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The Transformational Planning Framework

A pathway to holistic biblical teaching

Lanelle Cobbin

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“In the teaching of Religious Education, there is a danger of remaining in the realm of information, rather than enter the arena of formation”

In Miss Versteynan's infant's classroom in Wellington, the children are exploring the story of Baby Moses. They've just listened to the song 'Close to your Heart' and have reflected on the fact that, like Jocabed held Moses close to her heart while they were separated, that's where Jesus holds us while we're living apart. The atmosphere is reverent. The children are reflective as they return to their desks to draw a picture of themselves nestled near Jesus' heart. Then it begins. Jeremiah launches into a song; a personal song, a new song emerging directly from his own heart: "Jesus... I love you, You are so close to my heart". Others weave in their own little melodic compositions into a web of praise. Miss Versteynan pauses in her flurry to gather materials for the next lesson and drinks in the God-moment. Something just happened. She smiles.

In Miss Gibson's Yr 9 Class, the boys have begun to sit up the front. Their eyes are focused, their body-language, engaged. Questions fly (tough ones). The bell goes, but they stay, clustered around Miss Gibson's desk, peppering more questions, hungry for more. "That class went so fast Miss," declares Denzel. "Time flies when you're having fun!" she replies, gathering the resources from class. "Yeah", he says, surprised by an apparent epiphany, "I did have fun!"

Introduction

Seeing with new eyes

In his book, *To know as we are known*, Parker Palmer asserts that there are two ways of viewing the world—through the eye of the mind or the eye of the heart (Palmer, 1993). Our dominant choice, he declares, has been to see through the eye of the mind, a world of fact and reason.

It [the eye of the mind] is a cold and mechanical place. We have built our lives there because it seemed predictable and safe. Today, in the age of nuclear science, our mind-made world has been found flawed and dangerous, even lethal. So we

open the eye of the heart and see another sight: a world warmed and transformed by the power of love and a vision of community beyond the mind's capacity to see. We cannot forsake our hearts and yet we cannot abandon our minds. (Palmer, 1993, p.23)

Palmer contends that what is needed is whole-sight. Either eye is simply not enough. Mind and heart must unite to offer whole-sight—"single, steady and whole" (Ibid). As we consider the pursuit of biblical curriculum that is whole and balanced, his metaphor offers some rich insight.

Our mission as teachers of the Bible

For the Christian educator, the formation of faith is close to our *raison d'être*. It is a mission born millennia ago by God himself in Matthew 28, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (vs. 19). This invitation launched for Christians the most momentous endeavour one can be involved in, and it is no less relevant for Christian schools. With this great commission, transformation became mission (Hull, 2006) and set us on the path of whole-sighted purpose. This pursuit of transformation through the growing of disciples has shaped Christian education. "The work of education and the work of redemption are one" (White, 1903, p. 16). Such a declaration led to Ellen White's¹ counsel for the teaching of Bible to "have our freshest thought, our best methods and our most earnest effort" (1913, p. 181). Knight's question a quarter of a century ago still holds relevance, "Are our instructional programs structured to reach the desired destination?" (1985, p. 175).

We live in the aftermath of an era where fact and reason have been enthroned and the *eye of the mind* has dominated. However, God doesn't want walking encyclopedias of data but faithful followers. Intellectual truth is not necessarily a catalyst for heartfelt passion for God. Information alone can create a wall rather than a bridge. In the teaching of Religious Education, there is a danger of remaining in the realm of *information*, rather than enter the arena of *formation*.

An extremely real problem here is that it is infinitely easier to develop a course of religious instruction that passes on information than to prepare one that brings a student into a personal confrontation and/or relationship with the living God. The latter, however, is the ideal that we must seek to accomplish despite its difficulties. (Knight, 1985, p. 178–179)

What if?

In pursuit of curriculum possibilities that lead to transformation, ‘What if?’ questions need to be asked.

- *What if* we were to undergo a seismic shift in our thinking and embrace a spiritual formation approach to biblical teaching rather than simply an educational one?
- *What if* we seriously considered answers to the questions that would arise from such a shift?
- *What if* we could provide a practical tool that could hold us to account with the fusion of philosophy and practice?
- *What if* student engagement was a driving consideration in everything we planned?
- *What if* we really became passionate about moving our collective teaching to a higher plane of student engagement and ownership of learning?
- *What if* we could scaffold encounters with God?
- And *what if* we became so inspired about our new modus operandi that we didn’t see the use of such a framework as an exercise in compliance, but as a means of getting our students excited about God?

