

A Tale of Two Classrooms

Evaluating the Use of Dialogue Education for Teaching the Bible

Kyle Tennant

Learning Task #1: Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the usefulness of Dialogue Education when it comes to teaching the Bible. Herein, we will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of using Learning Tasks to teach the Scripture in Christian education settings (i.e., Bible studies, small groups, Sunday School classrooms) and provide some suggestions for its use. While many of the Principles and Practices of DE can be used in teaching the Bible without alteration, we may need to alter the Principles and Practices of Dialogue Education (DE) to fit the context of the learning. In the pages that follow, we will offer definitions for Dialogue Education, as well as teaching the Bible. We will then evaluate DE in terms of “I Like’s” and “How About’s” in order to provide some guidance for other DE practitioners who would seek to use DE in Christian education settings.

Learning Task #1: Warm Up

Note: Throughout the paper, there will be opportunities to interact with the text through a series of Learning Tasks. Feel free to respond to these tasks by writing your responses to them on a separate sheet of paper, or in the margins of the text itself.

Name one particularly memorable Bible teaching experience in which you, the learner, experienced personal change because of the teaching. **List** at least three factors about that teaching that made it so memorable and transformative.

Learning Task #2: A Tale of Two Classrooms

Learning Task #2: A Tale of Two Classrooms

2A: **Read** the following section, which paints two portraits of teaching. Circle or underline anything that strikes you.

Imagine, for a moment, a Sunday School class on the book of John. Undoubtedly, your mind conjures an image of students sitting in rows, their attention on the teacher, who has been lecturing since the start of the class and will continue to do so until time is up (or perhaps a little after the allotted time). The learners are silent: their Bibles are open on their laps, and they nod

or murmur agreement when they find a point particularly striking. The learners will remain silent until the end, when the teacher “opens the floor” for questions; but, given that he or she will most likely have taught past the end of the class, only one or two questions can be asked and hastily answered. The optimist among us pictures students totally enraptured by their teacher’s lecturing ability, fastidiously taking notes, their lives practically changing before our very eyes. The pessimist, however, sees students bored, their eyes glazed over, stealing glances at the clock, all the while the lecturer is woefully unaware of his or her students’ disengagement.

Now, imagine a classroom where students are grouped in fours or fives around small tables, with Bibles open, pens in hand, furiously scribbling notes on a well-designed handout. On the table are text books, charts, maps, and even some markers and crayons. What is most noticeable is their engagement: learners are locked in dialogue at their tables, referencing all of the materials above, drawing a chart of their own; they are laughing, smiling, and, remarkably, *enjoying* the learning. The teacher is sitting at the front of the room—perfectly still and silent, moving and speaking only at the invitation of those gathered at the tables, and then returning to his or her still and silent posture. After a few moments, the teacher calls the groups back to order (which takes some time—they are too engaged in the content before them), and asks each group to present their findings. Discussion ensues, laughter increases, and the instructor says something you have never before heard from a teacher’s mouth: “Well, I have never thought of that. What an excellent idea!” The class ends just about on time, and some learners linger, still discussing

the text and their understanding of it with the teacher, who lingers and listens to their findings.

Learning Task #2: A Tale of Two Classrooms

2B: **Answer** the following question: “Which portrait of teaching represents how you have received Bible teaching? Which portrait of teaching represents how you yourself teach the Bible?”

2C: **Draw** a Venn Diagram to compare and contrast these portraits of teaching.

2D: **Identify** at least one way that the second portrait invites you to change your Bible teaching method.

Learning Task #3: Dialogue Education in Action

Learning Task #3: Dialogue Education in Action

3A: **Read** the following section, which describes the basic structure of Dialogue Education. Circle or underline anything that strikes you.

The two scenes described above paint two pictures, albeit exaggerated ones, of two types of learning. In the first, we see a *typical* Sunday School environment, which differs little from the way we are used to learn. For now, we will call this approach Telling, which emphasizes the teacher’s knowledge of the material and skill at delivering it in a monologue. The first scene is sharply contrasted by the second: learners are engaged with the content and one another as they seek to understand the text in front of them. In the second picture, we are seeing Dialogue Education in action. What is Dialogue Education?

