

Fostering Commitment in the Classroom:

A Model Report Card: Four D's and an F

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Introduction

This paper is offered to colleagues from classrooms across our country. You serve in Lutheran secondary and post-secondary schools within the Wisconsin Synod. It is my privilege to address you and my prayer to assist you in considering the topic assigned to me, "Fostering Commitment in the Classroom" or as I have subtitled it "A Model Report Card: Four D's and an F."

I must admit that I accepted this invitation with some reservation. Oh, the topic intrigued me and I believed I could say something about it, but the bothersome thing was the way it was labeled. On page three of the initial draft of the Faculty Conference Agenda, right before my name I found the words "mini-essay." At no time in the last fifteen years of attending conventions and conferences could I recall hearing that expression. I turned to my dictionary and found this explanation for the word "mini," "of small dimension, extent, or consequence." It bothered me a bit that I was to spend time preparing a paper which was by definition, to be deliberately inconsequential. My hope is that there may be some consequence, after all.

Before we consider the topic "Fostering Commitment in the Classroom," let me explain "commitment" as I will be using the term. Commitment, to me, suggests faithfulness. The expression which is the hallmark of this conference may be a bit intimidating. The wide-eyed ninth grader who hears of commitment to the ministry may sheepishly suggest, "Who, me?" But let us suggest to him that he be faithful in his studies and he is happy once again.

The essay also addresses commitment in the classroom on the part of the instructor. Surely there is a double meaning in the title which implies faithful performance on both sides of the teacher's desk. With the teacher in mind, the phrase "commitment to the ministry" is no longer vague, far-fetched, or unrealistic. His is a life-long service of faithfulness in pulpit, lesson preparation, or preaching station. Our very motto might well be prefaced with the word "continuous." First Corinthians 10:31 encourages us "so whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

My substituted title, "A Model Report Card: Four D's and an F," remains to be explained. The areas of Discipline, Dedication, Declaration, Demonstration, and Flexibility will be addressed with dual emphasis on students and teacher. It is my sincere hope and prayer that something offered here will ignite the spark of renewed enthusiasm and whole forest fires of passionate teachers will leave this campus this afternoon with commitment in their hearts. Such fiery commitment to the holy ministry is why we have convened. Let the flames grow higher!

Discipline

When teaching teenagers, it is imperative that we get their attention. The very best lesson of the most committed teacher will waft in the winds of ignorant bliss when students misbehave or daydream. Discipline almost forces itself into our discussion without being invited. Like the big bully on the block he says, "Don't ignore me." Yes, students of our high schools and colleges need discipline too. We teachers must deny the rebuttal, reprisal, and resistance of our students' rebelliousness, while exuding the calm-aura of aromatic orderliness. Chaos in the classroom can only exist where discipline doesn't.

The word "discipline" has as its earlier root the word "disciple." Yes, quaint as it sounds, our students are our disciples. We propose to teach and train while they are supposed to follow our guidance and direction. This relationship helps avoid the confrontation scene which every teacher dreads. A practical way to nurture our disciples and weed out inattentiveness is to fill in the great gulf, or put another way, knock down the big wall that separates students and teacher in the classroom. Get out from behind the leaned-on lectern and the distinctly authoritarian desk and "walk the aisles" a bit. Some of my colleagues at Northwestern have even given up

lecterns and teacher desks altogether, preferring a circular arrangement of desks. This allows maximum involvement with all students simultaneously. No back seat sleepers there! If lecture you must, then do it on the move. As you pass the potential problem student, pat him on the back, take a glance at his notes, slow your pace, but above all, involve him, disciple him, and teach him too. Scripture grants that discipline is valuable in Titus 2:15, "Encourage and rebuke with all authority."

Student discipline is not the only game in town. We teachers need huge doses of discipline also. Ours is more likely to be the kind with the prefix attached ...self-discipline. When we demand deadlines, expect orderliness, and promote promptness in our students, it is absolutely crucial for us to meet the same deadlines, demonstrate the same orderliness, and deliver promptly. If we allow television, golf, fishing, part-time jobs, or even "family obligations" to precede or supersede our commitment in the classroom, we have established a double standard that I don't care to defend. Examples of this lack of self-discipline on the part of teachers are quickly perceived by the students and inevitably result in lost credibility. The most universal example is the "student paper deadline" where all the forces of power, authority, and grade reduction are levied upon the hapless delinquent. The teacher, however, proceeds to hold those papers until they are yellowed with age and all-but-forgotten. During those anxious weeks of waiting spent by the delinquent, as well as the diligent student, the teacher has not missed a tee time or fishing trip, his living room has been re-painted, and his family has spent three days visiting relatives. This is an irony which students do not find funny.

Dedication

The next D on our model report card concerns dedication. My thoughts on this subject are time-related. Please consider with me "then" and "now." Back then when we were the high schoolers, collegiates, and seminarians, our dedication was directly proportional to the goals we wished to achieve. In other words, we worked as hard as we had to in order to get the grades we valued, or make the team we admired, or impress the people who mattered. An early pragmatism flowed through each of us.

