

I personally am fascinated by this question of “what is significant learning,” and I’m sure that we all are, because as teachers we all want to impact our students in ways that are “significant.” So I wish that I could have been around each table to hear everyone’s insights on this topic. If I were to add my own two cents to the conversation, two words that come to mind are “enduring” and “engaging.” If learning is significant, it will *endure*. It will have an impact that is long-lasting and that shapes students into the future. And if learning is to have this kind of long-term impact, it needs to *engage* students, both by using teaching strategies that capture student’s attention and, more importantly, by teaching in such a way that students understand that what they are learning somehow *really does matter*.

I’ve been reflecting on these things over the past year or so and as a result I’ve made some considerable changes to some of my freshman-level classes. About a year and a half ago, I attended a teaching workshop with Dee Fink—and this really was a workshop, not just a conference, since participants were asked to come to the workshop with a course in mind that they would like to redesign. So I went to the workshop particularly thinking about my Old and New Testament Survey courses.

[By the way I am so pleased that Dee Fink will be with us later in the semester. I personally found his book and his workshop to be very provocative and energizing and I think that you will appreciate hearing from him. He has his own taxonomy of significant learning and I'm sure that, when he's with us, he'll be able to help us extend the reflection that we are doing today.]

Now just to give you an idea of what my Old and New Testament Survey courses historically looked like, I would say that they were pretty traditional—typically class involved lecturing through a class outline for the day, taking questions from students as we had time, and then giving several tests through the semester on the lectures, typically objective questions that I could run through the Scantron, questions like “When the Israelites invaded the land of Canaan, was their battle strategy first to conquer its northern, central or southern region?” or, “In which OT prophet is ‘the Holy One of Israel’ a key phrase?” or, “Which of the following books describes the transition from David's to Solomon's reign? Is it 1 Samuel, 1 Kings, or 2 Kings?” Besides this basic format, I did some other things occasionally to try to spice things up, and other classes that I taught looked significantly different, but this was my basic approach to my Old and New Testament Survey classes.

Early on at the workshop, I remember being struck by one particular line of thought. We were hearing some statistics from some studies related to student recall of course content and how quickly students forgot certain information that they were tested on. And it made me ask myself, “How forgettable are the things that I am teaching and testing on?” That’s kind of an uncomfortable question for a teacher to ask . And within the context of that discussion, Dee Fink raised the question (which proved to be an extremely focusing question for me): “Once students have completed your class and are several years on the other side of it, how do you want them to be changed as a result of being in your class?” That question is, of course, the right starting point—it’s “beginning with the end in mind,” as Stephen Covey would say. And as I reflected on that question, I did have a few key answers to it. For my Old and New Testament Survey students, even several years after they had completed my class, I wanted them to

- (1) Be able to research and answer questions that they themselves had about the Bible
- (2) I wanted them to know how to interpret a text of Scripture
- (3) I wanted them to have a strong sense of the importance and relevance of Scripture for their everyday lives

Now these longterm goals for my students were pretty easy for me to come up with—they are fairly simple and straightforward goals and they really are things that I most wanted for my students. But what is interesting is that when I stopped to reflect on this, I quickly realized that what I was actually doing in class would only help my students achieve one at best of the three goals. So here's what I did. I restructured these courses to place a priority on these things that were most important to me (or maybe I should say that I thought were most important *for them*). And this meant that I had to let go of some of the course content that I had previously focused on, not necessarily because it wasn't important but because I judged that there were *more* important things that I needed to do. And in the process (and, by the way, I'm not saying that it would have to happen this way, only that this is the way things developed with me), these courses became more project-oriented and less test-oriented. I still assessed foundational knowledge in these courses, but the focus shifted. To put some flesh on this, let me briefly describe three projects that I used to help me achieve the three goals I just mentioned:

First, I wanted students to be able to answer questions that they had about the Bible. So I used a “Learning to Learn Project” (by the way, learning how to learn is one of the six major categories of Dee Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning, and I’m sure that he will talk more about that when he is with us). For this project, students developed a list of questions that they would like to have the answer to and then chose one in particular. Then after receiving some guidance from me about various tools and resources that might help them (including a “field trip” to the Ryan Center), students researched their question (and to do this they had to use resources from various categories, including concordances, Bible dictionaries, atlases, historical-cultural background resources, commentaries, media resources, etc.). After writing up what they learned, they presented it to other members of the class in a small-group setting, describing why the question was important or interesting to them and how they would now answer the question after their research.