Dialogue Education is the creation of Jane Vella, a Catholic nun and educator who has been teaching for over five decades. Vella is the founder of Global Learning Partners, which partners with individuals and organizations to train them in the use of Dialogue Education. Vella’s approach to teaching and learning was first described in her book, *Training Through Dialogue: Promoting Effective Learning and Change with Adults*, published in 1995. Since then, Jane has written five other books, most recently, *On Teaching and Learning: Putting the Principles and Practices of Dialogue Education into Action*, published in 2008. Vella, heavily

influenced by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, designed Dialogue Education with the idea that "The means is dialogue, the end is learning, and the purpose is peace."¹

Dialogue Education is a way to structure dialogue in a learning environment; this is what was just described in the second portrait. DE is an explicitly learning-centered approach to education that functions on the basis of the Twelve Principles and Practices (hereafter *italicized*). In the case of the first scene, the learning there was at best content-centered, at worst teacher-centered. The teacher spent most of the time Telling the students what they needed to know without opportunity to ask questions or engage with the content. In the second scene, we see explicitly learning-centered teaching. The students talked more than the instructor, and were engaged in dialogue over the new content. In DE, learners are invited to engage in new content via dialogue and conversation. This, Vella says, is true competition, or "com-petition, asking together." In DE, learners, including the teacher, ask questions, wrestle with theories, practice skills and reflect on new attitudes all in dialogue. In DE, the teacher and students are *Accountable* to one another, working with one another in *Safety* and *Sound Relationships* with *Clear Roles*; these are key Principles and Practices to DE that makes this approach to teaching and learning unique.

In essence, Dialogue Education seeks to redefine the nature of teaching and learning through the use of Twelve Principles and Practices, which ultimately flatten the hierarchy that exists between teacher and learner. She writes, "The dialogue in dialogue education is not between teacher and learner, but among learners, of whom the teacher is one."² Learners do not learn passively as the teacher does all the talking; instead, Vella says, learning happens as they are "deeply engaged in a learning task, huddled around significant learning materials...in

¹ Jane Vella, *On Teaching and Learning: Putting the Principles and Practices of Dialogue Education Into Action* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 214.

² *Ibid.*, 88.

profound dialogue toward the completion of the [learning] task...”³ In DE, learners are active, engaged, verbal, and the decision-makers in their own learning.

Dialogue Education is structured around a series of Learning Tasks, “an open question put to a small group with all the resources they need to respond.”⁴ Learning Tasks invite individuals to work in small groups as they examine a new piece of content (a map, a lecture, a chart, a text) and to apply the learning to their own lives. Vella articulates the need for *Immediacy*, which states that “adult learners need to see the immediate usefulness of new learning.”⁵ Learning Tasks create opportunities for learners to be active participants in their own learning, as they talk with their colleagues and gain new knowledge. Vella writes, “Here is a small community of earnest learners, focused and committed to hear one another out, to collaborate toward the product: a plan, a context-appropriate theory, a tested skill.”⁶

Learning Task #3: Dialogue Education In Action

3B: **List** two or three statements that you underlined or circled and answer the question, “How do these statements inform the way you think about teaching the Bible?”

3C: **Identify** at least one commitment you would make from this section to change the way you teach the Bible.

Learning Task #4: What is Teaching the Bible?

Learning Task #4: What is Teaching the Bible

4A: **Read** the following section, which offers definitions of what it means to teach the Bible. Circle or underline anything that strikes you.

Before moving into reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of using DE to teach the Bible, it is important to first establish a working definition of “teaching the Bible.” A brief

³ Ibid., xxi.

⁴ Ibid., 53. See also Jane Vella, *Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 8.

⁵ Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: the Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 19.

⁶ Vella, *On Teaching*, 54.

literature review is in order. In *Creative Bible Teaching*, Lawrence O. Richards and Gary J. Bredfeldt suggest that the role of the Bible in a Christian's life is to enlighten the truth, expose the heart, and equip the saints for ministry. "The Bible is both the story of reconciliation and the tool for experiencing the story firsthand," they write.⁷ Teaching the Bible is the process of bringing the story of reconciliation to bear on the learner's life by building a bridge from the past to the present: "The Bible teacher must build a bridge from the ancient world of the Bible to the modern world of the student."⁸ In building this bridge from the past to the present, the learner gains the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to connect the story of reconciliation to their everyday lives.⁹

Haddon W. Robinson, in his book *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, suggests that preaching (and by extension, teaching) the Bible requires the teacher to create a lesson that "is the explanation, interpretation, or application of a single dominant idea supported by other ideas, all drawn from one passage or several passages of Scripture."¹⁰ Robinson's approach to teaching and preaching is famous for its emphasis on the "Big Idea," a single statement which is effectively the bridge between the original context of the passage and the contemporary application of the text.¹¹ "To be effective, sermons must relate biblical truth to life. The most effective sermons are those that do this in a specific, not a general, way."¹² Here, we see Robinson's view of teaching the Bible: relating biblical truth to life in a specific way that remains faithful to the original meaning of the text.

⁷ Lawrence O. Richards and Gary J. Bredfeldt, *Creative Bible Teaching* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1998), 58.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: the Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001), 35.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41-43.

¹² *Ibid.*, 96.

