FAITH AND LEARNING IN ACTION: TANGIBLE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN BIBLICAL INTEGRATION AND LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE
BY CALVIN G. ROSO

Abstract

I am at my best being and serving in the trenches – having my boots on the ground – mentoring students to meet the needs of others. As a Christian educator, I feel compelled to help others make a sustainable impact on the lives of those who cannot help themselves. The desire to help others is an important part of professional and personal journey in understanding faith and learning integration (FLI). In the past I have felt that faith and learning integration was a great technique to train students to help others. I also believe that the integration of faith and learning should help students understand how the Bible applies to real life. However, due to the teacher-centered approach to FLI (where the teacher tells students what FLI is instead of enabling students to discover for themselves how faith applies to everyday life), the integration process can potentially become an empty academic exercise that has minimal lasting impact on students' lives. I believe that FLI should be both authentic and practical. In addition, it should be impactful – FLI should have a transformational and lasting impact on students' minds, beliefs, and actions. I have concluded that faith and learning *in action* is a transformational and sustainable approach to biblical integration that can help students and adults grow in spiritually, academically, and professionally. This study describes my reflections as an educator and researcher studying faith and learning integration in contexts beyond the classroom. Autobiographical narratives of multiple strands of experience and research are presented and analyzed to explain pivotal turning points in my life both in and outside of the classroom. The reader is asked to consider these stories and their outcomes as my interpretation of how readings, events, and reflections have influenced my beliefs, theories, and actions in the area of faith and learning.

Keywords: biblical integration, faith and learning

Introduction

I recently told a colleague about some of my recent interests and research on orphan education, during which he asked, "What has made you interested in educating orphans?" My answer was neither simple nor concise, and I am sure I gave him a lot more information than he wanted at the time. Looking back at that moment, I realize that my answer was embedded in a transformation of belief, theory, and practice that I had been undergoing for decades. Through my reflections, I have come to the conclusion that if I could spend the rest of my life doing anything, it would be training students to use their professions to meet the needs of the poor and the needy – this includes helping orphans and anyone else less fortunate. I have concluded that I am at my best being and serving in the trenches – having my boots on the ground – mentoring students to meet the needs of others.

As a Christian educator, I feel compelled to help others make a sustainable impact on the lives of those who cannot help themselves. The desire to help others is an important part of professional and personal journey in understanding faith and learning integration (FLI). In the past I have felt that FLI was a great technique to train student to help others. I also believe that the integration of faith and learning should help students understand how the Bible applies to real life. However, due to the teacher-centered approach to FLI (where the teacher tells students what FLI is instead of enabling students to discover for themselves how faith applies to everyday life), the integration process can potentially become an empty academic exercise that has minimal lasting impact on students' lives.[1]

FLI is a relevant term currently researched in Christian higher education (Bailey, 2012; Boyd, 2006; Claerbaut, 2004; Eckel, 2007; Harris, 2004; Sites, 2009; Stegg, 2012). I have observed that the process of integration can appear tedious, impractical, or compartmentalized to students. As a graduate school professor, curriculum writer, and a former high school teacher, I have found that one of the most common concerns of teachers and administrators in Christian education is that FLI sometimes appears artificial and impractical.   I believe that FLI should be both authentic and practical. In addition, it should to be impactful – FLI should have a transformational and lasting impact on students' beliefs, thoughts, and actions. This paper discusses how my own beliefs regarding FLI have morphed into a greater desire for application outside the classroom in both students' lives and my own.

Research Methodology

Because of the personal nature of this study, an autoethnographical approach was used as the method of research. The autoethnography is autobiographical in its approach, ethnograhical in its methodology, and cultural in its interpretative direction (Chang, 2008).

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[1]Because *biblical integration* is the terminology used in K-12 schools to describe *faith and learning integration*, in this study the terms are used interchangeably.

> [The] Authoethnography seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno). [When writing an authoethnography] the author does not live through...experiences solely to make them part of a published document; rather, these experiences are assembled using hindsight. (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, para. 1, 5)

For this study, I have chosen to use a *layered accounts* approach to autoethnography, focusing on personal experience in conjunction with abstract analysis, data, and relevant literature (Ellis et al., 2011). Ellis et al. described a layered accounts approach as one that shows how the collection of data and analysis work together and frames current research as "questions and comparisons" (¶ 20).

