

ACTIVE LEARNING FOR RUSSIAN EVANGELICAL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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When we think about a good evangelical school or seminary we imagine an ideal picture of a large, well-illuminated classroom with a wise teacher standing in front of attentive students seated in rows who are trying to catch and memorize every concept and idea their teacher shares. Then we return to reality and see certain gaps and problems in our evangelical educational institutions. We think: How can we find a way to improve our situation and bring it up to our ideal? But there is also a deeper question: How can we be sure that our image of ideal education is a real ideal for evangelical education today? Let us consider how our picture of ideal education was formed and what influenced our perception of what it should be.

Factors that Influenced the Formation of Education in the Former Soviet Union

Because of the specific historical development of our countries, and because of their location between Western and Eastern civilizations, the approach to education in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus was influenced by several factors. At first, education was imported from the Byzantine Empire. It was founded on the Greek Christian tradition. But later Russian education was alternately influenced by several Eastern traditions (Mongolian, Turkish, etc.), and by Western educational models, especially since Peter the Great «opened a window on Europe.» Western education has been the dominant influence since the 1700s, so recently a Russian Orthodox priest-educator said ironically: «Russian ed-



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ucational institutions are copies traced from the Catholic schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries» (Kuraev 2001). This evaluation might be close to reality, but any culture would surely add its own peculiarities to any system, theory, or philosophy it imports from the outside. «As the details of the problems of moral education naturally vary within national circumstances, so too philosophical grounds for their solution must vary» (Rorty 1998, 10-11).

Both positive and negative influences of the West and East on Russian culture and its educational system caused Russian national educators to look for a culturally appropriate educational approach. Mikhail Lomonosov (1711-1765), the first Russian academician and founder of the Russian national educational system, contended for an education that would fit the national character; he pointed out the role of language in both nurture and nature. A number of Lomonosov's educational ideas were rooted in the writings of the great Czech educator Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670). Knowing the collectivist character of Russians, Lomonosov argued that teachers should let students help each other during class time, but work independently during exams (Lomonosov 1989).

Konstantin Ushinsky (1824-1871), the founder of Russian scientific pedagogy, contended that, «there is no such thing as a universal man,... or a universal educational system»; every nation has its own idea of a person. Other nations' heritage is precious and a valuable source of learning, but we should not try

to copy other nations' life. We certainly can use some educational ideas, but we should rework these ideas critically and creatively for our own situation. We should not mix science, which is common for all people, with education/nurture, which should be culturally specific¹ (Ushinsky 1988, 195-256; Vasilieva 2001, 296).

In the same way, several Western Christian educators agree that the «best choice East European educators can make is to not adopt the traditional residential Western approach to theological education, at least not without very serious adaptation» (Elliot 2000, 9-10). Charter writes, «The most redemptive role for Westerners in the inevitable partnership of East and West in the development of theological education... must be one of encouragement, intentionally encouraging... educators not to allow the West, unchallenged, to replicate the educational models and styles that they have implemented in countries around the world» (Charter 1997, 261).

DESCRIPTION OF THE PRESENT EDUCATIONAL MODEL

Let us first analyze the typical pedagogical approach practiced in educational institutions in the former Soviet Union today. Every school and teacher have certain preferences and peculiarities, yet there are some common tendencies and characteristics in their educational approach.

¹ From here on, all translations from Russian are the author's own.

Teacher-Centered Education

The classical Western educational approach that has greatly influenced Russian national education is mostly teacher-centered. The locus of authority in the traditional classroom resides almost solely in the teacher. Teachers, in turn, are controlled by an organization. The Russian national tendency toward authoritarian leadership reinforces placing a high level of authority on the teacher and educational hierarchy. The teacher's responsibilities are to plan all class activities, preferably in detail. The teacher is expected to gather, present, and explain course content, usually in the form of a lecture; and the teacher uses traditional assessment techniques to make sure the students understand the main concepts of the course and memorize necessary data.

The teacher or institution chooses which textbooks the students should use, although the teacher may verbally encourage students to reach beyond required literature. However, classical assess-

ment techniques that are mainly concerned with the student's memorization and integration of course basics do not motivate students to do much self-directed exploration into deeper layers of knowledge. Besides, usually there is no way to assess and reward such initiatives, and students are infrequently given time or access to information resources for self-directed learning.

The main feature of teacher-centered teaching is that the teacher is responsible for the thorough study of a certain body of knowledge in the area of his/her course. The teacher is expected to access available information out of oceans of accumulated data and then digest the particles of information gathered. This is expected to be done according to the teacher's institutional and personal theological framework and worldview.