Whereas the previous two sources emphasize the role of the teacher and the role of the subject in teaching the Bible, the next two focus more on the learner. In *Effective Bible Teaching*, James C. Wilhoit and Leland Ryken suggest that the mark of effective Bible teaching is based on what happens in the classroom. They suggest that we should judge a Bible teacher on the basis of “how much their students learn and apply from the Bible.”¹³ They suggest that good Bible teaching makes students actively involved in their learning: “Active learning describes educational experiences that engage students and prompt them to wrestle with information, test its validity, find ways of using what is learned, and relate or adapt it to previously learned material.”¹⁴

In the classic *Education that is Christian*, Lois E. Lebar also brings a more learning-centered approach to the table. Lebar suggests that good Bible teaching is not playing what she calls “Bible baseball.” She writes,

Instead of nurturing toward maturity, we often play Bible baseball with our classes on Sunday morning. We try to warm them up by throwing Bible words at them and asking them to toss them back to us. When the game begins, we pitch factual questions at them. But when they go home and take off their ‘Sunday togs,’ they’re the same people underneath. They haven’t experienced the presence of the Lord. They haven’t met him. We haven’t been changing life. We’ve merely been playing at the game of life.¹⁵

According to this passage from Lebar, good Bible teaching changes lives, and addresses students at the level of their lives; it does not lob facts and figures at them. Lebar suggests using a model she calls “Boy-Book-Boy” (now called “Person-Book-Person” in the name of inclusivity) to address the *felt needs* of learners and so apply the Bible to their lives. “The Person needs to get

¹³ James C. Wilhoit and Leland Ryken, *Effective Bible Teaching*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 29-30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁵ Lois E. LeBar, *Education That Is Christian*, Updated ed. (Westwood, New Jersey: David C. Cook, 1998), 141.

involved in the study of [the Bible] until it gets into him, until he lives in it and it lives in him.”¹⁶

LeBar agrees with Wilhoit and Ryken that learning is active: students should be “alert and active intellectually, emotionally, and volitionally as they participate in group interaction.”¹⁷

With all of this in mind, we suggest the following working definition for teaching the Bible: *Teaching the Bible is the process by which learners are guided in the appropriate observation, interpretation, and application of a passage of Scripture through active learning processes that engage them with the text so that learners are conformed to Christ.* Using this definition, we will now evaluate Dialogue Education’s use in teaching the Bible.

Learning Task #4: Dialogue Education In Action

4B: **Answer** the following question, “How do you see these definitions of teaching the Bible interact with the Principles and Practices of Dialogue Education?”

4C: **Re-read** the Lois LeBar quote about “Bible baseball.” **Identify** at least two ways that DE helps Bible teachers avoid playing Bible baseball.

4D: **Write** your own definition of teaching the Bible that indicates one commitment to how you will change your way of teaching the Bible.

Learning Task #5: I Like, How About...

Learning Task #5: I Like, How About...

5A: **Read** the following section, which offers a brief description of a means of evaluation. Circle or underline anything that strikes you.

To frame our discussion, we will use the “I Like, How About” framework for feedback provided by Jane Vella in her book *On Teaching and Learning*.¹⁸ We choose this model because what is presented here is in no way exhaustive; what follows are merely suggestions for using DE to teach the Bible. We will begin with describing some ways that DE is helpful and effective in teaching the Bible. We will then move to making some suggestions as to how we could use

¹⁶ Ibid., 100.

¹⁷ Ibid., 184.

¹⁸ Vella, *On Teaching*, 179-180; 184.

DE more effectively in teaching the Bible with DE, when some Principles and Practices are adapted to the purposes of teaching the Bible. We will discuss each of the points below with reflection on Vella’s writings. Table 1 summarizes our “I Likes” and “How About’s.”

Learning Task #5: I Like, How About...
 5B: Before reading the provide I Likes and How About’s, **list at least one** I Like and How About of Dialogue Education of your own.

**Table 1:
 I Like’s and How About’s for Teaching the Bible with DE**

<i>I Like...</i>	<i>How About...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ...that DE teaches people the Bible, instead of teaching the Bible to people. • ...that DE treats people as more than their brains. • ...that DE puts the Bible at the center of a learning community. • ...that DE teaches learners <i>how</i> to study the Bible <i>as</i> they study the Bible. • ...that DE forces teachers to be attentive to application. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ...adjusting the nature of the Learning Task so that it isn’t just ‘anything goes’? • ...redefining <i>Safety</i>? • ...using lectures for Add tasks? • ...balancing <i>Immediacy</i> with the need to be patient in growing?

Learning Task #6: I Like...

Learning Task #6: I Like...
 6A: **Read** this section which outlines the author’s I Likes about DE. Circle or underline anything that strikes you.