> Unlike grounded theory, layered accounts use vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection to "invoke" readers to enter into the "emergent experience" of doing and writing research, conceive of identity as an "emergent process," and consider evocative, concrete texts to be as important as abstract analyses. (Ellis et al., 2011, ¶20)

This study is organized by time periods of research and application. Epiphanies have emerged through retrospection (Ellis et al., 2011) upon these periods within the culture and context of Christian education. Data was collected through reviewing past journals and research documents in conjunction with personal memories and self-observation. In the process of writing and reflecting, my goal has been to both analyze my experiences and compare and contrast those experiences with current research (Chang, 2008).

Personal Background

I grew up in a small Midwest town in the United States in the 1960s and 70s. At the time our family would have been considered low income by U.S. standards. My parents were hard-working: my father an automobile mechanic and my mother raised four boys (I was the youngest). Our family attended a Protestant church on Sundays and an occasional Wednesday night. My parents did their best to meet our needs. For most of my life, I grew up believing that college was not an option. We were told, "Only the very rich or the very smart will go to college, and you aren't either of those." My parents' influence and my own insecurities convinced me that college was not an option for me. The only reason I even considered attending college was because I could not think of anything else to do. So, despite all these factors, I stumbled into college the fall after I graduated high school without either a vision or the tools to succeed.

My undergraduate study habits were feeble at best. Proverbs 29:18 "without a vision, the people perish" sums up my life as an undergraduate student. The bachelor's degree that took most students four years to complete took me nearly six years. I switched majors multiple times, dropped courses I thought took too much *work*, moved in and out of academic probation, and often thought of quitting. Although still visionless, I was granted an undergraduate degree in English from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1986. Years later, by the mercy and grace of God, I became a teacher.

The Journey

Boy Meets Biblical Integration

I never heard the terms *biblical integration*, *faith and learning*, or *worldview*, while attending literature classes at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (fondly referred to as *the Berkeley of the Midwest* because of its liberal philosophies and teachings). Most everything I was taught came from humanistic and atheistic perspectives, arguing that God did not exist in humanities or sciences, so therefore, God did not exist in history (past or present). Yet, whether by accident or providence, when the professor argued that Kafka had proven there was no God, I saw in Kafka's characters people who were desperately hopeless without God. Because I was less disciplined in those days, I rarely journaled. In spite of not journaling, I did process what I was learning . . . and there rose inside me something that defied the empty attempts of others to rationalize their atheistic beliefs. To me, every work of literature seemed to either cry out "Where is God?" or "Here is God!" In the literature I read characters either wished God existed or claimed He existed.

After college graduation, I worked for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship on a project called Marketplace. We were developing conferences and materials to help college students see that God had called them to be ministers in their chosen professions. My boss, John "Pete" Hammond, was the founder of the project, and I had the privilege of hearing him teach multiple times about the important ministerial role of the laity. (Hammond later developed *The Word in Life Study Bible* for Thomas Nelson.) During my InterVarsity years, I was exposed to theories from Tony Campolo, Eastern College; William Diehl, *Thank God It's Monday* (1982); Gordon MacDonald, *Restoring Your Spiritual Passion* (1986); William Pollard, ServiceMaster; and Forrest Turpen, Christian Educators Association.   Each of these authors, and others like Ray Bakke and Floyd McClung, insisted it was the job of the layperson – the average churchgoer – to be a minister of the gospel.

These authors helped me to understand that God can use everything for His good – there should not be a separation between the sacred and the secular. I learned it was the job of the laity to bring Christ into their neighborhoods and professions. I did not realize it at the time, but my belief system was shifting to align with Ephesians 4:11-12, which says it is the job of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teacher to "equip . . . the saints for the work of the ministry." I discovered that God calls Christians to minister in every profession. This belief of the important role of Christians in the marketplace was something that I would return to again and again.

Welcome to Christian School Education

A few years after my wife and I were married, I began teaching high school English at a Christian school. Teaching students gave me a vision and purpose for my life and a passion to learn. However, initially I had little understanding of what the purpose of Christian education was. Somehow I stumbled across authors like C. S. Lewis, Leland Ryken, and Franky Schaeffer

who shaped my philosophy about Christianity and the arts and literature. Lewis (1961) wrote that literature enables one to better understand the worldviews of others, explaining, "In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself" (p. 141). Ryken (1990) reminded me that reading literature encourages critical thinking, as "great literature is the enemy of the idle mind" (p. 29). Likewise, Schaeffer (1981), reminded Christians of the necessity to engage culture.