Finally, the teacher is supposed to present the digested information to the students in an extremely short, concise, and understandable form. The assumption behind this approach is that the amount of knowledge is great and ever-grow-

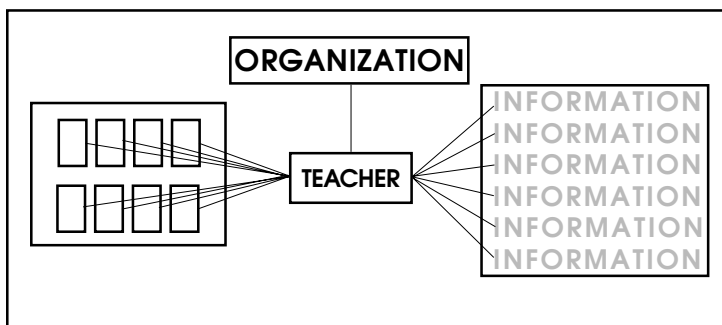


Figure 1. Teacher-Centered Education

ing, while class time is short and the students' ability to assimilate the information is very limited.

In the classical education model, students are expected to be active acceptors of knowledge, but often teachers are frustrated when they see students' passivity. As a result, some teachers wrongly conclude that the students are brain-dead. This assumption «leads to pedagogues that deaden their brain. When we teach by dripping information into their passive forms, students who arrive in the classroom alive and well become passive consumers of knowledge» (Palmer 1998, 42).

Organizationally-Controlled Education

It is commonly assumed that it is very important that all of the teaching in an evangelical institution should be in line with the theology of that institution. Then, too, the teaching in a certain school is expected to conform to the theology and practice of the confessional body that instituted the school.

Classical education provides certain advantages in this area. First, it makes sure that students learn basic data, knowledge, and skills within a more or less unified educational approach. Second, it seemingly provides effective structures to protect education from heresies, since classical education is not only teacher-controlled, but also controlled by the denominational organization that established the school.

Such approaches were developed after the second century A.D., when emerging heresies were threat-

ening the unity of Christianity. Ignatius of Antioch was the first author who stressed the authority of a bishop as the main defender of right doctrine (Catholic Encyclopedia <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07644a.htm>).

The problem is that the idea of centralized authority has been developed to an extreme within a number of traditional ecclesiastical bodies. Therefore, church hierarchies and their systems of restrictions and regulations often hinder the natural development of a church body. Another problem is that several cult-type pseudo-Christian organizations, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, use organizationally-controlled education for their greater success. Teacher- and organizationally-controlled education allows cult leadership to sift the information flow to their students. In this way cults can form and program their students in a certain fashion in order to reach their organizational goals effectively without facing much opposition and dealing with hard issues within a broader body of knowledge.²

Passive Learning

Classical thinkers of Western civilization, such as Socrates and Plato, greatly emphasized learning through dialogue, where a teacher tries to «bring forth from his followers a truth he believed they already possessed.» But in the proc-

² Today many Orthodox seminary students tell evangelical students that they will not read or listen to anything from evangelicals because all non-Orthodox literature is heresy for them. However, they say they are ready to share their opinion.

ess of our civilization's development, especially as a result of the expansion of knowledge during the industrial revolution, educators «no longer saw their role as Socratic midwives, laboring to bring forth knowledge from their students. Instead, they adopted a different approach, endeavoring to deliver knowledge directly to the uninitiated» (Meyers and Jones 1993, 4).

Therefore, classical teacher-centered education developed within Western civilization as the best available choice for the modern age. Classical education reflects the main characteristics of modernity: dichotomized thinking, characterized by as detailed a compartmentalization of knowledge as possible, with a tendency to arrange everything in certain neat and precise systems of thought, and the use of exact measurements and scientific-like descriptions.

Students in the classical teacher-centered classroom are expected to sit as still as possible, causing minimal disturbance to fellow students, the lecturing teacher, and the whole educational process. The best thing students can do is first accept the incoming information, then integrate it into their system of thought. Then the student must decide how she/he can apply the learned information in practice and «return» the learned information and/or indications of learned skills to the teacher during quizzes and exams.

Unlike certain traditional Russian teachers, the majority of Western teachers expect students to ask questions freely during class time, which enhances class dynamics and

adds some diversity to the learning process. However, the students' questions or comments are usually expected to be short and concise. The students' questions here are considered a means to help the student clarify certain concepts or thoughts. Usually there is not much time left for discussion within teacher-centered education, because the teacher is most concerned with delivering as much valuable information as possible.

«Confessional Truths» are Presented in Ready Forms

Classical education strives to find and present information, definitions, ideas, and theories in clear and polished form. Such an approach helps to save time so that more information can be learned. Clear and well-organized content helps students develop their own thinking in a clear and well-organized form. The course content is expected to be accepted, understood, and memorized by the students. There is not much time to «reinvent the wheel» – to go through the process of discovering the truth for each student individually. Moreover, there is concern that such reinvention could possibly lead to unexpected results and to some foggy and non-conforming inferences. The class may «get out of hand.»