I like that DE teaches people the Bible, instead of teaching the Bible to people. Dialogue Education is an admittedly learning-centered approach to education. This learner focus is built-in to the very design of a teaching-learning session using DE. “In dialogue education, the first question to ask when designing an educational program is not *What?* (the content) but *Who?* (participants and leaders).”¹⁹ Those using DE to teach do not start with content, but with the learners; this reverses the more common method of teaching the Bible. Traditionally, Bible

¹⁹ Vella, *On Teaching*, 32.

teachers choose a passage, study it, and then consider how it applies to their audience. With DE, the teacher reflects first on their audience, their *Who*, in order to discern the needed content, their *What*. Dialogue Education asks, “Who needs What as defined by Whom?”²⁰

A key practice for Dialogue Education is the Learning Needs and Resources Assessment (*LNRA*). An *LNRA* is a brief survey, via phone call, email, or brief in-person conversation that assesses learners’ previous experience with the content to be taught in the learning session. An *LNRA* “involves listening to learners, observing their context, and thereby designing teaching and learning that works for them as well as for the organization.”²¹ Using an *LNRA* ensures that the biblical content that is being taught is applicable to those learning, honoring the principle of *Immediacy*—that learners want to see the immediate use of their learning.

The *LNRA* helps the teacher shape the learning so that it moves from simple to complex, easy to difficult. This is the Principle and Practice of *Sequence and Reinforcement*. Vella says that *Sequence* refers to “the order of events,” or how the teacher orders content so that all are included, and no student is left behind.²² *Reinforcement* “is a form of sequence whereby learning tasks offer new and different applications of the concept, skill, or attitudes being learned.”²³ *Sequence and Reinforcement* is how teachers make sure that every student actually learns the material; it is informed by the *LNRA* so that learners find themselves able to keep up with the content. Too often, Bible teachers jump right in, forgetting that not all of their learners share their level of biblical literacy; *Sequence and Reinforcement* lessens this problem.

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Ibid., 24.

²² Vella, *On Teaching*, 90.

²³ Ibid., 91.

Lastly, Dialogue Education teaches the learners the Bible, and not the Bible to learners, by virtue of a key principle: *Respect for Learners as Decision Makers*.²⁴ In DE, learners are at various times afforded what Vella calls a deliberative or consultative voice. In DE, “the teacher must distinguish between [learners’] suggests and decisions. This is called the distinction between a consultative voice (a suggestion) and a deliberative voice (a decision).”²⁵ Dialogue Education puts the learning where it belongs: into the hands of the learner. At times, learners may decide to pursue one kind of content over another, and the teacher will do as learners have asked. At others, learners may suggest a new route for the learning, and the teacher may or may not follow their suggestion. For example, a Sunday School class on Romans may skip large portions regarding the role of Israel in the Church in Romans 9-11 because the teacher gave the learners decision-making power, and the learners chose to focus on the role of government in Romans 13. By putting learning in the hands of the learners, teachers find themselves teaching learners the Bible, not the other way around.

I like that DE treats people as more than their brains. Many Bible teachers have inherited the Evangelical attitude that human beings are fundamentally *cognitive* creatures, who need more information to live rightly. In *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K.A. Smith explains that to think of humankind this way is to see a human as “a cognitive machine defined, above all, by thought and rational operation.”²⁶ This results in a bodiless way of knowing, and a bodiless way of teaching, which he calls a “bobble head Christianity” that is so “fixated on the cognitive that it assumes a picture of human beings that look like bobble heads: mammoth heads that dwarf an almost

²⁴ See Vella, *Learning to Listen*, 15-17 and 129-147; also Vella, *On Teaching*, 97.

²⁵ Vella, *Learning to Listen*, 16.

²⁶ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 42

nonexistent body.”²⁷ Think back to the first picture of teaching: the teacher focused on Telling the learners what they needed to know—the assumption being that they simply needed more information in order to become spiritually mature. The result of this kind of Telling is, as Smith describes, bobble head Christians—who know the right things to say, but do not often live them.

Focusing on the cognitive ignores two essential aspects of our humanity: our affections and our bodies. Thus, Vella reminds us that good learning focuses on all three elements of our personhood, and insists on the Principle and Practice of *Ideas, Feelings, and Actions*. She writes, “the best learning is threefold: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor; that is, it involves ideas, feelings, and actions... This principle guides us by inviting cognitive action, feelings, and some muscle work.”²⁸ Return again, to the first portrait, where we see the teacher Telling the students the information they ought to know: this is a purely cognitive exercise, and any involvement of the affections or the body is incidental. Yet, in the second portrait, students laugh and joke (affections) while moving around and drawing (psychomotor). When we teach in such a way that all three aspects of our personhood are included, deep change happens. In this way, DE brings to the table an important strength: teaching the *whole* person.