My new passion for understanding literature from a biblical perspective carried me into graduate school, where I studied Christian school administration and curriculum and instruction. I studied worldview by reading Sire (1997), Schaeffer (1976), Van Brummelen (2002), and Colson and Pearcey (1999). I examined 20th-century writers like Gaebelein (1968) and Schindler (Schindler & Pyle, 1986) who wrote about the purpose of Christian school education. Gaebelein claimed "all truth is God's truth," reminding Christian educators that biblical truths can be stumbled upon throughout education. While working on my master's thesis, I discovered that St. Augustine (1958) said something similar to Gaebelein centuries earlier:

> We should not think we ought not to learn literature. . . . the pagans dedicated temples to
>
> > Justice and Virtue. . . . Rather, every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord's. (p. 54)

The writing of H.W. Byrne (1977) became foundational in my study of practical methods for integrating biblical integration into the academics. Byrne showed how biblical principles existed within each academic subject. According to Byrne, the purpose of Christian education was to reveal God and qualify students to reveal God to others. Byrne's definition revealed the mentoring/discipling elements of Christian education – biblical integration happened in the school so that students could later integrate God wherever they went.

Through mentors and professional practice I began building stronger opinions about methods of developing biblical integration in K-12 schools. What began as a purely academic interest became an empathetic interest as well, because in spite of great schools, great teachers, and great curriculum, I continued to see students leave the Christian faith—*run* from the Christian faith—as soon as they graduated from high school. "What can we do to make it (Christianity) stick?" became a driving question inside of me.

In the midst of the process of growing professionally, a subtle desire to help other nations was growing inside of me. Occasionally I thought about traveling to another nation, and I even contemplated teaching English abroad. During those years, however, I had two small children, and our family was barely surviving on my Christian school teacher's income of $18,000 a year. For the time being, my focus would need to remain on further developing biblical integration in my own classroom. Yet, unexplainably, whenever I heard someone speak about the need for Christian educators in other nations I would have to fight not to cry.

Man Meets World

When I was 37, my wife and I and our two young daughters moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where I would pursue my doctorate in education at Oral Roberts University. I soon became an adjunct professor, teaching courses in curriculum and instruction. Theorists who were new to me helped me see that *integration* was not enough. For the Bible to work in students' lives, the integration approach needed to be foundational. Other authors also reinforced that the effective integration of beliefs or skills (e.g., multiculturalism, character education, technology) into the curriculum required a holistic approach (Banks, 1996; Bauer & Kenton, 2005; Bennett, 1988; Lickona, 1992).

The Principle Approach[2] (Slater, 1975) presented a tangible way to help teachers integrate biblical principles into the curriculum by understanding the biblical foundation of each academic subject. In addition, definitions of curriculum by Doll (1995), Glatthorn (2000), and Posner (2007) implied that curriculum is everything the student learns in the school setting. Therefore, curriculum is holistic and goes beyond textbooks, materials, and classroom instruction; it also includes textbooks, instruction, learning, and school culture. Consequently, for faith and learning integration to be at its best, biblical principles must be embedded throughout the entire school.

During our early years in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the persistent inner conviction to do something for the world found an open door. In June of 2000, I had the opportunity to go to Bogota, Colombia, to present at a Christian school conference on topics of curriculum and biblical integration. As I prayed and struggled with whether or not to go, I sensed God assuring me that He would meet my financial needs and that somehow this was "only the beginning." This educational missions trip, and several other opportunities, helped shape my thinking about how FLI applies in Christian schools outside the United States.

More opportunities emerged for me to share my thoughts about biblical integration at Christian School conferences in the years that followed. I was confident that a modified Principle Approach (Slater, 1975), was the ideal method, perhaps the *only* method, for biblical integration in the school. Nevertheless, God sent individuals along my path to cause me to think critically about further issues surrounding the concept of integration, asking questions like, "What can we do to make sure that what we do in the classroom isn't artificial . . . that it's really practical?" Or "Sure, *you* can do this with what *you* teach, but I'm not sure that everyone can."

Or "What about countries outside the US where Christian schools aren't allowed to teach anything outside of the national curriculum? Is biblical integration possible there?" It was then that I began to realize the answers to biblical integration might not be as simple as I had originally thought.

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[2]The Principle Approach teaches that FLI should begin with the biblical principles *first* and then integrate the academic subjects into God's original intent for teaching that subject. Educators using the Principle Approach use Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary to find the definition of a word and then search scripture to find biblical concepts further clarifying the foundational reasons for teaching the academic subject.

Mary Could not Bike on Shabbat

I was soon teaching full-time at the university level and enjoyed engaging with students helping them see how God applied to learning and their future careers. In the meantime, I continued to search for biblical integration methods that would have a sustainable impact on students' lives. It was the desire for sustainability that led me to study moral education in Jewish education (Roso, 2004). I knew that the Jewish people had been integrating faith and learning for centuries, so I thought this study would add to the Christian discussion of FLI as well and it did.

