


Incorporating Spirituality in the Classroom: Effects on Teaching Quality Perception

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ABSTRACT

This study tested the extent to which professors could be trained to help enhance students' experiences of spirituality in their classes. Three areas of focus that may be important to incorporating spirituality into the classroom were identified in the integration of faith and learning literature: 1) professor self-disclosure, 2) intellectual connections, and 3) interpersonal connections. In a quasi-experimental design, two professors were trained to incorporate these focus areas into four experimental conditions. A sample of 203 student participants attended different teaching conditions and rated their perception of the teaching quality. Statistical tests revealed that professor ratings on general teaching skills and spirituality greatly improved after training; however, ratings also depended on the professor. Results indicated that applying such a pedagogical training can be a useful tool in educating faculty to successfully incorporate spirituality in the classroom and improve student perceptions of their general teaching skills.

KEYWORDS

Higher Education, Integration of Faith and Learning, Intellectual Connections, Interpersonal Connections, Pedagogy, Relationality, Self-Disclosure, Student Learning, Teacher Training

INTRODUCTION

Studies show that a large majority of students have an interest in spirituality and feel that they should be able to express it in college (Astin et al., 2011; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012; Lindholm et al., 2005). Many faculty recognize this and value their personal spirituality (Astin et al., 2011; Edwards, 2008; Lindholm et al., 2005); however, they have several concerns about what role, if any, spirituality should play in their courses (Wilkins & Birch, 2011). Some faculty wonder how to start incorporating spirituality into their teaching; others believe they are unable to find time to do it. Some express concern that bringing up spirituality might jeopardize academic rigor by reducing critical thinking and lowering performance expectations. Perhaps one of the greatest concerns is that spirituality may not fit with a particular discipline. These anecdotal concerns (Wilkins & Birch, 2011) are backed by Edwards (2008) who says that even in some religiously affiliated institutions "faculty rarely mention [their] personal religious or spiritual convictions in [their] scholarship or teaching" (p. 81).

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Behind these concerns is an overriding question: How does the introduction of spirituality into the classroom impact the quality of teaching and learning? The present study takes up this question in the following initial ways. First, this study identifies three main aspects of spirituality in the integration of faith and learning literature that are relevant to the college classroom. These aspects are not intended to provide an exhaustive coverage of spirituality, but they offer a useful starting point for professors who may not have a firm grasp of this concept as it relates to the classroom. Second, this study introduces a training protocol that can be followed to help faculty begin incorporating spirituality into their teaching. Third, this study empirically tests the effects of this training on student perceptions. This study makes a unique contribution over the survey, interview, and anecdotal studies done thus far because it is the only study that uses a quasi-experimental design to examine this specific topic.

In the literature review that follows, the authors explain the background needed to understand this study's purpose. Because this study was conducted at a Christian university, focus was narrowed mostly to literature on Christian spirituality. Notably, though, many scholars suggest that spirituality can be incorporated at any college—religiously affiliated or not (e.g., Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2012).

BACKGROUND

Integration of Faith and Learning (IFL)

The last four decades have seen increasing research attention to IFL in higher education. IFL is an interaction between professors and students (Cooper, 1999) where both seek to make connections between faith and academic disciplines (Hasker, 1992).

In studying IFL, scholars at Brigham Young University (Wilkins & Birch, 2011; A. Wilkins, personal communication with the first author, February 6, 2014) used both student and faculty surveys and focus groups to look at what role faith could play in learning and what students consider important in both their courses and their professors for a spiritually strengthening experience. From this research, the authors identified three main areas of focus that are important to incorporating spirituality into learning and which are used as a foundation in addressing faculty concerns:

1. A focus on the professor's journey, personal experiences, and the ways in which spirituality is working in his or her personal and professional life. (Professor Self-Disclosure)
2. A focus on intellectual connections between spirituality and the discipline and illuminating the meaning that those connections have in students' lives. (Intellectual Connections)
3. A focus on the professor's relationship with students. (Interpersonal Connections)

Although the authors review each of these focuses separately, it is important to bear in mind that they are dynamic parts of a whole and, despite having different emphases, they share a great deal of conceptual and practical overlap.

Professor Self-Disclosure

One of the primary aspects of IFL relates to the first focus, which the authors have labeled "Professor Self-Disclosure". In a Christian context, this focus is marked by professors letting students know through content-relevant self-disclosures that they have a personal relationship with God. Using a sample of students from seven schools affiliated with different Christian denominations, Sherr et al. (2007) found that a professor's personal relationship with God is one of the most important contributors to IFL. They also found that students appreciate it when professors share personal experiences of God in which they refer to or draw on spiritual knowledge to make decisions. One example of this could be where a professor tells the class that one reason why they chose to study in that field was due to a spiritual experience they had.

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