I like that DE puts the Bible at the center of a learning community. In the early church, the first Christians are pictured as receiving the Word in community: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship...” (Acts 2:42). Dialogue Education affords Bible teachers a chance to return to this model by creating a community of learners in which the Bible is at the center. Vella says that DE “is a state of mind, moving us to listening,

²⁷ Ibid., 42

²⁸ Vella, *On Teaching*, 95.

respecting, doubting, reflecting, designing, affirming, considering options, and celebrating opposites.”²⁹ If this is not a picture of community, then what is?

With Dialogue Education, the learning community is flattened, removing the hierarchy of teacher-learner, via the Principles and Practices of *Safety*,³⁰ *Sound Relationships*,³¹ and *Clear Roles*.³² Instead of an expert teaching inexperienced learners DE creates a community of learners of whom the teacher is one. A teacher, in DE, is “no longer the only knower in the room, the only person at the point of power, the transmitter of facts and figures.”³³ DE believes that learners have just as much to bring to the learning as the teacher does. In traditional Bible teaching settings, learners sit passively by while they receive new content via lecture and, if time allows, a brief question and answer session. Teaching the Bible with DE is attentive to “the concept of *dia + logos*, ‘the word or relationship between us...’” Thus, we are listening for what our “inexperienced” (so-called) learners have to say about the text in front of us.

Learners are divided into small groups, who wrestle with new content in teams, and then bring their findings back to the whole group for corporate consideration; this is a function of the principle and practice of *Teamwork*.³⁴ When we are teaching the Bible with DE, we are creating a community that is centered on the Word, corporately discerning the meaning of the text for contemporary times and its application to our corporate and individual lives. Learning in a community grounds learning in real life, in the real world. Vella writes, “All too often we hear people in educational settings say: ‘When we get back to the real world...’ Teams *are* the real world... What happens in the team is what is happening every day.”³⁵ Teachers of the Bible are

²⁹ Vella, *On Teaching*, 11.

³⁰ Vella, *Learning to Listen*, 8-10, 71-83.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10-12, 85-100.

³² *Ibid.*, 20-22, 179-189.

³³ Vella, *On Teaching*, 211.

³⁴ See Vella, *Learning to Listen*, 22-24 and 191-20; also Vella, *On Teaching*, 102-104.

³⁵ Vella, *Learning to Listen*, 23.

often confronted with this ‘When we get back to the real world...’ question in their preparation and teaching; DE immediately grounds learning in real life through *Teamwork* and community.

I like that DE teaches learners how to study the Bible as they study the Bible. A key principle to Dialogue Education is simple: “How do they know they know? They just did it.” Learners who are actively engaged with the Bible through Dialogue Education learn how to study the Bible as they study the Bible as a function of the principle and practice of *Engagement*.³⁶ *Engagement* in a learning environment means “wrestling with a theory, a struggle with a skill, a resistant practice of a difficult attitude.”³⁷ As learners engage with a text, and are guided through Learning Tasks that invite them to make observations, interpretations, and applications of the text, they subtly learn how to study the Bible as they are studying the Bible. *Engagement* echoes the challenge that Wilhoit, Ryken, and Lebar offered to us above: through active learning, we teach methods of Bible study as we teach the Bible.

Vella instructs teachers to evaluate learning on three levels: learning, transfer, and impact. “*Learning* is what occurs within the event, *transfer* is taking that learning to a new context, and *impact* is the change in organizations and systems caused by that learning.”³⁸ Learning, Vella says, may be measured in the session when we see learners practicing skills from previous Learning Tasks in new ones; we may also see it in body language, gestures, a turn of a phrase, or in the interactions among team members.³⁹ Transfer, though, happens either directly or indirectly: when a learner takes a skill learned in a session and repeats it at home.⁴⁰ Impact happens when that skill makes a change in an organization to which the learner belongs.⁴¹ For

³⁶ Vella, *Learning to Listen*, 24-25 and 203-211; also *On Teaching*, 105-106.

³⁷ Vella, *On Teaching*, 105.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

example, in the course of an eight-week study on Esther, we may see learners use a method of observation or interpretation taught the previous week as they study the passage before them (learning). Then, an individual may use that same skill in their personal devotions at home the next day (transfer). Six months later, that individual is using those skills in a small group Bible study he or she leads at work (impact). This is the idea of *Engagement* in action: “How do they know they know? They just did it.”

I like that DE forces teachers to be attentive to application. A common problem in Bible teaching settings is that what is taught is woefully disconnected from real life. While this is, in part, addressed through the principle and practice of *Teamwork*, it is also addressed through the principle and practice of *Immediacy*.⁴² *Immediacy* is the idea that what is learned ought to be immediately applicable in some way to the learner’s life. Vella offers helpful wisdom here: “It is not our job as teachers to meet all needs or solve all problems. However, it is our job to make the new content—ideas, skills, attitudes—meaningful to learners.”⁴³ *Immediacy* forces the teacher to think through how the content in a session is meaningful to learners’ context.