However, there could be several problems with such «truth-teaching» in predetermined form. There are a number of evangelical confessional bodies in the former Soviet Union. Although all of them usually share a significant part of their beliefs, there are still certain peculiarities

pertaining to each confession's belief system. Often believers tend to emphasize these peculiarities over other commonly accepted beliefs. Hence, evangelicals have to deal with a number of different confessional «sets of truth.» Each theological system seems to be consistent, but still some evangelical theological systems do not go well with others. Students are left to wonder: Are there several confessional «truths» or just one «God's Truth?» The classical education model is good at presenting and guarding various «confessional truths»; it is a good tool for indoctrination, but it does not provide effective structures and methodologies to solve inter-denominational theological tensions in the search for the multi-dimensional God's Truth.

DEVELOPMENT OF ACTIVE LEARNING THROUGH DIALOGUE, DISCUSSION, AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Since Western civilization entered the postmodern age, experience reveals that classical educational models are becoming less and less compatible with the new demands of society's development. «Researchers and educators have quite dramatically changed their views of learning and knowledge in the past several decades» (Loewenberg and Cohen 1999, 7). A paradigm shift was initiated by changes in the way we think about learning and teaching. While the old pedagogical approach was concerned with the transmission of knowledge into presumably «emp-

ty vessels,» which emphasized «the efficient flow of information down the pipeline,» active learning uses such metaphors as dialogue and communication, which emphasize «the interactive, cooperative, relational accepts of teaching and learning» (Tiberius 1986, 148).

Changes also influence the area of theological education. Well-built walls between denominational structures and their well-defined theologies are falling down; more bridges are built instead, and more relationships are established. Clearly defined terms, definitions, and concepts seem to be too flat. Previously developed theological, mental, and social structures and concepts do not correspond well with the present realities of the physical, social, and spiritual life of believers and their communities. Leadership structures and their theological institutions can no longer efficiently control and manage the information flow into their adherents anymore. Multiple ways of communication and information acquisition, storage, accumulation, and transfer, allow a majority of believers to access and exchange information independently, bypassing established structures.

As a result of these changes, students are different today! We can blame them; we can scold them; but they will not be like students used to be in the 1980s!

We also have different teachers today. The controlling functions

³ For example, certain foreign teachers and local teachers trained in the West are spreading liberal theology among their students, but denominational leadership does not recognize it.

of educational structures often fail to recognize and deal with unhealthy teaching within their educational institutions.³ The very foundations of previously established leadership and educational structures are shaking. How can evangelicals and their schools survive such a paradigm shift?

Development of a Russian Evangelical Philosophy of Education

In order to be effective educators we need to develop and implement a Bible-based, culturally appropriate, solid, and relevant educational philosophy. Not the teaching of ready concepts, but the ability to think critically and creatively and make informed decisions should be at the heart of evangelical theological education. We need to replace the banking concept of education (Freire 2002, 71-86), which is typical of the Western classical style, as well as the typical communistic educational approach, with various forms of active learning.

Multiple approaches have been developed to enhance learning and teaching and make it active: learning by experience (Dewey 1897, 1938); experiential learning (Kolb 1984; Jackson and Caffarella 1994; Vella 2000; and others); problem-posing, discussion-based education (Christensen, Garvin, and Sweet 1991) that responds to the «essence of the learner's consciousness – intentionality – rejects communication and embodies communication» (Freire 2002, 79); learning through dialogue (Freire 2002,

87-124; Vella 1995; Senge 2000; Brookfield 1987, and many others); self-directed learning (Knowles 1978; Rogers 1994); person-centered, self-guided learning and non-directive teaching (Rogers 1989, 1994; Fairfield 1977; Joyce, Well, and Calhoun 2000, 285-300); deschooling society (Illich 1972); learning as a process of transformation (Mezirow 1991); learning in a learning community (Senge 1990, 2000).

However, no matter how great and effective the educational approaches developed in different cultural contexts, we should not blindly adopt a «foreign educational system, no matter how well-built and well thought through,» although we should certainly use the experiences of other nations as a «precious heritage for all» (Ushinsky 1988, 195-256). Therefore, we need first to investigate our real educational roots and then think how we can apply the «precious heritage» from other educational systems into our cultural context.

A few of the national roots that we should consider are: the Russian traditional way of holistic learning (*Russian Christian Humanitarian Institute*, St. Petersburg 1990s); bringing up disciples instead of teaching students (Russian Orthodox concept of education); national education as art built on science, emphasizing nature and nurture, and the role of work in nurture (Ushinsky 1988); national education and the role of a model in teaching (Ganelin 1974, 314-52); the role of community in education and personality development

(Makarenko 1955; 1959, 397- 451); and the role of moral and ethical development (Suchomlinsky 1970).

Since the 1960s some Soviet educators have also developed methods of active learning. In the 1970s and 1980s Schedrovitsky was actively developing a theory and practice of system/action methodology (Schedrovitsky 1992, 68-73). His ideas were further developed and applied by Zinchenko (2000). Two groups of educators in Leningrad (Association of the Developers of Play-Social Modeling) and in Moscow (Organizational-Active Play) achieved notable results in developing active education.⁴ Regrettably, the active learning approach was not officially accepted within the Soviet Union's educational system, although the findings of Soviet educators were found valuable and welcomed abroad (Galliamov 1995). These are only a few sources to begin with.