A request for resources from Adventist Educators in New Zealand some four years ago propelled the writer on a quest to consider these questions. Observation, reflection, research and prayer in the ensuing time distilled a number of key principles that helped fashion a planning framework that can offer a possible path forward in the specific pursuit of spiritual formation.

Spiritual-formation as a driving motivation

The landscape of spiritual formation is peppered with rich definitions, emphasising the dynamic relationship Christians have with their God.

The movement of the entire life towards God. (Maxson, 2006, p.2)

Learning to walk routinely and easily in the character and power of Jesus Christ. (Willard, cited in Gangel, 2005, p. 154)

God getting into us and us getting into God. (Stevens & Green, 2003, p. xi)

Spiritual formation harnesses a ‘whole-sighted’ approach to a relationship with God. While there are definitive cognitive components to faith, spiritual formation focuses on the way in which objective knowing can become personal knowing (Benner, 2003).

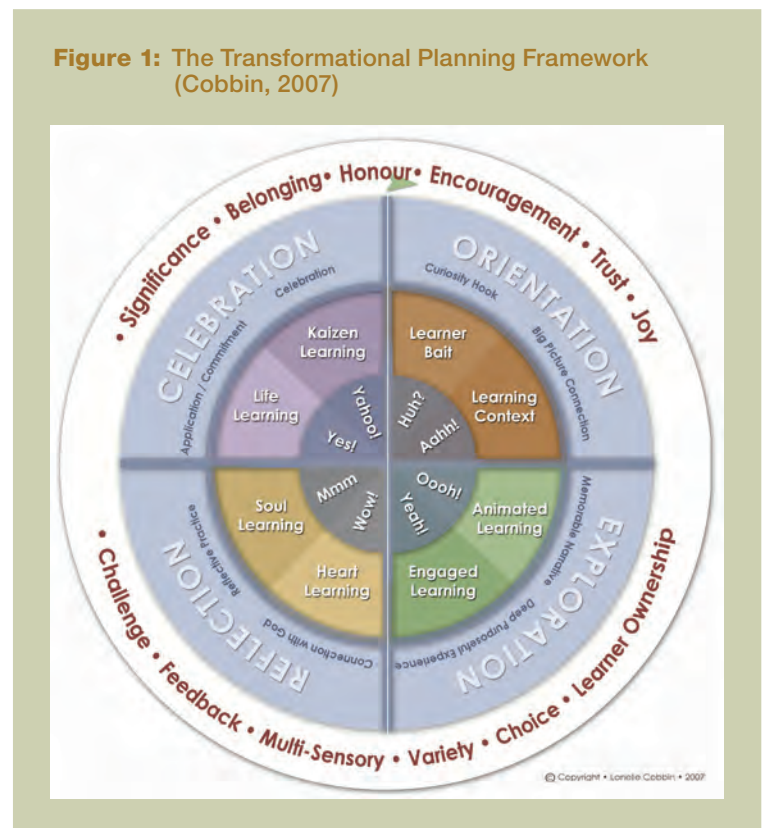
“What if we could scaffold encounters with God?”

The Transformational Planning Framework

The *Transformational Planning Framework* (see Figure 1) offers a process the Bible teacher can follow to teach biblical content with whole-sight and integrate the principles of spiritual formation into classroom practice. It is based on concepts that a pantheon of thought-leaders in education, faith, learning theory, spiritual formation and sociology herald as important. The planning framework offers a teaching/learning trajectory that is holistic, intentionally simple and purposefully flexible, inviting rich variety to be applied at different age levels and cultural contexts².

The *Transformational Planning Framework* invites teachers to inject components into learning experiences that will allow students to be emotionally engaged; see the big picture; respond with depth, rigour and creativity; be touched at a heart level;

Figure 1: The Transformational Planning Framework (Gobbin, 2007)



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personally reflect; intentionally worship; develop an authentic connection with God; be challenged by an obedient response; share meaningfully; and truly celebrate who God is.

Emotional engagement: The core

Emotional engagement is at the heart of the *Transformational Planning Framework*. In each phase of the teaching process, planning focuses on what will invigorate students' engagement through positive emotional states that are reshaped with movement to a new phase. Eric Jensen's meta-analysis of brain research led him to promote the management of emotional learning states as a prominent educational priority. "Manage [learning] states well and the learning will take care of itself" (2003, p. 12). Clearly, emotions are the glue of retention.

