

July 2013

The Wisdom of Practice: Essays on Teaching, Learning, and Learning to Teach, by Lee S. Shulman

Michael Thomasian

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

Recommended Citation

Thomasian, M. (2007). The Wisdom of Practice: Essays on Teaching, Learning, and Learning to Teach, by Lee S. Shulman. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 11 (2). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce/vol11/iss2/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, please email CatholicEdJournal@lmu.edu.

distinctive and inclusive. This work touches on a thesis that is important and relevant to Catholic education, but one that is more useful to those in higher education. The author does challenge the reader to give more attention to the reception of Church teaching, so that principles can be put into practice and Catholic education can be considered both distinctive and inclusive.

REFERENCES

- Arthur, J. (1995). *The ebbing tide*. Leominster, England: Gracewing.
Bryk, A., Lee, V., & Holland, P. B. (1993). *Catholic schools and the common good*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Sullivan, J. (2001). *Catholic education: Distinctive and inclusive*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
Von Hugel, F. (1908). *The mystical element of religion*. London: Dent.

Susan Richter serves as principal at Saint Joseph's High School in South Bend, IN.

THE WISDOM OF PRACTICE: ESSAYS ON TEACHING, LEARNING, AND LEARNING TO TEACH

LEE S. SHULMAN
JOSSEY-BASS, 2004
\$45.00, 608 pages

Reviewed by Michael Thomasian

“An effectively reformed school is a setting that is educative for its teachers”
(p. 519).

Shulman believes, after 30 years of research, that classroom teaching “is perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species has ever invented” (p. 504). In this passionate collection of essays, Shulman asks two vital questions: What makes teaching so difficult? How can teachers learn to manage, cope with, and eventually master those difficulties? The work is at times mind boggling, and yet leaves the reader feeling uplifted.

Unlike many researchers, Shulman's work is rooted in practice that is later structured into theory. In 23 chapters, *The Wisdom of Practice* covers all the bases that practicing teachers, educational scholars, and public policy-makers will find beneficial in creating effective school reform. The author concentrates on four key topics: teachers' professional knowledge and judgment, the pedagogies of the professions, the assessment of teaching, and the character of education research.

The author's extensive background in educational research is closely linked to experience with medical research. Shulman finds plenty of opportunities to relate findings from one field to the other. For example, the author compares the classroom to a triage. Just as the wounded and ill need attention, so does every student in a classroom. Every patient deserves treatment and a chance to survive. How does one prioritize? The way a teacher responds to individual students, new policies, curricular obligations, and other pressures are all crucial to the art of teaching.

Research suggests that when a classroom operates as a community of learners there is a much higher level of achievement and growth compared to the traditional classroom. Benchmark lessons begin the instruction. The students share prior knowledge on a subject which eventually gets all of the students on the same page. This is also the opportunity for the teacher to explain the goals of the lesson and discuss what the final outcome should be. The teacher gives meaning to the lesson. Students are separated into research groups who will individually master a section of the class project. Through reading, writing, investigating, and interviewing, authentic learning is taking place. Groups are later given time to consult with each other to share findings. Shulman refers to these interactive discussions as crosstalks. Throughout the process, the teacher is the facilitator who must be in control yet also open to things not always going to plan. Toward the end of the unit, students jigsaw. Specialists from each group form new groups where the students will be able to teach one another their section of the project. The pieces should fit together like a puzzle. The final product, the consequential task, becomes a public exhibit. This approach focuses on teamwork, where each student has something to contribute. It takes time and tolerance for creativity and unpredictability, but the knowledge gained by the students is worthwhile.

A community of learners is characterized by six principles: generative content, active learning, reflective thinking and practice, collaboration, passion, and community or culture. Shulman insists that these principles can be applied to both student learning as well as teacher learning. Reflection and collaboration seem to be areas of weakness in most school cultures. Time and support are simply not provided. "Any school that wishes its teachers to

teach well had better provide the conditions for them to be learning continually” (p. 517). The author again uses an analogy from the medical community to advance the point. Practitioners form a clinical pathological conference where they meet once a week to present a case that did not go as well as anticipated. Discussing the unanticipated happenings and knowledge gained from them are occasions for learning. These conferences apply just as well to teachers. As teachers we do not typically take enough risks nor do we celebrate them. Reflection and collaboration need to be more highly esteemed.

The community of learners pedagogy is an effective and powerful one, yet is implemented by few teachers. The author suggests that teachers do not always teach as well as they know how. There are many factors that interfere with such reform, such as political pressures (policy and mandates), curricular pressures (excessive amounts of material to cover), and teacher attitudes (every student must master everything). Shulman maintains that this style of teaching intimidates many teachers. This may surprise the reader at first, but after reflection, the point seems valid. Noise and student independence are often viewed as a chaotic classroom that is not well managed. Many teachers prefer to rely on more traditional, however ineffective methods, because it increases the predictability of stability and teacher control. Teachers, mainly as a result of their teacher preparation (or lack of) are uncomfortable with uncertainty.

We have not yet created the conditions in schools, in institutions or in teacher education that will not only tolerate the creation of uncertainty and unpredictability, but will in effect develop values that will support teachers and learners in those communities to engage in such activities. (p. 497)

The author argues that teacher preparation focuses on design (e.g., lesson planning and management) and does not do enough to include real life application. Shulman supports the use of case studies and more hours in actual practicum work. New policies cannot be implemented, new research cannot be tested, and school reform cannot truly take place without the adoption of the classroom teacher. Readers are left asking the question: Is my school educative for its teachers?

Shulman’s collection should be on the bookshelf of every professional development library. The author’s analogies to the medical field and anecdotes from the Jewish tradition only add to the wisdom of this collection. Those who are serious about school reform will analyze the data and methods discussed here and make attempts to improve the way teachers learn because this ultimately effects the way students learn.

Michael Thomasian serves as the assistant principal at St. Anthony Catholic School in Washington, DC.