There is also surprising diversity and creativity within the contemporary pedagogical realm in Russia. Ushinsky and other national educators emphasize *knowing the learner* by means of developing a personal relationship with him/her and by using all available scientific methods and approaches:⁵ his/her personality, surroundings, abilities, etc., whereas a number of Western educators emphasize the need for «*learning more about the subject and students they teach*»

(Loewenberg and Cohen 1999, 3). Evangelical educators should have a holistic approach, therefore we need to emphasize both knowing the learner and knowing about the learner. We should broaden our perspective and use various approaches and theories as the source for developing a Russian evangelical philosophy of education.

Developing Learning-Centered Education

How can we avoid the dangers of teacher-centered and organizational-controlled education that allow non-biblical views to be promoted easily, and where contradictions between the theologies and practices of various branches of the evangelical movement seem to be left unsolved? What do we need to do to create dynamic education that would be relevant to fast changing life and compatible with the tremendous flow of contemporary communication? Evangelical education in Russia should not only go through the narrow channel – the mind and heart of the teacher; it should utilize all possible information channels. Every learner in the class should be involved in information acquisition and exchange in the classroom. Education should become learning-centered and Truth-centered!

Evangelical theological education in Russia should be located in the middle of an information field,

⁴ M. Birnshtein, I Syrioezhkina, S. Gidrovich, V. Ephimova, V. Komarova, R. Zhukova, V. Platova and others were working on these projects.

⁵ Ushinsky was the first to suggest using anthropology in pedagogy. He understood

anthropology as a conglomerate of a number of sciences: anatomy, physiology, psychology, logic, history, philology, and upbringing, etc. (Ushinsky 1989, 7-38).

at the center of information streams. In order to provide this kind of education, a sizable percentage of the school budget should be directed toward the development of a school library. Maximum efforts should be made to acquire all available evangelical and Orthodox literature, as well as relevant secular literature, in philosophy, education, sociology, psychology, and so on. Whenever possible, evangelical schools should establish working cooperation with public, pedagogical, and academic libraries, so that students can have easy access to these libraries' resources.

But the most critical, and probably the least expensive, source of information today is the Internet. A web laboratory with a large net-

work of PCs with a high-speed, reliable Internet connection needs to be set up in every evangelical educational institution. Today this is not an option, but a necessity.

Why is access to information so important for learning-centered education? Active learning requires easy access to information; the better the access – the more active the learning. Learning is energized by access to various sources of knowledge. Active learning thrives on multiple ways of accessing information; in active learning information should be equally available to each learner, not only to the teacher. Active learning begins with information acquisition and occurs in the process of interaction between the learner and various sources of

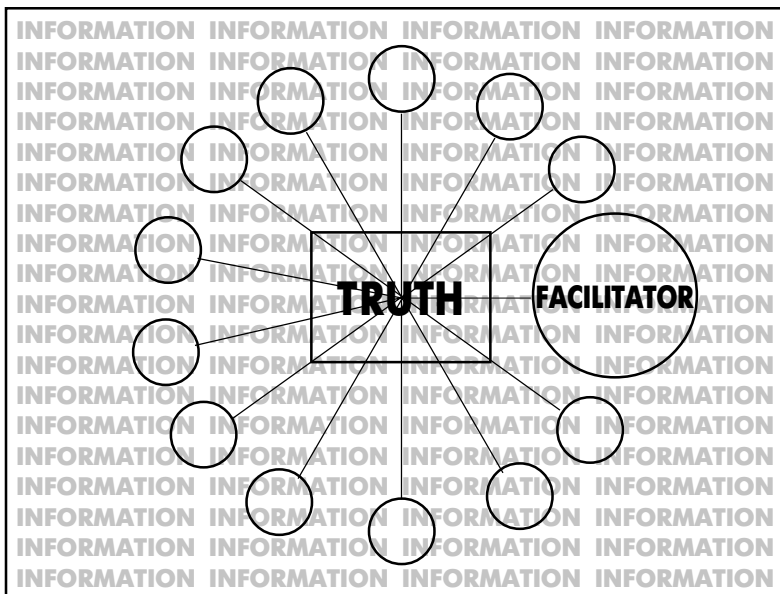


Figure 2. Truth and Learning-Centered Education

knowledge, such as another learner, and/or teacher-facilitator, who is also one of the learners. The participants learn from teachers, and vice versa.

A very important distinctive of active evangelical education should be Scripture as the measure of all knowledge. All other paper-based, wave-based, magnetic, and electronic, etc. sources of information should be evaluated and measured from a biblical standpoint. Scripture should be the center of the natural and social environment surrounding the learner. Active learning uses a variety of methods, tools, and approaches to learning that greatly intensify the educational process. Since active learning is not teacher-controlled or organizationally controlled, it provides a method, environment, and encouragement for the community of believers in a genuine search for God's Truth.

What Is Active Learning?