My study of Jewish moral education confirmed that integration must be holistically embedded into everything at the school (Baeck, 1961; Barclay, 1974; Elkin, 2002).

> The values taught in Jewish tradition are naturally connected to what we teach in academics—for example, ''doing your best.'' We try to directly make connections to Jewish tradition as often as possible. One way is by teaching letters in kindergarten—we teach words dealing with both Jewish tradition and character. (H.A.R., personal communication, 2003, as cited in Roso, 2013, p. 41)

Moral education was so well integrated into the Jewish school curriculum, instruction, and culture, that the biggest struggle I had as a researcher was being able to identify where moral education started and where it ended. This holistic approach to integration was well supported by other educators outside the Jewish school (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Lickona, 1992). I also felt that the Bible supported a holistic approach to our own growth and transformation as Christians (Romans 11:16; Romans 12:1-2).

Another new concept that I observed in Jewish education was service learning. The children took what they knew and applied it to helping those who could not help themselves.   Service learning in the Jewish day school was student-driven. *Mitzvoth* (good deeds) was the principle that motivated students toward service learning. The school was even located next to a retirement center where the students were highly involved.

> The Jewish custom of *Tzedakah* focuses on a ''life-long responsibility'' of charity, righteousness and good deeds. Teaching Tzedakah reinforces character education throughout the curriculum by including several Mitzvah projects during the year. (Roso, 2013, p. 35)

Because service activities were strongly connected to Christian beliefs as discussed in the New Testament book of James, I felt that this concept could be easily transferred to Christian education.

Jewish education also reinforced the importance of critical thinking. I visited classrooms where elementary school children discussed difficult questions on moral behavior. For example, although Jewish people are called to do good deeds, Mary could not participate in a bike-a-thon on Shabbat because according to the *Torah*, Shabbat is a day of rest. According to the *Talmud*, you can only break Shabbot to save a life. Students were asked to use the *Torah* and the *Talmud* to solve the problem (Roso, 2013). The idea of using biblical integration to

develop critical thinking skills in students became important to me. I began to challenge Christian educators to become *good Bereans* who eagerly received instruction, and went go home daily to study the Scripture to see if what they were taught was true or not (Acts 17:11).

Rice, Beans, and a Soccer Ball

Professional work with Christian schools in other nations later opened the door for me to lead high school students on short-term missions (STM) trips to Latin American countries. What began with a STM trip to Honduras in 2008 grew into a passion that now takes my full attention every summer. On our trips, we intentionally connect with local pastors and churches to help them meet the needs of those they serve. Sometimes this is simply serve rice and beans while our older students kick around a soccer ball with kids down the street. I have since developed travel devotionals for students to learn how to reflect on their STM experiences and apply missions into their own lives back home.

Sadly, the outcome of our STM adventures sometimes reminds me of the disappointments I have experienced with FLI in Christian education. For example, our team walked through remote villages and prayed for people, only to have some students leave church and their faith a few short weeks later. *What could we do to make their experiences stick?*

The literature I studied said there were both good and bad ways to do STM (Corbett & Fikkert, 2009). Studies also stressed that for people to make STM trips a lifestyle of service (instead of a one-time experience) those involved need consistent and long-term follow-up after returning to their homes. In a desire to help students make STM experiences permanent, we now meet monthly to reflect on world missions abroad and at home. After a devotional, we spend our morning playing with children at a local children's shelter. Students participating in this "afterworld" experience have noted the changes in their own lives:

> "I want to show more love to strangers and keep God in front of my mind more."

> "I kind of look at people differently now."

> "I want to make my career—whatever it is—about serving."

> "I have learned to put Jesus first in everything I do. I can be Jesus with skin on."

The Juxtaposition of Missions and Academics

I have begun to bring my love for missions into the classroom. For example, when I teach Comparative Education, I challenge my graduate students to think and act globally as one outcome of the course. The final assignment requires them to research needs in education in a developing nation and propose ways they can partner to help meet those needs. I have also added problem-based service learning to help students walk away with faith and action instead of simply faith and learning. Research shows that service learning has positive effects on "higher order thinking, empathy, cultural awareness, personal and interpersonal development,

motivation to engage in social issues, motivation to study, life skills, self-efficacy, civic engagement/ responsibility, and student learning outcomes" (Warren, 2012, p. 56). The book of James stresses that faith and learning are not enough to create sustainability in the lives of Christians. Instead, the answer to sustainability requires faith and action.

> Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (James 1:22, 27 NIV).