DE also forces attentiveness to application through the use of Learning Tasks. A Learning Task, as noted above, is an open question put to a small group with all the resources needed to respond. In Vella’s *Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults*, we find that learning tasks have four elements to them: Inductive Work, connecting learners with what they already know about the new content; Input, inviting learners to examine new content (a concept, a skill, or an attitude); Implementation, getting learners to do something directly with the new content; and Integration, helping learners integrate the new content into their lives.⁴⁴

(Note that elsewhere, the four steps to a Learning Task are Anchor, Add, Apply, Away; the ‘Four

⁴² Vella, *Learning to Listen*, 19-20 and 161-177; also *On Teaching*, 99-101.

⁴³ Vella, *On Teaching*, 99.

⁴⁴ Vella, *Taking Learning to Task*, 33.

A's' will be used interchangeably with the 'Four I's' below.) In essence, a single Learning Task containing all four elements could be one-half to three-quarters application-based.

This emphasis on application ensures that the learning has *Immediacy*, and ensures that learning begins and ends with a learners' context. Application to everyday life happens at a number of levels, and a number of times. In a learning task, we find "a small community of earnest learners, focused and committed to hear one another out, to collaborate toward the product: a plan, a context-appropriate theory, a tested skill."⁴⁵ Here is an example of a Learning Task using a text from Scripture that is focused on application:

Learning Task #1: Courageously Sharing

Inductive/Anchor	Name one time that God gave you an opportunity to share the Gospel with a friend or family member, but you decided not to do so. List the emotions you felt in that moment.
Input/Add	As a large group, let's examine Romans 1:16-17. Record your observations and interpretations as we go.
Implement/Apply	Paul says that he is not ashamed because the Gospel is 'the power of God unto salvation.' Answer the following questions to yourself through journaling: "What is it about God's power in the Gospel that causes Paul to be bold instead of ashamed? What is it about God's power in the Gospel that could end my shame and make me bold?"
Integrate/Away	Identify someone you have been feeling led to share the Gospel with. Choose a day in the next two weeks that you'll have that conversation.

This learning task is highly connected to the context of the learner, inviting him or her to identify personal experiences and emotions related to sharing the Gospel. As they work through this task, they are led to apply the text to their own lives immediately. The teacher in this situation is not afforded an opportunity to skip application, because it is built directly into the learning.

⁴⁵ Vella, *On Teaching*, 54.

Learning Task #6: I Like...

6B: **List**, in order of importance, the I Likes listed here. *If you need a refresher, return to page 9 for a complete list.*

6C: **Name** at least one way that these I Likes inform the way you teach the Bible. Then **identify** a commitment for your future teaching.

Learning Task #7: How About...**Learning Task #7: How About**

7A: **Read** this section which outlines the author's How About's about DE. Circle or underline anything that strikes you.

We now turn to some constructive suggestions for using DE in teaching the Bible. DE has already proven to be a valuable resource for Bible teachers.

How about adjusting the nature of the Learning Task so that it isn't just 'anything goes'?

Without careful handling, Learning Tasks can be counter-productive to learning a passage's meaning. Remember that Bible teaching, as we have defined it, is guiding learners in the *appropriate* observation, interpretation, and application of a particular passage. We say 'careful handling' because a poor reading of Vella will lead one to believe that it is not the teacher's job to make a point, but for the learner to take away whatever it is they want to take away. This is not the case. Vella writes, "Here is another value to the open question: no response is invalidated. Such an attitude excludes fear as a component of the learning task. The 'right' answer is what emerges from an honest response for a learner in his context."⁴⁶ This is a classic example of a DE statement, that if read poorly, can lead one to believe that in teaching the Bible, any interpretation or application would be valid.

Again, this is not the case. Learning Tasks do not invite learners to make any response; it is part of the teacher's job to form and inform the learners as they go in order to lead them to

⁴⁶ Vella, *Taking Learning to Task*, 9.

Truth. A teacher who teaches a class that the color red is called blue is a terrible teacher; a Bible teacher who allows his or her learners to arrive at Trinitarian Modalism instead of biblical orthodoxy is an equally bad teacher. Vella writes that it is the teacher's job to organize content, to listen to learners about their context, and to prepare learning materials.⁴⁷ It is his or her job to come to class adequately prepared to guide the students to his or her desired outcome, named in the design steps of What, What For, How and So That.