One can see many examples and simple forms of active learning in Russia today. Active learning occurs when students avidly discuss learned information during class breaks, meals, and in the dorm. Learning is active when students process and apply what they have learned as they encounter challenging life situations, such as conversations with Orthodox believers, or encounters with representatives of various sects. Vella uses the term *praxis* to describe effective learning through dialogue: «Praxis means an action with reflection. It combines inductive and deductive approaches to learning.

The cycle of praxis is (1) do; (2) look at what you did; (3) reflect using theory; (4) change; (5) do, and so on» (Vella 1995, 180-81).

How can we make sure that our students do not fail in the course of unexpected, challenging situations in their life and ministry? We should practice active learning! We should model similar challenges during class time under the leadership of an expert-teacher-facilitator and promote access to helpful information channels. Active learning suggests the active participation of each student in class activities. Active learning suggests the creative use of a great variety of educational methods and activities,⁶ which may include, but is not limited to various forms of class discussions and dialogues (Freire 2002; Vella 1995; Senge 1990, 2000; Brookfield and Preskill 1999; etc.). Other examples are: group and individual presentations, role playing, case studies (Vella 1995); use of information technologies in cooperative learning (Polat 2001); collaborative learning (Bruffee 1999; Brookfield 1995, 160-184); problem-based learning (Joyce *et al.* 2000; Kesley 1992; Cookson 2002); simulation games, panel discussions, and other activities. There is also a place for dynamic lectures in active learning (Brown and Atkins 1988), especially if the lectures skillfully address cognitive and affective do-

⁶ Here I have mentioned just a few educational activities; further exploration of this subject would be very helpful. There is growing amount of literature concerning learning activities available in English, and in Russian secular educational literature.

mains of learning (Bloom *et al.* 1956, 1984, 4-17).

One of the central goals of active learning is developing critical thinkers who will be able to develop informed, intellectually (Gardener 1993) and emotionally intelligent (Goleman 1995) critical reflection on the basis of incoming information. Using an active learning approach, a student will be able to operate with concepts, make decisions, and undertake appropriate actions (Brookfield 1987, 1995, 1999).

Active learning suggests that the learner take the initiative in learning together with the teacher. Malcolm Knowles, Karl Rodger, and a number of others emphasize various forms of self-directed learning. Zankov⁷ *et al.* contends that education should not «form the students» as traditional education attempted. Active learning is called on to help a growing person unfold and develop spiritual, emotional, and intellectual abilities; educators are to create a fruitful and friendly environment for the development of these abilities in the learner (Zankov 1963).

Goncharov, Shatalov and Schetin developed very interesting ideas of collaboration pedagogy, which removes authoritarianism from the classroom and centers on the learner's development and his/her environment (Genike 2001). Central

ideas in their approach include: (1) a person is in an active relationship with the world and himself/herself; (2) a person's active relationship is revealed during the process of self-actualization; (3) a person develops according to his/her call/destiny.

The logical schema of the traditional Russian educational process was: subject matter-teacher-disciple/learner. Collaboration pedagogy places the learner both at the beginning and the end of the educational process: disciple/learner-learner's destiny-subject-lesson-disciple/learner. Mezirow's idea about learning for transformation echoes the idea of collaboration pedagogy and may be used to describe the process of self-actualization:

Becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing the structures of habitual expectations to make a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective possible; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings (Mezirow 1991, 167).

Nowadays Genike calls collaboration pedagogy one of the foundations for his person-oriented education model. Other sources for ideas on person-oriented education are derived from the writings of J. Piaget, L. Vygotsky, A. Brown, Still, K. Meredith, C. Temple, etc. Genike fostered most aspects of active learning applied to the Russian educational environment (Genike 2001).

⁷ Leonid V. Zankov was a disciple of Lev Vygotsky; his research was on the relationship between memory, education, and development. He created the Developmental System of Education. Zankov developed Vygotsky's idea that education should go one step ahead of the learner's development to stretch his/her abilities. Today about 200,000 schoolteachers use Zankov's approach.

Some Implications of Active Learning

Teacher as Facilitator

Teachers in active learning become facilitators. The role of a facilitator is not to do all the talking, but to gently lead the participants through various educational activities.

The course syllabus in active learning is less rigid, somewhat less detailed, but still well planned. The facilitator should have several options prepared and ready to use, depending on how the class flow develops. The course syllabus is a more or less detailed map of the course area, not a detailed description of a single road from point A to point B. Of course, the facilitator should know his/her course subject very well. Since class discussion may enter certain areas quite unexpectedly, the facilitator should be able to exhibit the necessary expertise to lead a group through it. No one can know everything; however the facilitator should be sufficiently familiar with certain areas of knowledge to be able to give participants guidance and direct them to sources of information.