Similarly, Jesus said, "Everyone who hears these words of mine *and puts them into practice* is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Matthew 7:24 NIV, italics added). Practice brings permanence. Practice brings sustainability. Three students participating in problem-based service-learning in my class noted the difference it made in their own lives:

- I enjoyed this experience, and evidently the church did as well as I was asked to be a Co-Coordinator for the program for the 2014 calendar year. I am stretched relatively thin already, but I could not turn down the opportunity to help unveil this new plan for this program. I am excited about the endless possibilities that lie ahead for these boys and young men. (Josh, personal communication, 2013)

- Personally it was uplifting to help people in need . . . I'm thankful that this service learning project was a part of the course requirements. Service learning provides a venue to make learning into action. (Melissa, personal communication, 2013)

- Overall, this was an amazing experience. I found that I have a passion to work with students that have been faced with adversity and need help finding a path to help them be successful. I hope to continue to work with this program and contribute what I have learned to positively impact these students' lives. I hope to model my behavior in a way that influences the students to stumble onto biblical truths. As scripture says, "a student fully trained will become like his teacher." (Audrey, personal communication, 2013)

Assessing Faith and Learning in Action

Two years ago several of us in my college began a study of models of assessing faith and learning in the university classroom. The purpose of this task was to create a tool for faculty to self-assess their progress in developing FLI. This project discovered many common factors that Christian educators see as important faith and learning integration: (1) the life of the educator, (2) scholarship, (3) instructional planning, and (4) instructional delivery. Two studies (Korniejezuk & Kijai, 1994; Rassmussen & Rassmussen, 2005) included the elements of student engagement and student assessment in the FLI process. Rassmussen and Rassmussen's *Faith-Learning-Living-Integration* model proposed both summative and formative assessment of students' ability to practice implementing biblical concepts in both the subject area and the

profession. Our department's study assessing FLI confirmed that integration must include the students' ability to apply biblical principles in the subject area and their profession.

Final Reflections and Future Discussions

It has occurred to me lately that effective FLI, like all effective teaching, is less about the teacher lecturing and more about the teacher engaging students in learning and practicing faith in the context of academics and professional practice.   Perhaps the teacher-centered academic approach to faith and learning integration should be replaced by *faith and learning in action* (FLA). FLA implies that students are taught how to find the Bible's relevance to the subjects they are studying, and they are taught how to find the Bible's relevance to their chosen profession. Consider this analogy: if I teach a student *what* to think, he thinks for a day, but if I teach a student *how* to think—how to put it into practice—he thinks for a lifetime. "Consider what happens when all of us begin to look at our professions and areas of expertise . . . not merely as means to an income but as platforms for proclaiming the gospel in contexts around the world" (Platt, 2010, p. 203). By teaching students how to discover and practice biblical principles, students will experience application that goes beyond the classroom setting.

The goal is for students to be qualified to reveal God to others (Byrne, 1977) through their chosen professions. How can I as a professor of education reveal God to others? Hosea 12:6 says I am to return to God, observe kindness and justice, and wait for God continually. I must walk close to Christ while also showing compassion to those who need it the most. I have concluded that the neediest in my profession are orphans and vulnerable children. My job is also to equip teachers to use their profession to take words and deeds of grace and mercy to those who need it most.

Ironically, I return to the idea of Christians being effective in the marketplace. God has taken me on a journey that makes me feel most alive when training others how to show God's grace in word and action both away and abroad. I am convinced that the idea of a short-term missionary is not biblical. Instead, we are all called to full-time missions—occasionally some of us take trips to do so (Davis, 2008; Platt, 2010; Sicks, 2013).

FLI without action is often limited to an academic exercise. It should not be limited to an event in the classroom, or even a project for students to create. Instead FLI should become FLA—active and daily. Like yeast in the dough (Romans 11:16), biblical principles should permeate not only everything I teach, but everything I do. What begins at the head and influences the heart needs to be walked out in daily life to bring permanence. When this happens, Christ followers become less concerned about survival and more concerned about meeting the needs of those who need help the most. I have concluded that it is the job of Christian educators in the church and in Christian colleges to train students how to be with Christ and serve others in their professions.

> Converts need to be trained in a biblical worldview that understands the implications of Christ's lordship for all of life and that seeks to answer the question: If Christ is Lord of all, how do we do farming, business, government, family, art, etc., to the glory of God? (Corbett & Fickkert, 2009, p. 45)

I'm interested in orphan education because I believe that Christians are called to help the most poor and needy through their life at church, home, and profession. Reflecting on my own story and transformation has reminded me why I am an educator. In addition, these reflections remind me that there is no separation between the sacred and the secular—that my STM experiences can have a natural connection to my profession. My job as an educator is to do more than integrate faith into the academics. My job is to help students discover the connection between faith and action in their church, home, and professional lives.

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