Learning: A focus

The second layer of the *Transformational Planning Framework* focuses on learning. Claxton's (2008) Generation 4 learning-to-learn principles inform the design of this layer in which student learning drives teachers' planning and practice. Students are encouraged to take charge of their learning journey. The focus shifts from how teachers can help students learn better, to how teachers can help students become better learners, through offering help as a 'learning-power coach'.

ORIENTATION

Learner Bait

(Curiosity Hook • Huh?)

Mr Harrold enters his Year 7 class wearing military dress. Students enter to epic music and launch into the subject of the war in heaven by estimating the bleed-line of ink when dropped onto paper towel. How far can one action go? Sometimes small actions can result in far greater circles of influence than we anticipate.

Mrs Stanton's Year 5 class is about to explore the story of Elijah. They play a game of hoops and balls to launch the idea that we need to work with God not against Him in His plans for us.

The purpose of the first phase in the teaching of any biblical unit is to emotionally hook students into the learning by arousing their curiosity and making them 'hunger and thirst after righteousness'.

The introduction of a lesson or new topic is a crucial phase. Brain research suggests that the brain has a high attentional bias that is especially strong to something new or novel (Jensen, 2000).

The introduction is essential for eliciting the mental state or mindset that will make the remaining minutes maximally productive. Whatever you do, don't skip this stage. (Jensen, 2000, p. 70)

Not only does this phase act as learner bait for the forthcoming learning experience, but it also serves to identify a key theme in the proposed topic. The activities will invariably be experiential in nature and involve an interactive, relational activity or emotionally engaging story. In each topic, there is a truth for students to embrace, and a Person of Truth with whom to connect. Engagement towards this end fashions this phase.

Learning Context

(Big-picture Connection • Aahh!)

What was God's dream for Israel? Mrs Truscott's Year 8 class contextualise their historical journey with candles. Israel was to be a shining light for God in their world. As the history is reviewed, candles are lit and snuffed out to highlight their fickle following. Mt Carmel is crunch time in light of this.

Meanwhile, Year 5 explore a similar concept by studying maps of Palestine to note the strategic placement of the Israelites in the then-known world.

In many ways, biblical curriculum is an exercise in meaning-making and life-relevance. Our job is to help them discover such relevance. Religious studies lessons create opportunities for students to see the great meta-narrative, how they fit into it, and how it might help them answer the big questions of life.

When students are bored and turned off, something very wrong has occurred. A great majority of the time, that 'great wrong' is meaningless curriculum. More than 95% of the discipline problems disappear when meaning comes back into the curriculum. (Kovalik 1994, p. 52)

Learning Context calls us to account to contextualise the learning and offer big-picture connections. It encourages the identification of learning intentions and links between units, lessons, ideas, meta-narrative themes and prior knowledge. Topics need to be contextualised. These connections may be quite brief in nature, but they are essential to students' holistic understanding of their learning.

EXPLORATION

Animated Learning

(Memorable Narrative • Oooh!)

In Mrs Butler's Year 1 class, the children are exploring

“In each topic, there is a truth for students to embrace, and a Person of Truth with whom to connect”

the story of Joseph. God has a plan for Joseph's life and He is weaving it together. As the story is shared, colours and textures are used to explore the emotions in the story. Mrs Butler weaves materials into hessian to represent the different moments in Joseph's life. Each one is symbolic. The children use this visual motif to offer clues to recall the elements in his story.

In Mr Parker's Year 2 class, a knock on the door reveals 'Peter' who dramatically shares his experience of getting out of the boat and walking on the water to Jesus.

Animated Learning explores the teacher-facilitated voyage into the biblical 'story' that will form the foundation of the unit. While story is a potent pedagogical approach at any level, the preeminent role we ultimately play as a Christian teacher is to be a teller of THE story; the story of God.

Many stories within this great STORY will be celebrated within a biblical curriculum. It is important that these be delivered in a manner that is maximally engaging, allowing the narrative to be memorable. To this end, passion, energy and enthusiasm in delivery are key. Given the diversity of faith-groups found in most classes, there is a challenge to captivate those who have not heard the story before, whilst adding layers of emotional response previously unconsidered by those who are familiar with the story. There is power in story—power to engage and move students in an affective way. Teachers must harness that power.

Engaged Learning

(Deep, purposeful experiential learning • Yeah!)

Back in Mrs Butler's Year 1 class, children are brainstorming character qualities of Joseph as seen throughout his life. Each word is shared and justified. Pictures are drawn and are placed with the words on a visual pathway to show how Joseph's character was changing and becoming stronger with each struggle because He trusted God.