Now, as we consider commitment in the classroom I pose only one question, "What's changed?" If dedication is listed on our model report card, where is it evidenced? Or is pragmatism still our calling card? A few examples will elaborate.

Then, we attended chapel and church as a matter of schedule. We joined drama club because our friends did. We played football because it was fall. We studied nightly because our teachers told us we wouldn't pass if we didn't. We couldn't wait to graduate and get on with our life's work. "Dedication" meant a new church had been erected.

Well, now it's now, and once again, what's changed? Without getting cynical, let's consider dedication as it relates to commitment in our classrooms. Every one of us serves in some subject area in a secondary or post-secondary school in our synod. What a gathering of educators we have here! We teach literally thousands of young men and women who confess Christ, and many could, with prompting, serve His church. The vast reservoir of talent we confront in our classrooms is staggering. Enlarge your field of view for a moment and see beyond those two dozen students who while away your time each Tuesday morning. See instead the hundreds of potential workers who can join us in this glorious ministry. If dedication is on our doorpost, we'd better be working like zealots to "swell the mighty flood."

As an aside, I offer this thought. Next week many of you will convene at Northwestern College for a special Recruitment Seminar. Let that occasion be one of equal vision and far-sightedness. Never let us succumb to the scurrilous charge that we already have too many pastors and teachers. Admittedly, the news of unassigned candidates is not heartening. However, the God of our Fathers will not leave us or forsake us. Pray for more workers, encourage those whom you disciple, and, above all, re-dedicate yourselves to His most kingly kingdom work. To this end may the pragmatic cloak of youth fall from the shoulders of maturity. Our dedication is to *swim* well, not to *float* well! This passage from Galatians 6:9 encourages us, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

Declaration

The report card which we are considering lists another D. It stands for declaration. As we continue to consider commitment in the classroom, it serves to state the obvious. Daily declare the glorious God-given blessings of the ministry! If ours is a special calling, a service of love, a sought-after goal, in short, a ministry, then tell about it. Show students the blessings of serving the God who called us. Let happiness and contentment reflect from your eyes into theirs. Don't be afraid to say, "I enjoy teaching you (this subject) (this lesson)."

This effort is not to be taken for granted. The very essence of our message may be escaping like the slow leak of a punctured tire if we present ourselves and our lessons in stern and sterile terms. Sometimes, I believe, we are so afraid of alienating that we forget to embrace. Perhaps a funny anecdote will show the class a different side of your personality. This more complete picture is desirable. Why should we pretend the ministry is all seriousness and severity? Allow them to laugh. Allow them to groan too. We did once ourselves. (Do we still?)

With the wave of teenaged despondency growing into tidal proportions, it might further our cause of commitment to consider the "after-class talk," which, after all, happens most often within classroom walls. Here again a simple declaration can offer symphonies of support to the distraught. "What's bothering you today?" followed by sympathetic listening time can and will help focus the student on his Savior once again. I have not forgotten private conversations with my teachers in just such a setting. Those of us in dormitory schools should be particularly alert for the floundering. Our students may go weeks or months without a heart-to-heart talk with anyone of their parents' age. Sometimes roommates just aren't good enough. Perhaps by declaring our concern, we can help fill the void created by away-from-home living.

Students also should be encouraged to declare their commitment in the classroom. Ask them to write down future plans, goals, fears, or expectations. Later, common topics can be discussed and progress can be made toward accepting the challenges of the future. Far better than the head-in-sand "tomorrow is another day" philosophy which afflicts so many youthful people today.

All students at Northwestern Preparatory School are periodically questioned about their future goals and schooling plans. President Zell checks with the twelfth-graders several times during the year to give them the opportunity to declare intentions. This declaration process among students is not always popular. It's not "cool" or "in" to say, "I'm planning to be a pastor someday." Some prefer, "I'm keeping my options open." Maybe we can nurture a more forthright honesty by declaring our love for the Lord, His work, and His lambs.

Demonstration

The next D on the report card will pack the most punch, I suspect. It tells us to practice what we preach, or demonstrate our commitment in the classroom. If we expect our students to meet deadlines, finish assignments, avoid procrastination, read voluminously, write precisely, think logically, analyze correctly, and work ceaselessly ...why don't we?

It isn't good enough to toss off a few flippant cliches like, "I've already earned my degree," or "I don't have time to revise tests," or, the worst one of all, "It isn't in my Call." Common sense could beat each of those excuses into the ground. Besides, we should say, "the love of Christ constrains us" (II Corinthians 5:14).