Promoting discussion is one of the main ways of teaching in the classroom. Brookfield and Preskill discuss fifteen benefits of discussion:

(1) It helps students explore a diversity of perspectives. (2) It increases students' awareness of and tolerance for ambiguity or complexity. (3) It helps students recognize and investigate their as-

sumptions. (4) It encourages attentive, respectful listening. (5) It develops new appreciation for continuing differences. (6) It increases intellectual agility. (7) It helps students become connected to a topic. (8) It shows respect for a student's voice and experience. (9) It helps students learn the processes and habits of democratic discourse. (10) It affirms students as co-creators of knowledge. (11) It develops capacity for the clear communication of ideas and meanings. (12) It develops habits of collaborative knowledge. (13) It increases breadth and makes students more empathic. (14) It helps students develop skills of synthesis and integration. (15) It leads to transformation (Brookfield and Preskill 1999, 22-23).

Teaching is an art founded on science (Ushinsky 1989, 7-38). Teaching through facilitation is even more so. In order to become an efficient facilitator, the teacher should learn by practicing necessary facilitation skills.

Non-verbal skills play an even stronger role in the class dynamic. The facilitator should learn to maintain culturally proper eye contact with everyone as he/she speaks; give equal attention to each participant; avoid favoritism; freely move around the room, creating a relaxed atmosphere; actively react to what participants say by nodding, smiling, etc.

Verbal communication skills are very important as well. The art of facilitation includes learning to ask encouraging, open-ended questions, and providing a safe learning environment in the classroom, so that

students may freely and respectfully build on each other's comments and those of the facilitator. Voice, timing, speed, speech clarity, etc., all play an important role in active learning facilitation. A good facilitator makes participants talk more than he/she does, allowing participants to answer each other's questions. Paraphrasing and emphasizing someone's comments, reinforcing participant's comments by sharing similar experiences, summarizing the discussion – all such skills are valuable for successful facilitating (CEDPA 1994, 73).

While Western educators provide great techniques and methodologies for active learning, Ushinsky emphasized the necessity of knowing a person «in reality, with all his/[her] weaknesses and in all his/[her] greatness» (Ushinsky 1989, 38). A number of Russian educators developed these ideas. There is a strong trend among Western educators today toward a holistic education as well. Parker Palmer emphasizes that, «good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of a teacher.» No matter what form of teaching we use, active teachers are «truly present in the classroom, deeply engaged with their students and their subjects» (Palmer 1998, 10).

A significant part of the teacher's authority in traditional education often comes from his/her position and the hierarchical status ascribed to that position. But the authority of a teacher-facilitator «comes from the teacher's personal, spiritual and professional

characteristics, it is not an ascribed authority, but rather achieved.» Ultimately such authority: ... comes from the teacher's inner life... Authority comes as I reclaim my identity and integrity, remembering my selfhood and my sense of vocation. Then teaching can come from the depth of my own truth – and the truth that is within my students has a chance to respond in kind (Palmer 1988, 33).

A friendly working atmosphere in the evangelical educational institution, a climate of genuine cooperation, deep personal relationships, and provision for the fruitful realization of each teacher's unique gifts greatly contribute to active learning. «Relationships between faculty must become less purely professional and more based on friendship» (Banks 1999, 186).

How Do People Think?

Dewey states that «education upon its ineffectual side is concerned with cultivating the attitude of reflective thinking»; that is, preserving and enhancing reflection. Information is an undigested burden until it is understood; only comprehended material becomes knowledge. Thus, «there is an important distinction between verbal, mechanical memory and what older writers called 'judicious memory'» (Dewey 1933, in Hickman and Alexander 1998, 274).

Dewey argues that the human mind has a native tendency toward reflective and logical thinking at every stage of growth since birth.

Hence, the role of the teacher is the transformation of natural powers into expert powers, and the transformation of the learner's curiosity and sporadic suggestions into thorough inquiry. The psychological and logical sides are not opposed to each other, but rather interdependent and connected to each other (Dewey 1933, 275-77).

One can use the example of a personal computer to explain how people think. One can install a diskette with some information into a PC and even open it and display its contents on the monitor screen. Only temporary memory will be used for it. All this information will be lost unless that information is processed and saved on the hard drive. We retain and store information by processing it, converting it into personalized knowledge. It is important to make multiple connections to new information; it helps improve memory and eases future access to the information. Various associations, emotions, images, and actions also help to retain new information. Dewey calls this process «reflective thinking,» or «psychological thinking.»⁸ The educator's task is to evoke logical thinking in the learners by teaching through the «regulation of natural and spontaneous processes of observation, suggestion and testing; that is, thinking as an art» (Dewey 1933, 277).

God has given us the ability to think logically, and He has also given us a desire to learn. God talked to

Adam; meaningful talking cannot happen without logic (Ge 1-2). The desire to learn was so strong in the first people that it was even abused by Satan and got Adam and Eve into trouble (Ge 3). On many occasions God called individuals and groups of people to think and to process the information He gave them: «Do you know... (Job 38-41); «Whose portrait is this?» (Mt 22:20). From the very first days of Adam, God did not «install» all the vocabulary in Adam's head – He asked Adam to name the animals (learning by doing, by experience). Adam had to use his ability to speak, his creativity, imagination, analysis and comparison. Thus, the first human language was developed.