Students in Mrs Roland's Year 7 class are exploring heaven. Groups circulate in the classroom to read diary entries from 'Jessie' who shares insights about heaven. Information is gleaned by student-pairs and brought back to small groups for organising into a mind-map. A picture and time-line of heaven is created. God has given us enough information to dream big!

This phase of the unit explores the student's response to the Story of God. Its defining adjective, 'engaged' invites an unleashing of inquiry-based,

thinking-driven pedagogical methods that will encourage students to 'own' the learning process. Students are encouraged to get behind the wheel of their own learning and mentally grapple with content (Sizer & Sizer, 1999); discuss it, synthesise it, make new discoveries about biblical culture; and be open to new places God wants to take them.

In this phase, teachers use their knowledge of learning styles, intelligences, and brain-compatible learning to ensure that students are challenged and fully engaged in meaningful discoveries. Learning is not the consequence of teaching or writing, but rather of thinking (McLaren, 2004). Talking is not teaching and listening is not learning. Similarly, crosswords and find-a-words do not grow faith (Schultz & Schultz, 1996). Critical thinking leads to principled reasoning that allows truth to become part of a mature faith (Dudley, 1999). Students are encouraged to own this thinking and grappling.

REFLECTION

It could be said that the phases within the first half of the *Transformational Planning Framework* are esteemed in all good teaching practice. It is now that a transition is made from the cognitive realm to the spiritual, affective one. Here, educational concerns are strengthened by a spiritual formation emphasis. There is a movement from the eye of the mind to the eye of the heart as the elements that promote faith are brought into play.

Heart Learning

(Connection with God • Wow!)

*Back in Mrs Butler's Year 1 'Joseph' classroom, the woven creation, now all trimmed with gold, is fashioned into a coat. Children are photographed in the coat, for God has a beautiful dream for **their** life, and He is weaving it together. They take time to thank Him quietly for this dream.*

Meanwhile, in Mr Walker's Year 8 classroom, Moses is the focus of study. After listening to a moving song about being willing to do God's work, students select an emotion card that captures how they feel about the lyrics of the song, and share their thoughts.

Heart Learning provides the opportunity for transformation to take place. Here, it is acknowledged that Truth is a person with heart, skin and lips, and that His truth can transform. The preeminent purpose in this phase is to connect students with God, and have them give Him permission to touch their hearts and lives. Gillespie speaks of the importance of such a focus.

“While story is a potent pedagogical approach at any level, the preeminent role we ultimately play as a Christian teacher is to be a teller of THE story; the story of God”

Men and women who teach the scriptures have a responsibility to move beyond the content and cognitive insights...beyond conceptual theology and textual exegesis to inspiration (worship, praise, gratitude, forgiveness and personal freedom). (Gillespie, 2006, p.35)

“Inviting ‘transformational’ application rather than simply ‘informational’ application is a vital emphasis”

Awe is another goal of *Heart Learning*; it is the means by which transformation can happen. “The greatest insights happen to us in moments of awe” (Heschel, cited Schultz & Schultz, 1999, p. 47). Awe provides a moment in time when words such as ‘grace’ can pierce through the mind and reach the heart. Only when the heart is touched can the life be changed from the inside out.

Stepping onto the road of Christian spiritual transformation requires an encounter with the living God. This encounter may be gradual or it may be sudden. But it will always involve a turning and an awakening. (Benner, 2003, p. 74)

Heart Learning creates an environment that invites such a ‘turning’ and ‘awakening’.

Soul Learning

(Reflective Practice • Mmm)

In Mrs Harrison’s Year 3 classroom, students have explored the gift of Canaan given to the Israelites at the battle of Jericho. It was a gift Israel was to remember. Students reflect on 10 things they think God wants them to remember and then fashion their list on a personal ‘altar’; a symbol of remembering. Lists are shared with others.

In Mr Kelly’s Year 7 class, students are focusing on the story of the cross. In a time of reflection, they journal their thoughts, then creatively respond to the message of the cross. Each offers their ‘response’ at the foot of a constructed cross in their classroom.

Brain research tells us that our emotional and moral self grows in periods of quiet reflection. The Bible invites us to “be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

In authentic education, silence is treated as a trustworthy matrix for the inner work students must do, a medium for learning of the deepest sort. (Palmer, 1998, p.80)

Personal reflection through journaling, drawing, pair-sharing, mind-mapping or responses to reflective questions are key to personalising faith and flow naturally from the connection with God that has just occurred during *Heart Learning*. Valuing time for this kind of quiet reflection is important if the learning is to

go internal and allow God’s Spirit to convict. It is here in *Soul Learning* that the fissure between the cognitive and the spiritual can be not just mended, but fused.