I'll divide my remarks about the demonstration of commitment into two areas—*within* the classroom and *for* the classroom. Within the grandeur of the teaching profession there are some little appreciated, seldom observed, and easily overlooked gems of demonstration. These include: correcting papers, planning lessons, preparing lectures, writing tests, reviewing texts, reading professional journals, filing information, and revising everything. As incidental to the actual teaching act as these functions appear, I submit that they are absolutely vital to the demonstrative commitment in the classroom. Stagnation in the pedagogue is a repulsive evidence of the inertia of rest. It would appear to be so easy and so time-saving to use last year's lesson plans, tests, lectures, and notes. After all, if you revise your test, you'll have to figure out a new answer key!

This intended caricature comes too close for comfort to the truth, doesn't it. Who of us would allow a student to present us with last year's book reports, last semester's term papers, and last month's project for the fulfillment of this week's requirements? Yet, there are teachers consistently carting cobweb-covered notebooks

to classrooms. This laziness cannot be condoned, allowed, or continued. We must demonstrate our commitment in the classroom.

If we accept a small nudge toward breaking the inertia of rest *within* our classrooms, then get ready for a jolt of progress in demonstrating our commitment *for* the classroom. This area, I will presume to say, needs direct attention in the schools we serve. These activities include: graduate studies, advanced degree attainment, paper presentations, projects, and writings.

There can be no better way to teach than to lead. The paragonal teacher needs only to change hats to become the systematic student in search of more knowledge. Whatever your subject area may be, your teacher's edition is not the definitive text.

In simple terms, we can best demonstrate our commitment for the classroom by enrolling in one. It's too simplistic to say "But, there isn't anything offered in my area." The implication of that remark reminds me of a child standing in a 37-flavored ice cream parlor and claiming dis-interest.

With active inquiry and careful selection, courses will appear all over the country that can help us teachers to teach writing, manage computer jargon, enlarge language skills, and understand history better. I am not overlooking our synod's summer workshop programs at Dr. Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The *effort* at furthering our educations is the key thing, not the encyclopedic listing of schools attended or degrees gathered.

Don't let age be a deterrent either. I have observed grandmas and grandpas taking graduate courses at universities. Those who would offer, "I'll study my subject area on my own" are kidding themselves. No doubt they are the same former high schoolers and collegiates who declined friendly offers of Saturday swimming, saying, "No thanks, I prefer to finish this individualized term paper which I have decided to write for fun."

We can offer real earnest evidence of demonstrating commitment for the classroom when we enroll in graduate schools, complete teaching projects, publish writings in our field, and earn advanced degrees. "Do as I do" is a far more powerful lesson than, "Do as I say."

As the educators of our synod's future generations of ministers and lay people, we owe to those who learn from us a lasting legacy of learning, honed in love and tempered with the tolerance of knowledge. Paul tells us, "This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight" (Philippians 1:9).

Flexibility

Finally, we turn to the lone F on the model report card. It reads, "Flexibility." It's only fitting to end with this word since I began my remarks about this model report card with the D of discipline. Now, I will offer the stereotypical image of a rigid, ram-rod, "ram it down your throat" instructor who sings only one song and that is "My Way." Such an overbearing, pompous, distant, and arrogant teacher never varies his pedanticism. His inviolate inflexibility does irreparable harm to the young adults we teach.

Better by far to be all things to all men than to demand compliance on every occasion. Flexibility assumes individual differences among our students. Flexibility allows in-depth coverage of burning issues, while glossing over obsolescent ones. Flexibility, I believe, is quite compatible with Christian charity. The ability to be reasonable and approachable is an important ingredient in efficacious instruction. Put in practical terms, insisting on a major test the morning after a school-wide roller skating party is not showing a commitment to the classroom. It shows instead a commitment to your unalterable outline. The students will resent it and so will you when you see the test results.

Neither is flexibility a one-way street. Students should be prepared to change plans when conditions warrant. As one test is postponed to allow for an unplanned event, the next test may follow more rapidly than usual. Certain courses may call for long-range assignments to be due during an exam time in another class. The flexible student will adjust his homework accordingly. Students would do well to recognize the individual differences among teachers too. Moving from second hour German to third hour English may mean a flexibility exercise of considerable exertion.

Conclusion

As we look back upon the model report card of commitment in the classroom, allow me to close with a little allegory. There is a valley called Mediocrity nestled next to the steep mountain of Faithfulness. Priests serve both regions with periodic offerings. The altar of mediocrity is heaped high with sacrifices, but only a few committed priests care to kill the calf that must be dragged up the mountain to the altar of faithfulness. It takes *discipline* and *dedication* to scale the stony heights. The priest who does must *declare* his intentions and then, facing ridicule and scorn, *demonstrate* his willingness to make the mountain top. Just as he reaches the altar of faithfulness, a cry of help is heard from below. The priest must be *flexible* enough to return and reclaim a fallen comrade or help along a young disciple. Then, finally, he approaches the altar of faithfulness and prepares to make his offering of commitment and fidelity, and the calf is consumed in God-pleasing sacrifice.

We are those priests who love to serve their Lord. Two altars stand waiting for the offerings. For the sake of the ministry, my prayer is that we, and those we represent, will strive in never-ending toil upon that mountainside.