God's Truth Discovered Through the Learning Process

How do we know God? We can only *know about* God as we study the Bible. But we can genuinely *know God* as we enter into a relationship with Him. Similarly, Truth can only be truly known through a holistic relationship with the God of Truth. Our ultimate goal is not merely to gather knowledge about the Truth; such learning would be simply a process of accommodating information about God and the Bible.

Jesus said, «I am the way and the truth and the life» (Jn 14:6). True spiritual knowledge and wisdom come through relationships; we understand God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit as

⁸ Other terms: creative thinking, critical thinking, analysis and synthesis, applying in practice, etc.

we comprehend and perceive the loving and serving relationships between the persons in the Trinity. «Knowledge comes insofar as the object known is within the knower» (Aquinas).

Jesus' call to truth is a call to communicate – «with Him, with each other, with creation and its Creator» (Palmer 1993, 49). God calls us to Himself; every true believer is saved, born again, and becomes part of God's ultimate creation – His Church. Therefore, when Christ invites us to follow Him, He expects us as a community of believers to grow in the intimate knowledge of His Truth in relationship with Him.

During active learning in the classroom, which is one of the means of our spiritual growth, we are not only searching for Truth, but Truth is searching for us as well. When we find spiritual insights in the application of Scripture to our life situation, we not only know and grasp Truth, but Truth knows and grasps us! «Ultimately, I do not master truth, but truth masters me.... Here we know even as we are known» (Palmer 1993, 53). The more we know Him, the more He knows us.

Learning and collaborative searching for Truth should be at the center of each theological education class! Both special revelation – Scripture; and general revelation – human knowledge about God's creation described by science, need to be the central subject of various fields of evangelical education. However, Scripture should stand as the absolute authority and standard of all knowledge.

One could argue: Why do we need to search for the Truth, don't we have the Bible? Yes, we have the Bible, where Jesus calls Himself Truth. God's Word - the Bible - is also called Truth. Yet Jesus wants us to have an ever growing personal and communal relationship with Him!

One of the main ways to develop such relationships is through meaningful and spiritual interaction with His Word. The Bible teaches us that fellowship with Jesus Christ should be both personal and communal. Fellowship should include not only a relationship with Christ, but also a relationship between the members of the community around Him. Whenever His disciples are gathered in His name, He is among them.

Throughout the church's history, various «denominational truths» have been developed and established through this process. Even before all of the New Testament books were written and gathered together, true believers were gathering together, listening to the words of Christ, sharing these words and discovering what they meant to them, personally and corporately. Thus, they were finding appropriate implications of Eternal Truth for their changing circumstances. We should greatly appreciate the tremendous efforts of previous generations of believers, who were often in very hard circumstances while they reflected on Scripture and arranged their reflections in the form of confessions and creeds. However, we should not mechanically adopt their reflections. Each of us personally and

as a part of local community of believers should rediscover the spiritual and practical meaning of God's Word and church confessions and implement them in everyday life. That is one more reason why learning in theological educational institutions should be active.

A great advantage of active, Truth-centered learning is that in a genuine collaborative search for Truth and interaction with it, elements of heresy, sectarianism, theological legalism, or liberalism are more likely to be discovered and rejected by the participants. The process of holistic analysis done by a network of communities of believers, such as classrooms and church Bible study groups, actively searching for Truth and its implications for everyday life, is an excellent means of protecting biblical theology from mistakes and corruption.

For instance, the teacher-facilitator would not be able to indoctrinate learners with legalistic or liberal ideas during Truth-centered active learning. Participants would be able to clarify the teacher's theological position during class discussion and present their theological position as well; no human should have a monopoly on Truth in active education. If the teacher insisted on his/her position, participants could easily disagree and reestablish the biblical view.

Moreover, participants could consider the teacher's theological position within their own church communities and raise the question as to whether or not a certain teacher should be welcome to teach.

Some Suggestions for Effective Learning and Teaching

Here I am going to share only a few of many possible suggestions for active learning as it may be applied to evangelical educational institutions in the former Soviet Union. These suggestions are intended to encourage evangelical educators to creatively implement an active learning approach in their particular situation.

Class Time is Short: How Can Participants Learn More?

A person can utter only 60 to 180 words a minute. All teachers know that it is better to speak slowly in order to be well understood. Teaching with an interpreter only allows communication of 35 to 70 words a minute. One double-spaced page contains only 300–350 words. Therefore, during one hour of lecturing a teacher is usually able to «say» only about ten to twenty pages. A teacher is usually able to «communicate» only 350 to 700 pages during an average course. That is a drop in the bucket compared to the huge amount of information that could benefit the learners in our schools! Moreover, if the affective and cognitive domains of education taxonomy are poorly addressed, listeners retain only 7% of «lectured» information after several days. Why do we keep wasting precious class time on lectures?

How can class time efficiency be improved? Write the information to be communicated in concise form

and give it to the class participants well in advance. Lectures may be sent by e-mail, or course materials may be posted on WebPages, so that participants can download and read them at a convenient place and time. If materials are in a foreign language, they may be sent to the seminary for translation. Students could get credit for such work and it would be a good learning experience. Participants should be allowed to read lectures in the comfort of their homes!

