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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Learning is Not an Outcome of Teaching

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The notion that learning is **not** an outcome of teaching is a challenging conundrum to those who teach. Perhaps for two reasons, first, it's counter intuitive, and second, it begs the question, "Well then what am I teaching for if not to bring about learning?!"

While teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin, the reality is that it is possible that what learners actually learn in a given lesson or course has little connection to what the teacher does or is trying to teach. We can imagine that some of this has to do with poor teaching. But some of it has to do with other complex dynamics of learning, including motivation, confirmation bias, attentional states, and capacities.

A teacher who does not understand principles of learning, neglects to prepare well-designed learning outcomes, fails to ensure student engagement, and fails to apply sound instructional practices will likely not bring about meaningful learning. But the concept that "learning is not an outcome of teaching" goes deeper than that. The idea has to do with the fact that learners need to be, and are, active participants in their own learning.

Regardless of our particular educational intent as teachers, students bring to the learning experience their own expectations, felt needs, goals, assumptions, frames of reference, and limitations related to the learning experience. Those factors often are more determinative of what will actually be learned than will anything the teacher intends or works toward.

Experienced congregational ministers are familiar with this phenomenon. Regardless of how

well they craft a sermon and despite how intentional they are in being clear about the purpose, function, and objective of the sermon, the fact is that the “real” sermon is the one that is heard by each parishioner in the pew and not the one preached from the pulpit.

The preacher may be preaching the one sermon he or she prepared for Sunday, but there will be as many sermons heard as there are people in the sanctuary. This phenomenon always makes for interesting conversations at the door as the pastor greets the parishioners. If five people comment on the sermon on their way out, the preacher will be left wondering how and when it was that they heard those five different things in the sermon!

The concept that learning is not an outcome of teaching can challenge certain educational approaches, like “teaching by telling,” lecturing, or an exclusive diet of direct instruction. If learners are active agents in their own learning, then we need to use those educational approaches that tap into what students bring to the learning experience.

Ways to Ensure Better Outcomes

The best way to ensure better learning outcomes is to design for student engagement.

- Facilitate ways for students to discover their own learning and insights
- Allow students to negotiate their own learning goals and facilitate ways for them to achieve them
- Focus on problem-posing (which requires data gathering, observation, analysis, and interpretation) as well as problem-solving
- Cultivate student's capacity for learning how to ask questions rather than getting good at answering teacher's questions
- Facilitate ways for students to construct their knowledge rather than providing them with information
- Help students articulate their prejudices and bias
- Help students uncover and identify their misunderstandings
- Help students identify their resistance to new ideas
- Allow students the options of approaching learning in the ways (modalities) they need.
- Ensure that students apply knowledge to demonstrate learning, including through non-academic venues.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/03/learning-is-not-an-outcome-of-teaching/>