To continue with the example of the Trinity, the steps of design may be written to teach a group of adult learners the orthodox view of the Trinity. This is the What of the learning; the What For may be ABO's such as: "Learners will have read a chapter from a book on the Trinity; designed a chart to show wrong views of the Trinity; written a definition of the doctrine of the Trinity; and sang a worship song that expresses this truth in a different form." The How would turn these ABO's into Learning Tasks. The So That of this teaching is something like "so that students would have a worshipful understanding of the truth of the Trinity." If, at the end of the learning experience, learners have walked away with a heretical understanding of the Trinity, the teacher has failed, *even if the learners had the opportunity to express themselves honestly and connect the learning to their own experience.*

In short, what we are trying to get at here is that the teacher is in fact welcome to lead their learners to a designated point: this is, after all, what teachers are trying to do with the Eight Steps of Design. On the way, a learner may express an idea contrary to what you are teaching them, but a sure design provides layers of *Safety* for that learner to arrive at the point. A teacher's design and his or her response to faulty thinking, a learner's team, and the Holy Spirit act together to guide the student toward reaching the goal defined in the What, What For, How, and So That.

⁴⁷ Vella, *On Teaching*, xxii.

How about redefining Safety so that we lead our learners to safe ideas?

While undoubtedly related to the point above, it is worth including this ‘How About...’ in our discussion. *Safety* is the principle of Dialogue Education that seeks to invite and create trust in the learning environment. Vella says that safety means trust in the design and the teacher, trust in the relevance of the objectives of the learning, trust in the small group and learning colleagues, and trust in the sequence of the learning.⁴⁸ A primary way that *Safety* finds its way into learning is through the teacher’s attitude and actions. Vella writes, “One great danger to *Safety* is the fatal moment when an adult learner says something in a group, only to have the words hit the floor with a resounding ‘plop,’ without affirmation, without even recognition that she has spoken, with the teacher proceeding as if nothing has been said.”⁴⁹ This is another statement that, if poorly understood, can lead a teacher to think that he or she is not permitted to respond to a learner’s contribution in the negative. Yet, at times, responding in the negative is absolutely necessary.

Teachers are called upon to remember that the principle of *Safety*, at its core, is making the learning environment safe for the learners. Safety is purchased with the currency of trust in the teacher. When a learner places his or her trust in the teacher, he or she does so believing that what the teacher is about to teach is true. A teacher who allows learners to learn falsehood by affirming wrong answers has violated the principle of *Safety* in the name of honoring it. Jesus said, “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:3). A corollary: any teacher who causes one of his learners to sin, or believe falsehood, ought to have a millstone hung around his or her neck! It is possible to avoid the

⁴⁸ Vella, *Learning to Listen*, 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

‘plop’ when hearing a negative answer with statements such as, “Tell me more about that, I had been thinking of this differently” or “I’m not sure we are talking about the same thing here. Let’s have a look at it again” or “What do others think of this idea?”⁵⁰

How about using lectures for Add and Input tasks? A key element to teaching the Bible is lecture; if used appropriately, a lecture (or in more common Christian jargon, a “talk”) can be extremely effective when teaching the Bible, especially when used in conjunction with other pieces of a Learning Task. Vella makes it clear that lectures can be used as the Input piece of a Learning Task, noting that new content “is presented through printed materials, overheads, case studies, and *lectures*...”⁵¹ She even goes so far as to say that lectures “are integral to learning tasks as one way of offering new input.”⁵²

Such statements help Bible teachers strike a balance in their teaching of the Scriptures. On the one hand, this method does invite teachers to use lectures to teach the Bible, which is necessary in an increasingly biblically illiterate culture. Lectures help teachers provide learners with key information on a text’s background and context, both cultural and literary. Yet, Vella makes it clear that lectures are only as good as the Implementation tasks with which they are paired: “Learners get good lectures in dialogue education designs They also get clear directions on what they might do to make the content of that lecture their own.”⁵³ Returning to Wilhoit and Ryken’s definition of teaching, we are reminded that active learning is key. A lecture in an Input task followed by an active Implementation task (say, a case study) makes a brief lecture on the Bible immediately useful and applicable.

⁵⁰ See “30 Ways to Affirm,” Global Learning Partners, <http://www.globalearning.com/downloads/resources/30-Ways-to-Affirm.pdf> (accessed March 27, 2013).

⁵¹ Vella, *Taking Learning to Task*, 60. Emphasis added.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵³ Vella, *On Teaching*, xxiv.

In light of this, we suggest that Bible teachers seek to consistently use lectures that are interactive, engaging, and multi-sensory (including as many learning types as possible) in order to communicate the “main idea” of a text of Scripture. We also suggest making this lecture brief, in order to allow sufficient time for Inductive, Implementation, and Integration tasks.

How about balancing Immediacy with the need to be patient in growing? Vella writes at length that adult learners, and learners in general, need to see the immediate usefulness of the new content they are given; this is the principle of *Immediacy* in action. Vella tells us that learners “want to see something in hand as soon as possible.”⁵⁴ This is a principle that many Bible teachers could and should get behind: too much of Bible teaching is ethereal and disconnected from real life. The principle of *Immediacy*, and the application-focus of Learning Tasks, invites teachers to ground new content in the lived experience of those receiving Bible teaching and to make the new content useful in their everyday lives. In light of this, we suggest that learning be framed in two ways.