As for my second goal of wanting students to have a basic idea of how to go about interpreting a text of Scripture, I had previously shied away from doing this because, after all, I do teach a separate class on interpreting the Bible and I thought that I really needed to keep that

class and my survey classes separate. But I realized most of the students in my Old and New Testament Survey courses don't show up in the Intro to Bible Study and Interpretation class and thus they weren't being equipped to do something that I most wanted them to be able to do. So my course redesign of these classes aimed to introduce students to at least the basic steps of interpreting a biblical text and learning about related tools and resources, which in my NT Survey class culminated in a project for which students interpreted a select biblical text.

As for my third goal of helping students to value Scripture's relevance for their everyday lives, in my OT Survey course, the culminating project for the class was a project that required students to develop a biblical theology of their major. This project required students, among other things, to read the chapter that was most closely related to their major from Dockery & Thornbury's *Shaping a Christian Worldview*, interviewing a faculty member within their discipline, and researching and reflecting upon relevant biblical texts, all as a prelude to writing a personalized expression of a theology of their major.

Again, my main point in sharing these projects is to say that with my course redesigns, I tried to be especially attentive that my course activities matched up with what my highest goals for my students really

were, the ways that I most hoped that my students would be equipped and changed by the course long after the course was over. In other words, I was trying to focus on learning that I hoped would be enduring and not as forgettable as I feared that some of my course content may have been previously.

Turning from “enduring,” let me say a few things about the word “engaging.” I think that we best have a hope that our students’ learning will be enduring if our students are fully engaged with the process of learning. So while I was redesigning these courses, I pressed not only to present engaging content but to use engaging teaching methods, using principles of active learning as best I could and seeking to use a variety of approaches. Although in past years I used a fairly limited selection of activities in Old and New Testament Survey (typically lecture, question and answer, tests, usually one project), in this course redesign work I tried to mix it up—and not simply for the purpose of “mixing it up” but in order to engage my students more fully. So I used YouTube videos, peer evaluations, an online learning platform that is aimed at promoting Bible literacy called Biblemesh, debate, one-minute papers, guest speakers, Jing screencasts, and poster presentations. I gave feedback to students via MP3 audio files, which allowed me to give more extensive

and more personalized feedback on student projects. Students used the library's ArtStor database to find and analyze classical paintings related to OT texts. We went to the movies and used the film as an opportunity to do biblical-theological reflection on contemporary culture. Students gathered lyrics of contemporary worship songs that they used in a Sunday service in order to compare them with various categories of the psalms, Israel's ancient hymnbook. I also wanted students to have a strong sense that the Christian faith is deeply rooted in time and space and so, when my NT Survey students were studying the book of Acts, I took them to the full-size replica of the Parthenon in Nashville so that they might have a more sensory experience of the religious context of the first-century Greco-Roman world. An especially important strategy that framed most of what I did was a teaching strategy called team-based learning (or TBL), which relies upon a heavy use of small-group activities within a competitive context, including the use of a game-like scratch-off form for team quizzes. Within the environment of these teams, the students who were almost all freshman students forged new friendships at Union and came to value the importance of learning about the Bible within the context of a faith community, another important longterm goal that I have for my students.

In sum, when I think about learning that is significant, I think about learning that engages students both in terms of content and method and that endures as time goes by, continuing to exert an influence on students in terms of how they think, what they can do, and what they value. I am certainly still in process in terms of how I work all this out in my teaching (and I think I always will be), but I hope that my reflections on this most recent part of my journey might be of some help to you and might help facilitate our group discussions today.