Instructors should consult with the school to find out what literature is available in Russian for the course. Other sources of information should be suggested to participants as well. Expectations for advance reading should be clearly communicated to the students.

Likewise, it should be clearly understood what they are to write as a reflection of their reading, and what areas of knowledge they should explore before they enter class on the first day. In this way they would accumulate a great deal of information even before entering the classroom. Later this wealth of accumulated information will be processed and assimilated in dialogue and through practical application with other participants in the classroom.

There are many books that would be extremely helpful for evangelical theological education, but they need to be translated into Russian. Evangelical schools in the former Soviet Union need to establish working horizontal cooperation between themselves and their foreign counterparts that would

allow them to get copyright permission to translate the most needed textbooks. Local educational institutions could share the translation job and then share the translated materials. In this way, evangelical educational institutions would eventually accumulate a great wealth of materials. If posted on school websites, these materials would become a great source of learning for all Russian readers!

The Need for Quality Course Building

Although the teacher in an active learning setting is not lecturing most of the time, course preparation requires even more skill and work. The course syllabus needs to be completely prepared and structured at least nine months before the class session. A number of texts and other materials may need to be translated and provided to each participant in paper copy or on a CD. WebPages for each course with all course materials and helpful links are strongly recommended.

The course package or/and course WebPages should include the full course syllabus with a detailed description of pre-course assignments; a port for the participant's applications; pages for the participant's homework postings; autobiographies and pictures of the facilitator and participants; a chat room for participants; and various links to relevant resources. The course facilitator is responsible for providing all the necessary materials in digital format for course WebPages.

Local and foreign teachers should become familiar with the educational philosophy and practical approach of the school where they are going to teach; this description needs to be posted on educational institution's website as well.

Pre-Class Learning and Preparation

This stage is very important – the process of *acquisition of information*. Most of what is going on during traditional education class time should happen during this period. Learning should start right after the applicants are approved for participation in a particular course. Such approval-registration could be done in person, by mail, or through the Internet. The participants should read all the class textbooks, visit helpful websites and become acquainted with other related Internet resources, share their autobiographies with other participants or post them on class WebPages, and begin interaction with each other.

The participants may write and send to the teacher, or post on class WebPages, all pre-course written assignments: book reports, reflection papers, practical assignment reports, etc. While working on these assignments, participants will be learning from each other's performance. Again, it is so important to maintain good communication and information exchange between the participants and the facilitator.

⁹ This is the ideal number according to research and the Bible. The class should have no less than seven and no more than fifteen participants.

Classroom Learning

The classroom period is no less an important stage; it is a process of *assimilation and integration of information* (Dewey 1897). It is a process of *transformation of accumulated information* into deep knowledge and understanding through various modes of experience: analysis and critical thinking, dialogue, practical experience and application, feeling involvement, artistic presentation, and other modes of active learning by experience.

Since active learning is quite different from the traditional educational approach, teachers should learn and practice their facilitation skills, develop their own active learning and teaching style, and learn in fellowship with other facilitators. This process will surely take time. Sometimes it is hard to be a facilitator and an expert at the same time. Facilitating the learning process is an art; not every teacher can do it successfully. In some cases it might be worth trying to divide the teacher's role into facilitator and resource-person roles. Both should practice teaching a class together before they teach a college or seminary course. It is better if each class has eight to fifteen participants.⁹

Learning in the classroom should take place in an atmosphere of «immersion.» Therefore, it is better if participants live in a campus dorm for the period of the course session; usually each intensive course takes two weeks. All the participants should use meal times to

fellowship together with their facilitator, resource person, other seminary staff, workers, visiting ministers, and each other. Besides the four hours in the classroom five days a week during two weeks, participants will be involved in fellowship and learning through dialogue for at least five hours every day. It is preferable that the facilitator and resource person stay all day and remain in fellowship and dialogue with the participants. A sizable part of learning, «fellowship, and dialogue is expected to take place in the library and in common rooms. Short devotions should precede each class; musical performances, news sharing, and fellowship may follow common meals; evening fellowship, conversation, and recreational activities are also much encouraged. Active learning suggests that all kinds of productive dialogues that go on throughout the day between participants, facilitators, resource persons, faculty, ministers, etc.

are an essential part of the educational process.

CONCLUSION

An imam said, «Our children learn from the times more than they learn from us.» Each period of history requires an adequate approach to teaching and learning. Teaching and learning modes developed during modern times have become ineffective in our postmodern times. If we are not constantly learning to teach and learn together with our learners, someone else will teach the new generation of ministers in evangelical churches. Today's changing world requires active learning and teaching. Truth-centered learning is the way to preserve and rediscover the Truth within spiritual communities; it is the way to grow spiritually by knowing God in relationship with Him and His Word. How else could we pass on Everlasting Truth during this perplexing time?

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