

Finding our Place

MAKING THE CONNECTION TOWARD FAITH INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT: *At the onset, the unfamiliarity of faith integration for nurse educators working within a faith-based university can be challenging. Two nurse educators describe the process they took to learn and navigate faith integration, while teaching undergraduate nursing students. Over the course of one year, various approaches toward faith integration with students were implemented, leading to an authentic relational interconnectedness.*

KEY WORDS: *faith integration, nursing education, relational practice, religion, spirituality, undergraduate nursing students*



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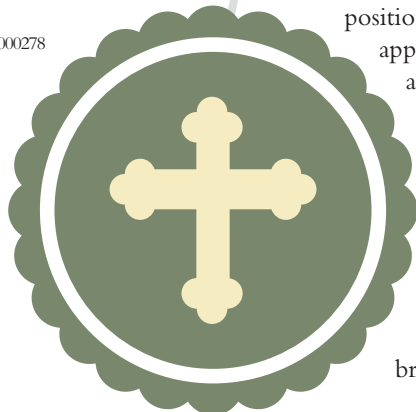
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Where do we situate ourselves as educators who are *novices* in integrating elements of faith in the classroom? How can we learn how *faith* fits with our teaching? This article describes experiences of teaching in a faith-based university that is aligned with a Christian mission statement and philosophy, and discusses examples of integrating faith in undergraduate nursing courses. Reflections about the relational process of connecting with students is key in *finding our place* within this teaching context.

Our Christian university supports a unified framework with a mission, core values, curriculum, and community life based on biblical teaching. As educators within this context, we strive to live out Christ's actions and words (Raymond, 2012). The goal of faith integration is to "ascertain and to develop integral relationships that exist between the Christian faith and human knowledge, particularly as expressed in the various academic disciplines" (Hasker, 1992, p. 234).

Coming from teaching in secular universities, where *faith* is distinct and separate from formal teaching, transitioning to *faith integration* in the classroom can feel unfamiliar and unsettling. Individuals have personal worldviews, based upon his or her particular presuppositions and values for teaching, which in a secular context can appear constrained. In a faith-based context, there is a shift to a worldview that is focused toward a context of interdependence (Doornbos, Groenhout, & Hotz, 2005, p. 7) and a shared relational connection. Educator and ethicist Marsha Fowler identified that new faculty members may feel overwhelmed or unclear of the process of faith integration in the academic arena and suggests they be provided with the knowledge and skills to prepare them on this journey. She further emphasizes the notion that faith integration within the classroom is essential to broaden and challenge students' ability to critically think

about complex nursing issues (Personal Communication, August 17, 2011).

MAKING THE TRANSITION TO FAITH INTEGRATION

Two examples of transitioning from a secular university to a faith-based university are described in the following two narratives:

Narrative One: I have taught for a number of years in secular universities, where the mention of the terms of faith, spirituality, and religion was primarily positioned relative to the *cultural needs* of the client. The *openness* to express my faith was not viewed as appropriate or necessary. Upon acceptance of a faculty position at a faith-based university, I knew that my teaching and learning strategies would change, as a result of the expectations to integrate faith through student engagement of course content and discussions. Because this context was unfamiliar and, in many ways, uncomfortable, I was challenged to *find my place* of comfort, in order to begin this process of faith integration. Being a quiet individual and unfamiliar with

the process of implementing faith integration, I pondered the following questions: *How do I do this? Where do I start? What is appropriate? Am I going to offend someone? Who are these students I am teaching? What are their expectations of me?*

I also was concerned that I might take so much time *setting the context* that I would lose valuable teaching time. I did not realize that this initial contact with my students had a direct impact on how I communicate, but also directly related to the content that was being taught. Mentoring from other faculty members familiar with faith integration was invaluable, as I continued to *find my place* in teaching in this new context. Fowler (2012) highlights the importance of providing faculty members with a safe environment and an overall supportive milieu to enhance self-reflection and growth in faith integration (p. 52).

My classes began with a *checking-in*. The first three to five minutes of class focused on assessing where the students were, in relation to past learning and current events. This strategy was useful in co-creating an open, relational dialogue between the students and me. Within this new context, I began by sharing a spiritual quote, which then progressed to sharing Scripture. I was intentional in quoting material or Scriptures relevant to the course content. During the semester, I increasingly felt relationally more interconnected to students and more at ease with this type of faith integration in the classroom.

Narrative Two: After having taught for a few years in a secular university, the inability to bring discussions of faith, spirituality, and religion to the *forefront* positioned a tension and a disconnect of

MUTUAL SELF-REFLECTION ASSISTED IN PROVIDING A GREATER DEPTH IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS.



authenticity. The inability to teach from a faith-based vantage point limited the understanding of the importance of the relational interconnectedness between educators and the students. Many former nursing students commented that my approach and interactions with them were *different* in the way I cared, listened, taught, and created a supportive learning environment for respectful and safe conversations to occur. An opportunity to teach at a faith-based university was compelling, yet the notion of integrating faith into my teaching was unfamiliar.

