enjoyable but also very revealing. I have had to take a long look at some of the ways I view the world, and while that was not always pleasant, I do feel that I have become a better person because of these experiences.*

(175WC3)

This response richly illustrates the impact of creating disruption (Kilgour, 2019) in order to provoke students to think for themselves (White, 1903). Of course, such painful learning again illustrates that an environment of safety is essential to deep learning (Palmer, 1993).

Transformational education produces life-long impacts, inspiring a receptiveness to continuing growth beyond the end of a formal education. As already witnessed, students recorded changes that they expect to have an ongoing influence on their beliefs and behaviours, indicating that what they learned would be carried into their future careers (175WS3; 175FS9; 365FS8). Another student elaborated on this, stating that *'Most of my classes the information does not stay with me for very long. However, this class I have retained so much'* (465BFS3).



Using the framework of CHAT has helped explore how the student experience of history in an American Christian university context can be transformative through a Christ-centred approach. The content-heavy and recall-oriented characteristics of the activity system can be transcended by modifying the tools in use, taking the content as a starting point for engaging the subjects in disruptive and subversive learning, through ‘well-publicised objectives’ in which the principles of the gospel are used to undermine the ‘network of socio-cultural elements’ (Kilgour, 2019, pp. 184, 192); this enables subjects to critique their own history and culture, ultimately drawing their own informed conclusions. The tools or methods used included a partially flipped classroom; creating space for greater discussion and student engagement; the overt, well-publicised reframing of the objective of history classes as being critical thinking and not mere content recall; repositioning reluctant history students as not obliged to enjoy history; the presentation of history as an exercise in understanding the present rather than recalling the past; the deliberate use of the differing perspectives of American and Australian culture to rupture expectations and provoke discussion and reflection; and a more extensive use of assessment activities which promote critical thinking.

The educational perspectives of White (1903) and Palmer (1993) identify certain key goals or objectives (Kilgour, 2019) including a conscious and overt harnessing of spiritual and religious perspectives; the development of critical thinking, especially through freeing students to think for themselves; relational learning experiences that appropriately framed the ‘history and culture of the... subjects [and] the mediating artefacts and tools’ (Kilgour, 2019, p. 192), in ways that spark enthusiasm, passion and inspiration. Creating holistic learning experiences by drawing together the learning environment and the personal and professional worlds of the students added to the transformative intent of the learning experiences, generating outcomes that went beyond the classroom to encompass whole-of-life changes. The student feedback made it clear that these experiences educated, inspired and transformed their outlooks and attitudes. In showing respect for the students through recognising their adult autonomy,

their own intellectual powers and their capacity to discover rather than be told the desired learning outcomes, these classroom experiences demonstrated that love was the basis and goal of the classes. In return, students responded with excitement, passion and a love of their own. *'Thanks for inspiring a love of history and a desire to discern past events in all of your students,'* one responded (175W1). History can indeed be a way of presenting the love of Christ in the classroom.

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