CELEBRATION

Life Learning

(Application and commitment • Yes!)

In Mrs Ellis’s Kindergarten class, the children have learnt that Moses was a leader who served others. They select a name of a classmate and draw a picture of something that person does to serve others. They place it in a ‘basket boat’ and float it across a container of water to their friend to say thank you to them for their kindness. (Much blowing involved)

Back in Mrs Truscott’s Yr 7 class, student questions posed at the beginning of their ‘War in Heaven’ unit are drawn out, redistributed and answered in a sharing shuffle.

The phases of *Heart Learning* and *Soul Learning* naturally flow into *Life Learning* with its focus on transformational application and commitment.

God’s word is not a collection of facts to be temporarily memorised. His Word is a guide for how we should live today, for how we should know Him, for how we should deepen our relationship with Him. After all, God wants us to worship Him, not His book. (Shultz & Shultz, 1999, p. 158)

“No religious truth is truly learned unless it makes a difference in one’s life” (Gillespie, 2006, p. 35). Inviting ‘transformational’ application rather than simply ‘informational’ application is a vital emphasis of this phase. Students are presented with questions such as: How does this story/passage/theme apply to my life? How will knowing this encourage me to live my life differently this recess? What does it really mean to me? There is an invitation to be “doers of the word, and not just hearers of the word” (James 1:22).

Kaizen Learning

(Celebration • Yahoo!)

Back in Mrs Harrison’s Year 3 class, Jericho, Israel’s wonderful new home is celebrated Jewish-style by singing ‘Hava Nagila’ (‘Let us rejoice. Let us rejoice and be happy... Awake with a happy heart!’)

In Mrs Truscott’s Yr 7 ‘War in Heaven’ class, students celebrate God and His victory by ‘toasting’ Him with sparkling grape juice. Each student shares something great about the qualities God has shown in this story.

Religious Education should be the most celebrated of learning areas, for it is in this arena that things of God are pursued. ‘Kaizen’ is a Japanese word that means to honour the incremental steps toward success. Delight makes authentic learning successful.

Somewhere along the line, the academic community seems to have forgotten that one of the most important things to learn is a love for learning. Few people gain a love for anything that is marinated in drudgery. People learn more—and learn to love learning—when they enjoy the process. (Schultz & Schultz, 1999, p. 104)

Honouring the small steps within the learning process is a powerful learning tool, not only because it encourages retention through the engagement of positive emotions, but also because it associates joy, delight and fun with Godly things. The celebration may take many forms, ranging from meaningful ‘rituals’ to simple parties, but all should be authentic and full of delight. Once embedded in practice, be assured, students have been known to ask for it.

Conclusion

The *Transformational Planning Framework* offers a deliberate way forward for religious education in Adventist schools in Australia and New Zealand. It is designed to protect us from distraction and propel us toward the goal of spiritual formation. But the power is not in the program. It never was. The power comes from God and is lived through the life and words of the teacher. In light of this, teachers, as spiritual facilitators, need to be what they desire their students to become. Teaching comes more from our ‘being’ than our ‘doing’.

The greatest thing we have to offer our people is not our education. It is not our good ideas. It isn’t even our gifts and abilities. It is the fruit of the time we have spent with the Saviour, the utterly unique and unparalleled thing that happens to us when we are simply in His presence. (Patterson, 1999, p. 52)

A life that is lived out of such an overflow allows God to do what He loves to do: pursue, connect, save, and transform.

The *Transformational Planning Framework* can be utilised to plan experiences that shape lives for God; develop tools for nurturing a robust religious belief; encourage spiritual encounters with God; and inspire these same lives to be world-changers, echoing the Great Commission spoken by Jesus Himself.

Back in Ms Gibson’s Year 9 class, in comes Tara, (you know her, she’s the too-cool-for-school one in the third row) “Miss, last night I couldn’t sleep, so I kept reading in my Bible about Jesus dying on the cross, I just kept reading and reading, I couldn’t stop.” Ms Gibson smiles.

“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Matthew 5:6 NIV) TEACH

Endnotes

¹ Ellen White was instrumental in identifying many of the principles that shape the educational work of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

² This *Transformational Planning Framework* is now the foundational structure of the *Encounter Bible Curriculum* being developed by Adventist Education in both New Zealand and Australia. The framework can be adapted beyond the context of religious education, for the intentional integration of faith and learning in all learning areas. Adventist Schools in New Zealand are using it for this purpose.

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