Given my prior teaching experiences and faced with the reality of teaching at a faith-based university, I pondered: *What is faith integration? How do I engage students in discussions about matters of faith, prayer, and Scripture throughout all aspects of teaching and learning? How do I do this without being viewed as asserting positional power as the course leader?*

Because my faith is intrinsic to who I am, I incorporated Scripture from Matthew 5:13-16 and 22:37-39 into the undergraduate community nursing course content to “provide a moral context and guide deliberation” (Fowler & Reimer-Kirkham, 2012, pp. 37-38). These passages emphasize the concept of *Imago Dei* and the importance of guidance and care for others from an unspoiled place as essential for mentorship and acknowledgment of beauty in all individuals. This encourages students to take a faith-based stance, to reflect upon and use reason to integrate a “systematic account of reality” or understand their “worldview” (Fowler & Reimer-Kirkham, p. 41) on specific community health issues.

REFLECTIONS

As our courses evolved, we both experienced a *transformational* process relative to our relationship with our students. As a result, an awareness of a *space* or *arena* provided an openness to engage with students and the *grace*



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necessary to accept differences to move us further toward faith integration. This *space* afforded the formal and informal conversations, in which respectful individual discussions ensued, within a supportive environment. In our previous teaching experiences, exchanges with our students were confined to the *here* and *now*, without expressions of personal faith.

In this current context, however, these exchanges with our students became cyclical and allowed for the openness and self-reflection to reveal a level of authenticity and freedom to integrate our faith. Doriani highlighted “the more we sense and accept our difference in the world, the greater our influence will be” (2006, p. 45). As these relational connections with our students strengthened, we found ourselves affording more time for transparent interactions and a level of comfort and confidence to move into a place where we were formerly uncomfortable.

Gillespie’s (2005) exploration of the student-teacher relationship within the

nursing clinical context suggested a direction for educators in supporting *connection* as a place of possibility. These findings revealed that beyond the tangible results of creating positive outcomes for students’ learning and professional socialization, “There is value that arises from the essence of connection itself” (Gillespie, p. 211). Ramal (2010) emphasized the importance of the faculty-student interaction as necessary to promote a lasting effect of spiritual care within the nursing curriculum. Pesut (2008) stressed the process of faith integration with undergraduate nursing students as being reciprocal, noting, “I seek to shape students, and they in turn shape me” (p. 92). Upon reflection, we believe that this reciprocal process was emerging as our relational connections and transparency with our students strengthened.

Our intentions were not to proselytize, but to find a safe place to share our faith with our students. One method for engaging in conversations



with students was through relational practice (Hartrick Doane & Varcoe, 2005). This openness allowed us to have a *back and forth* conversation. Such conversations brought us to a

back over the past couple of months and see how God has so divinely orchestrated in my learning process. Thank you, as well, for helping make this such a wonderful learning experience.

Another student commented: *Thank you for the way you have already invested into my life as a future nurse. You show a level of caring that is rare.*

This context provided an opportunity for us to approach our interactions with students in a way that elicited an *unveiling* of a traditional method of teaching in favor of authenticity, in which God and spirituality can be placed central in our discourse.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?



We asked ourselves: *What do we take away from this experience?* We learned, as educators within a faith-based university, informal student/faculty interactions created a lens in which there is more transparency and opportunity to experience an authentic relational interconnectedness and sense of servant leadership. Ongoing discussions and opportunities for mutual self-reflection assisted in providing greater depth in our relationships with students, which fostered our transitioning toward faith integration. The essence of integrating faith into our teaching is not specifically an objective or a destination, but a journey. Faith integration is an ongoing process of learning and spiritual discovery that continues to evolve as our relationship and understanding of God deepens.

As we continue to become more comfortable as nurse educators with

place of acknowledging one another's similarities and differences in faith. This approach provided opportunities "to attend to issues of meaning, experience, race, history, culture, health, and sociopolitical systems. In addition, as we relationally honored and attended to such differences, the potential for growth, change, and knowledge development was enhanced" (Hartrick Doane & Varcoe, p. 9). For example, we've found many students take the opportunity to share personal journeys of faith, allowing meaningful connections to flourish.

Examples of student affirmations in our approach to faith integration included:


I want you to know that you have been such a huge encouragement to me during this process. Your words and your affirmation mean a great deal to me, and for that I am so thankful! I smile now as I look



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Resources

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- Setran, D. P., & Kiesling, C. A. (2013). *Spiritual formation in emerging adulthood: A practical theology for college and young adult ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

faith integration in the academic context, we will continue to: a) Ask questions in order to promote a higher level of understanding of the complexities of this process; b) Ask students how they experience faith integration; c) Explore our professional responsibility in the *student-teacher relationship* relative to our faith; d) Integrate changes in the nursing curriculum; and e) Mentor faculty in faith integration. 

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