Teaching Statement

An anvil paperweight passed from one student to another. This talking piece served to center the conversation on each student, but it also provided a metaphor for our inquiry this semester. Once the anvil returned to me, I paused momentarily to weigh it in my hand, and then we began to discuss the features of this object: just as an anvil has smooth and rough surfaces, the texts we will read have multiple dimensions. Just as one can use an anvil to form elegant pieces that are passed down through generations, theological training can craft good and beautiful things that individuals and their communities will cherish. Just as an anvil is a symbol for a craft that requires apprenticeship, theological education requires training that leads to practical wisdom. Just as an anvil—and the objects created with it—can become weapons, theology and theological training can be (and have been) used to execute harm. And just as I inherited this anvil paperweight from a family member that I never met, we often receive the theological traditions we engage from individuals and communities that came before us.

Although only a single pedagogical practice, this exercise frames how I organize a learning environment, invite students to constructively engage the witness of the Christian tradition, and seek to nurture the practical wisdom that is required to sustain students’ vocations. First, I work to foster a learning environment where students may participate as co-creators in teaching and learning and encounter the complexity of the material we explore. Recognizing that theological education is an inescapably corporeal and somatic undertaking, I attend to the particular and collective forms of embodiment that comprise an educational setting. Much as bell hooks observes, I seek to teach in a “manner that respects and cares for the souls of [my] students” by supporting the “conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.”1

I have refined my pedagogical vision and practice as an instructor, preceptor, and guest lecturer at Duke Divinity School and Duke University. This experience includes: teaching Theology in the Contemporary Church in a hybrid course format; co-teaching Forming Disciples in the Wesleyan Tradition; precepting, i.e., serving as a TA, for Christian Theology, Early and Medieval Christianity, and American Christianity at Duke Divinity School; teaching in a freshmen pre-orientation program to humanities research at Duke; and facilitating a two-week introduction to network analysis for freshmen students at Duke. Across these diverse teaching platforms and disciplines, I work to orient students’ learning both in relation to the demands of their context and the imaginative resources that exist across the Christian tradition.

Accordingly, my instruction and class assignments invite students to constructively engage the witness of the Christian tradition in light of their particular context. For example, I organize my course Theology in the Contemporary Church around an extended case statement that is based on students’ context. The class begins with students identifying a preliminary challenge they wish to engage and presenting the relevant background information that is required to understand this challenge. Following Ken Bain’s observation that “questions … play an essential role in the process of learning and modifying mental models,”2 the primary task of this first assignment is to surface questions that merit further investigation. The course readings and lectures then introduce students to various theological traditions that may organize thought and practice (e.g., liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, fundamentalism, evangelicalism, and liberation theologies) in the

contemporary church. In response to this material, students then write a theological heritage essay that identifies and discusses the various theological traditions that enable and constrain their individual and/or collective ability to understand and respond to the challenges they face. Students’ third assignment asks them to report on a self-selected text—drawn from several options—that may serve as an exemplar for theological engagement with the challenges that confront individuals and communities. The final assignment, which is a full case statement, invites students to combine and revise their previous work into a single case statement that includes their reflections on the forms of practice that may guide their work.

Students express the impact of this pedagogical approach on their learning and vocational preparation: “[H]e always had his pulse on the fact that the majority of his class consisted of budding ministers and church leaders, not necessarily academics,” reflected one student. “That said, Dustin never watered-down the material, but consistently endeavored to bridge any practical, intellectual, or spiritual gaps he discerned between students and the course readings or subjects.” Another student similarly shared: “He also was masterful at creating a space where we felt free to think and reimagine out loud without any judgment.” In undergraduate settings, students respond positively to my course organization and engagement. For example, after a two-week guest lecture about networks and social imaginaries, one hundred percent of students rated my instruction as good, very good, or excellent. As one student wrote: “The network approach was unique in that it can be applied to any level of description from micro cell biology to macro financial markets. The network analysis forced me to look for the explanation behind visible edges and nodes, forcing me to theorize how social influences manifest in network patterns.”

In hybrid and online instructional settings, I maintain a similar pedagogical aim, but I prioritize the forms of learning and instruction that are best suited to this platform. For example, the assignment for the final online week of a hybrid course asked students to read one of four self-selected texts and post a summary to our class forum. The primary purpose of the assignment was to redirect agency to students and invite them to engage with one another across diverse texts. The result was a dynamic, online learning environment, one that invited students to actively engage and contribute to their own learning and that of their colleagues.

Finally, I seek to nourish the forms of practical wisdom that are required to sustain students’ vocations. For example, I introduce the last class session by asking students to consider: What have we been doing and why does it matter? Although I purposefully introduce the significance of assignments and texts at key points in the course, I also seek to promote critical, self-reflection. These kindred commitments intersect in the final class session as we collectively consider how our work has been organized; whether, and if so, how, it matters; and the form(s) of practical wisdom that may emerge from or be required for the task of Christian ministry. When given space to pause and reflect with one another, students will both identify central themes of the course and begin translating these to their own work or ministry. Through our discussion and my own comments in the final class session, I seek to foster what David Smith calls “motivated connections,”3 which are sensible extensions of the course content in light of Christian faith. When combined with my instruction, each course invites students to constructively engage the Christian tradition and seeks to nourish the forms of practical wisdom that are required to sustain students’ vocations.