First, we must frame some learning as a resource you store up for later. There is a great deal of perseverance and waiting in the Christian life, and not everything in the Bible is immediately applicable. At times, the teaching we receive must be stored up for a later day; for example, a Bible lesson on James 1:2-4 (“count it all joy my brothers, when you face trials of various kinds...”) taught to someone who is not presently in a trial must be stored for a time when (not if) they do experience suffering or a trial. If we always frame learning as a transaction of “I’ll participate if you give me something useful,” we might not teach key content that may not be needed *now*, but later.

Second, we must frame the *end* of teaching not as application but as worship. This is not too alien to what DE is trying to do; as one of Vella’s axioms is “Joy is the measure.” What is

⁵⁴ Vella, *Learning to Listen*, 19.

worship if not joy? The direct result of good Bible teaching in a Christian's life may not necessarily be application in the sense of "now I have three new skills for dealing with a trial" but application in the sense of "I have another reason to worship the Lord with joy." When teachers liberally utilize the Principle and Practice of *Praxis*, worship occurs at the beginning, the middle, and the end of learning. Vella describes *Praxis* as "action with reflection," and states, "praxis serves insofar as it makes new content relevant to learners, as they re-create or construct that content to transform their life and context."⁵⁵ Worshipful and joyful *Praxis* invites learners to respond to the Lord's voice in the Word by inviting them to re-construct their lives on the Word taught in community.

Learning Task #7: How About

6B: **List**, in order of importance, the How About's listed here. *If you need a refresher, return to page 9 for a complete list.* **Add at least one** How About of your own.

6C: **Name** at least one way that these How Abouts inform the way you teach the Bible. Then **identify** a commitment for your future teaching.

Learning Task #8: Conclusion

Learning Task #8: Conclusion

8A: **Read** this section which outlines the author's final words regarding DE. Circle or underline anything that strikes you.

Dialogue Education presents the Bible teacher with a complex tool box for his or her use in building up the people of God. The number of details and factors to which teachers must be attentive are nearly endless, and can easily become constricting. At the start of this paper, we proposed that a new axiom is needed if we are to teach the Bible effectively with DE, and axiom needed if we are to feel freed, not constricted, as we teach the Bible with DE. That axiom is: "Dialogue Education was made for man, not man for Dialogue Education." A rigid adherence to

⁵⁵ Vella, *On Teaching*, 93-94.

the Principles and Practices to DE when teaching the Bible makes teaching and learning more about method than the learners; this ultimately defeats the purpose of Dialogue Education, to enhance learning.

Teaching the Bible with Dialogue Education ought to free the teacher to enter into authentic relationship with his or her students: they will, eventually, become his or her friend. When a Bible teacher authentically partners with learners as a friend and co-learner, as happens so effectively in Dialogue Education, deep learning happens that ultimately transforms the learner and the teacher. This is a fulfillment of Henri Nouwen's understanding of teaching. He writes,

Perhaps no teacher can be a true teacher unless he is also to a certain degree a friend. In other words, Christ said to His disciples: 'I shall not call you servants anymore, but friends' (John 15:14). He became in truth their real teacher because all fear was overcome and real learning could begin.⁵⁶

Dialogue Education invites teachers to befriend their learners and journey together toward truth and change. This is Christ's invitation to every believer, and must become every teacher's invitation to their learners.

Learning Task #8: Conclusion

8B: **Review** your church's present model of Christian Education and Discipleship. **Name** at least two areas of ministry that could be enhanced by the Principles and Practices of DE, and **identify** at least one practical way to make that happen.

8C: **Re-read** the Nouwen quote on the teacher as friend. **Identify** at least one way that you will seek to befriend your learners the next time you teach.

Works Cited

⁵⁶ Henri Nouwen, *Creative Ministry*, Course Reader 129.

“30 Ways to Affirm.” Global Learning Partners.

<http://www.globalearning.com/downloads/resources/30-Ways-to-Affirm.pdf> (accessed March 27, 2013).

LeBar, Lois E. *Education That Is Christian*. Updated ed. Westwood, New Jersey: David C. Cook, 1998.

Richards, Lawrence O., and Gary J. Bredfeldt. *Creative Bible Teaching*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1998.

Robinson, Haddon W. *Biblical Preaching: the Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001.

Smith, James K.A. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009.

Vella, Jane. *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: the Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*. Rev. ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

_____. *On Teaching and Learning: Putting the Principles and Practices of Dialogue Education Into Action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008.

_____. *Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Wilhoit, James C., and Leland Ryken. *Effective Bible Teaching*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.